

## Facing the Flood

A new bride experiences for the first time the floods in the flood-prone Kosi region of north Bihar.

RANJEET KUMAR SAHANI

As part of my research on the contextual vulnerabilities of historically marginalised communities in the Kosi sub-basin in north Bihar, I rely on oral history interviews as one of the means of data collection. I have been interviewing members of the Musahar and Mallah communities in the Darbhanga and Saharsa districts.

During the course of one of my oral history interviews with fisherfolk in 2017, I came across a respondent, a woman who was married into the flood-prone region of Kosi. This narrative is an account of her first encounter with the Kosi floods, how it changed her attitude towards life, and about what people living inside the Kosi and Kamala embankments go through during floods in the region. Her story tells us about the manner in which one feels overwhelmed with difficulties and trauma when confronted with a flood, especially if one does not hail from flood-prone areas. It also shows us how women in rural India face the consequences

of displacement due to marriage, and how disproportionate distribution of environmental risks, due to floods in this case, could test and traumatise them even more throughout their lives.

Here is the story in her own words:

“The flood came in the month of July–August 2004. It was the first time I’d witnessed a flood since my wedding in March that year. For the first two days, the flood water remained in the *baadh-ban* (agricultural and jungle area outside village), and the village seemed unaffected by the flood. But, on the third day, the western Kosi embankment broke in Musariya at around 3:45 in the morning. Fortunately people were awake and had been anticipating the flood. Most of them had been watching video cassettes on television. Since I was newly wed, I didn’t go to watch the videos and was sleeping at home. There was *shoraha* (a Maithili word for panic call) all around when the bund broke. Everyone started emptying their *kothi-bhandi* (traditional grain storage vessels made of mud and bamboo) and ran towards the Kamala bund located further west, with kids and cattle, *daana-paani* (everything edible from grains to oil and masala needed for cooking), and *jar-na-kathi* (everything that can be used as fuel for cooking).

“I got up at around 4 am, and the moment I stepped out of my room all I saw was water. There was water outside my house and in my front yard. I hastily walked towards another front yard out of curiosity and found that it too was filled with water. I kept hopping from one front yard to another until I realised that every household was flooded. In between, as I waited at a neighbour’s front yard, I asked a woman if the water level will continue to rise. She told me that water will enter every house, sooner or later. My hopping around attracted the attention of one of my elderly aunts-in-law, who sarcastically called out to my mother-in-law and said, ‘You were telling us that your daughter-in-law is scared of water, but look, she is swimming around in the flood water.’ Having heard this, I quickly ran towards my house.

“My husband and my father-in-law were packing all the necessary items on the boat and shifting them to the Kamala bund, because the road between Jamalpur, my conjugal village, and the Kamala bund was also under water. I did not have any prior experience with floods and was very scared. I stumbled and asked my husband if we would be safe. He answered in jest, ‘As if you are the only person who’s going to die.’ He urged me to stop panicking and help them with taking things outside the house. I knew how to swim, but the amount of water that had collected in the past one hour had made me very nervous. Over the next hour, the water reached our verandah and later, entered the house. Finally, we had to leave the house by that afternoon with all our belongings except for stone articles like the mortar and pestle.

“On our way to the bund, we saw a man with a calf on the boat, and a cow tied to it swimming alongside. The cow was struggling to swim and only had its nostrils above the flood-water. We also saw a boat capsize in the heavy floods. When

this happened, people from nearby boats rushed to save those onboard, but unfortunately they could not save everyone. This was very frightening for me, because our entire family was also on a small boat, in the same waters. However, my father-in-law and my husband were professional boatmen and they knew the waters in and out.

“To prepare me for upcoming challenges, my mother-in-law told me that it was just the beginning of a two-month-long struggle. I realised this was true the moment we reached the bund in the evening. It was a nightmare for me. The bund had no facilities for staying or storing things, and it was raining continuously. My father-in-law, who’s very particular about having food on time, was pestering my mother-in-law to cook some food very early in the evening. She was furious and told him, ‘Can’t you wait or not eat one day? How can you cry like a baby for food, even when you can see that we are caught in this flood?’

“Later, she asked me to cook something. I was not prepared for this situation because there was no stove and all the grains were packed in sacks and were lying all over the place. I came up with a naïve suggestion of dry-roasting the rice and eating it with onion and salt. I approached one of our neighbours to ask if I could use the clay stove that she had carried from home. I quickly gathered some fuelwood and husk, and started roasting the rice. Just when the rice was getting ready, it started to rain heavily. I couldn’t roast it fully. I nevertheless served it to my father-in-law, who ate that hard, stone-like roasted rice without any complaint, under the tarpaulin cover tied over the temporary *machaan* (a raised platform built with bamboo). That was the worst night of my married life. It rained through the night, and we were all trying to save the grains and ourselves from the ceaseless downpour.

“Finally, when the night was over, the rain also came to a halt. We stacked all the wooden cots on the bund and

placed bamboo pillars on the ground to make temporary huts. But, there were fresh problems awaiting us. Going to the toilet was the biggest challenge in the morning because there were no dry spaces apart from the bund. Men didn’t have any issues, but for women it was very difficult. It was also quite nerve-wracking, since we had to go along the river Kamla, which was flowing to its full capacity. Later, my husband built a temporary toilet for me, a platform partially covered on three sides, which opened directly into the river. This entire experience was rather overwhelming for me.

“The incident reminded me of my sister who often warned me to never get married to someone from Kosi-kanhha (Kosi region or flood-prone regions). But, what could I do? My father is a poor man and I could not blame him for throwing me into this flood-prone region. I instead told people that I was lucky to have gotten married into this family, because we had a boat and my father-in-law and my husband knew exactly what to do in such a situation. I remarked that my mother-in-law, hailing from Jharba, a village inside the Kosi embankment, was also very reliable in such scenarios. Floods can be both thrilling and traumatising for a young bride, especially if she is not from the flood-prone region. Now, after having spent 14 years in the Kosi-kanhha, I have developed enough courage to face any flood.”

The narrative above reflects a newly wed bride’s first-hand experience of a flood and the unequal impact of floods due to embankments. It also shows the susceptibility and vulnerability of people, particularly women, who are exposed to floods in the Kosi region of north Bihar.

Ranjeet Kumar Sahani (ranjeet.ks@atree.org) is a PhD scholar at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, and his ongoing study is on floods and environmental justice in north Bihar.

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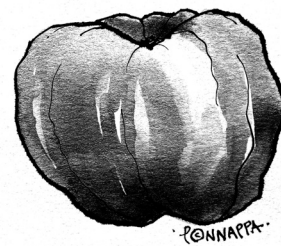
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