Kosi as Metaphor: Learning to Unlearn on Water
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The Kosi today stands as a disturbing metaphor for much that is wrong with the Indian discourse on water. The breach in the Kosi barrage in Nepal on 18th August resulted in a humanitarian disaster across both Nepal and India with nearly 50,000 in Nepal and 3 million people displaced in the Indian state of Bihar. Nearly 247,000 acres of farmland have also been destroyed in the process. In the ensuing blame game between India and Nepal, and domestically between the federal and state governments in India; charges have flown thick and fast over who is to be held responsible. The widespread flooding has been described as a ‘national calamity’ by the Indian Prime Minister and relief packages have been announced on a war footing. But while there is a lot of talk of learning from the disaster, the inconvenient truth remains that there has been no willingness to unlearn.

The mainstream thinking on water has remained in a state of denial despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Take for instance the official definition of the Kosi floods as a natural disaster from which has flown a set of flawed assumptions. The Kosi embankment in Nepal despite a capacity of 9.5 lakh cusecs of water breached with just 1.44 lakh cusecs due to the heavy accumulation of silt deposits. Yet the belief in embankments as a flood control measure stands uncontested. A high dam is today being projected as a ‘permanent solution’ that is ironically estimated to have a life span of 37 years due to high siltation levels and overlooking dangers of seismicity. Kosi’s annual siltation deposits of over 80 million tons have also eroded the East Bank canal’s irrigation potential to just 7 per cent.

The intellectual discourse on water too has been problematic because of its inability to project alternative scenarios as well as raise critical new questions. A recent study on social science research on water issues in South Asia has shown that this has typically tended to focus on macro-level water issues such as droughts, floods, rivers, dams, irrigation etc. and have limited end-user involvement and end-user needs or problems. There is also little evidence of intra-research community linkages and no institutional mechanisms appear to be in place to share research findings in a sustained, methodical manner. Issues of regional planning regarding rivers that are transboundary in nature often do not find a place in the research agenda and analysis. Studies on rivers avoid taking a comprehensive view of the river system as a whole. The river is often studied in isolation with little attempt to relate it to the ecological system of which it forms an integral part.

There has also been a failure to get syncretic water conversations going. The need for multi-actor frameworks involving local communities, researchers, policy makers and development workers is becoming all too evident. But what is arguably even more important is to get syncretic water conversations going among these diverse stakeholders. The notional distinction between research and the researched for instance has meant that research findings and local knowledge often talk past each other. The perception that research has to, in the ultimate analysis, be relevant and useful to policy makers has further constricted knowledge frames. Within these structural parameters, the role of people has thus been reduced to being passive recipients of knowledge flows. But, as those at the receiving end of
the fury of high water and suffer displacement and loss of livelihood, local communities thus become natural development partners. Synergies between science and traditional knowledge can bring actionable ideas that can create bottom-up, inclusive approaches to questions of resource governance. Similarly, building bridges between research and policy will also be critical to create institutional entry points for collective learning. Recent studies have shown how innovative strategies adopted by farmers to mitigate the effects of water resource degradation in Eastern India bear the potential for a ‘reversal of knowledge flows’ by fostering social learning among all stakeholders. Such conversations can offer policy makers a richer and wider repertoire of alternative learning processes to experiment with.

A straitened debate on water and an often uncritical intellectual acceptance of this has unfortunately diminished the space for unlearning. Unless dominant interpretations are called into question, extant categories and conventional imageries will only be reified over time without respite. The manner in which these difficult questions are negotiated will decide whether the Kosi floods will be remembered as yet another disaster or be treated as a wake-up call for unlearning.

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