

Indian flood deaths highlight government indifference to recurring social calamity

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In what has become a tragic annual ritual during the summer (June-September) monsoons, rains and overflowing rivers have killed at least 400 people and left more than 4 million homeless in the Indian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh over the past two and a half weeks. The lives of as many as 15 million people have been disrupted by the flooding.

Far from being the result of natural causes, there is considerable evidence that the floods are a direct result of the gross mismanagement of dams in Central and Western India. Instead of releasing water in a timely and systematic manner prior to the onset of the monsoons, the authorities have been charged by knowledgeable Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) with letting a large number of dams fill up beyond prudent levels, then releasing massive amounts of water within a short period and without warning, causing massive floods that submerge thousands of villages and towns located downstream.

The floods have destroyed animals, standing crops, irrigation systems, canals and farmland, bringing unimaginable misery to millions of people. The death toll is sure to rise as many more bodies will no doubt be discovered after the floodwaters recede.

Though the army was mobilised by the Indian government to provide aid, the evacuation and rescue effort were haphazard and have done little to relieve the immense social suffering.

Surat, the second largest city in the western state of Gujarat and the “diamond capital” of India, was largely submerged and cut off from the rest of state for several days beginning August 8. After the Tapi River overflowed, hundreds of thousands of the people were trapped on higher ground and rooftops without electricity, water, food or telephone connections.

A densely populated city of 4 million people, Surat came to international attention in 1994 when dozens of people were killed by pneumonic and bubonic plague, in an outbreak linked to the conditions of filth and squalor for which the city was infamous.

At the height of the flooding, 60 percent of Surat was for several days under standing water measuring from 4 to 20 feet. The telephone system was shut down, and all emergency services were paralyzed, with many police stations submerged.

Both Gujarat’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government and the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) proved utterly unable to provide even minimal relief, leaving tens of thousands without with food and water. Indeed, press reports suggest both the city and state administration were completely paralyzed, with several high officials breaking down in tears.

The response of the Gujarat government boiled down to telling the already wet and hungry residents of Surat that they should seek higher ground!

So great was the anger and misery in Surat, when the state Chief Minister and senior BJP leader Narendra Modi went around in a boat on an “inspection” tour of the city, angry citizens heckled, hooted and threw curses at him for his government’s failure to provide them with any help.

The widespread desperation in the flooded city was anecdotally revealed by an appeal for help that the vice-chancellor of South Gujarat University—who was stranded at his office for more than two days with 40 other staff—made to an *Indian Express* reporter.

“We don’t have any food or drinking water. Can you ask someone to help? There’s no electricity. We cannot charge our mobiles and are unable to contact anyone. We desperately want water and food.” According to the *Indian Express* report, the vice-chancellor’s cell phone went dead after this conversation.

Modi’s government has been held up by the Indian ruling elite, including the corporate media and the Congress Party-associated Rajiv Gandhi Association, as an example of efficient “governance,” despite Modi having been one of the chief instigators of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. This pogrom resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 and left tens of thousands homeless.

If Narendra Modi’s Hindu-supremacist state government

has been so warmly praised, it is because of the ruthlessness with which it has functioned as a facilitator for foreign and domestic capital.

Surat is home to a large number of petrochemical, cement, textile and heavy engineering industries, all of which have had to shut down because of the flooding. When these industries will be able to resume production remains unclear.

In the meantime, there are reports that tens of thousands of migrant workers have started leaving en masse from the city to their villages in order to escape not only the immediate misery, but also the future threat of disease from rotting corpses, garbage and freely flowing sewage.

The losses to Surat's famous diamond industry also threaten to be huge, with many precious stones, cash, business papers and other valuables lost to, or destroyed, by the floodwaters. Seventy percent of India's \$15-billion-a-year diamond industry—an industry that generates more foreign exchange for India than any other—is based in Surat. Uncut diamonds from South Africa and Antwerp are cut and polished for the world market by the employees of Surat's diamond merchants.

A diamond merchant complained to the press: "Surat is the most progressive [sic] city of Gujarat. But neither the SMC nor the [Gujarat] government is providing any relief. We pay the largest amount of tax. But the choppers [helicopters] are just hovering over, providing no help".

Informed observers have charged that mismanagement of several large dams by the authorities is largely responsible for the floods.

They note that the floods were not precipitated by rainfall far in excess of the norm. But dam managers, presumably in the hopes of generating more electricity or collecting more drinking water, had allowed their catchment areas to fill, leaving little room in the event of an earlier or bigger-than-normal summer monsoon.

When the rains caused their catchment areas to overflow, threatening the dams with possible collapse, the authorities were forced to release large amounts of water without warning, so as to avert an even bigger tragedy.

The sudden release of water caused rivers downstream to overflow their banks, inundating large areas.

Ironically, in building many of these dams, state authorities justified the ruthless displacement of peasants and tribal groups by touting better flood control as one of their major benefits.

According to a press statement issued by Himanshu Thakker of the New Delhi-based South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, "The water levels in dams were actually too high prior to the monsoons so, when the rains came, vast amounts of water were suddenly released. If you look at the evidence before us, it is clear that the dam

authorities are guilty of criminal negligence."

Thakker said 13 of the dams in south, west and central India were way over their prudent capacity prior to the onset of the monsoon. While these dams should have been between 5 and 10 percent of their capacity before the onset of rains they were in fact between 20 and 77 percent of their capacity.

An editorial in the *Hindu* said the floods were "a distressing reminder of the continuing lack of intelligent water management policies as well as disaster preparedness." It observed that "the areas affected most" were "not necessarily those that received the highest rainfall. In Maharashtra [Gujarat's southern neighbour], for instance, as many as 10 dams had to release large quantities of water within 24 hours after four days of incessant rains. As a result, over 2,000 villages...spread over 19 districts were affected and more than two lakh (200,000) hectares of agricultural land were damaged."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi made their customary helicopter tours of flooded areas, promising to provide Rs. 100,000 (about US\$2200) to the next of kin of the deceased. Singh also made a reference to the plight of the flood victims in his Independence Day (August 15) address to the nation.

But as long as the victims are peasants, tribals or slum-dwellers, India's governments have proven unwilling to make a serious investment of their attention and state resources in water management and flood prevention. Their preoccupation is pressing ahead with neo-liberal economic reforms that enrich capital at the expense of India's toilers and expanding the military in pursuit of their aim of making India a world power.

Even the establishment *Hindustan Times* had to observe in an August 9 editorial, "The annual plight of those affected is symptomatic of the indifference of governments to natural disasters, which choose to firefight rather than take measures to contain the impact of such disasters."



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