

Floods in Assam and Orissa: Same Story of Negligence and Devastation

Wednesday 24 September 2008, by [CPI \(ML\) Liberation](#) (Date first published: 23 September 2008).

Assam faced its usual yearly bout of severe floods, while Orissa is facing a unprecedented flood fury that is threatening to break the record of the Kosi floods in Bihar. In these cases, too, however, the catastrophe is less natural and more man-made—specifically, made by negligent Governments.

An NDTV report (September 03, 2008) observed about Assam that "the misery this time is entirely manmade. At Kendukona in lower Assam, embankments constructed in 2008, have already given away... While predicting a natural disaster may still be difficult under Indian conditions, there is no reason why a work of civil construction like an embankment constructed as early as April should give away."

At Orissa, where embankments on the Mahanadi have given way at 61 places, it is a man-made tragedy. Analysing weekly data released by the Central Water Commission, and daily data from the Orissa government about water flow in the Mahanadi river and reservoir levels in the Hirakud dam, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, an NGO, has pointed to a total disconnect between information and action by the government. It has highlighted how despite having a flood control cushion, apathy in operating the dam—filling up the reservoir to full capacity before the end of the monsoon, in violation of an official expert committee recommendation—has led to an avoidable flood disaster. As Orissa confronts the enormously destructive floods, CPI(ML) will do all it can to aid the relief efforts, and will also demand accountability about the role of Government negligence in causing the floods.

Three Days Among the Flood-Affected

(As recounted by activists of AIPWA and AISA who visited the affected areas)

A 17-member team of AIPWA and AISA activists, led by Shashi Yadav, National Secretary of AIPWA, Sangeeta Singh, National Council member of AIPWA, and AISA National Vice President Abhyuday, left for Purnea from Patna. Travelling in the jam-packed general bogey of the Capital Express, we reached Katihar, and from there to Purnea.

At Purnea, AIPWA leaders Shashi Yadav and Sangeeta Singh along with Madhavi Sarkar were let in the Government mega shivir (mega camp), thanks to Madhavi Sarkar's identity of being the slain MLA Comrade Ajit Sarkar's wife. But the officials prevented other members of the team from entering, claiming that the entry of 'outsiders' was prohibited. When the DM was contacted on phone, he said 'visiting hours' were from 8-10 am only- as though the place were not a relief camp but a jail or a hospital! We found that flood victims from all over have come to the relief camp but are not being given room in the camp. Officials are making announcements on mikes, telling people to return home since the waters have receded.

We met around 50-60 people, many of them women and children, waiting outside the camp. One youth among them said there was nothing to eat in their village and they had somehow managed to reach the mega camp, but here too they were being chased away. When we along with the local CPI(ML) leaders took up the issue, some of them got registration in the mega shivir.

At the mega shivir, we found that there were no special arrangements for women and children. Women told us that when they went to the camp doctors for their own and their children's treatment, they were scolded and told, "Just because you see a doctor doesn't mean you have to concoct an illness."

When a large number of flood victims including many women and children from the Bela Refugee Colony, post Basmatiya Bazaar, in Araria district, tried to enter the Purnea Maranga mega shivir, they were stopped at the gates and spent two days on the streets, depending on the charity of local people. We spoke to Dilip Chandra Das, Kajoli Das, Vibhendra Chandra Das, and Dayal Varma from among these people and heard that eventually tired of being hungry, they broke the bamboo barricades and entered the mega camp, but were beaten up and thrown out by police and officials. We took up their case with the DDC, who told us that these people were from Araria and so we cannot provide for them. We insisted that now that these people are here, and in dire need of help, the officials cannot refuse to feed them on any bureaucratic pretext. As this stand-off continued, JD(U) leader and Chairperson of the State Women's Commission, Lacy Singh along with another JD(U) goon Babbu Jha came up and began abusing and threatening us. They boasted that they could get us lathicharged or even shot at, and in fact Babbu Jha even boasted that he was the biggest local goonda. These abusive threats to flood victims and flood relief activists by representatives of the ruling party were captured on videotape by students. We stood our ground and challenged the police to do whatever lathicharge or firing they liked-we would not budge as long as there were hungry flood victims who were being denied relief. Eventually the DM intervened and ordered the administration to feed those people. But we heard that later, after we left, those people were once again chased away.

At Purnea, we met Sunita from Forbesganj whose foetus died in the womb

itself due to negligence of doctors at Sadar Hospital. Yet, the hospital refused to perform the operation to clean out her womb. Writhing in pain she was taken to a private nursing home, where the foetus was removed and the woman's life saved. The Government has announced relief of Rs. 10, 000 to anyone giving birth to a child (Rs.11,000 in case of a girl child) – had this amount been given to Sunita, she could have paid off her hospital bills. As it is, the hospital refused to let her leave till she paid her bills. So having lost her home and also her child, a traumatised Sunita was further forced to face the callousness of both the Government and the private health system. She could leave the hospital only when local people came together to collect funds, even in a time of their own misfortune, and helped her to pay off the bills. Many other women and children have needlessly died due to lack of medical care.

Next, we left for Murliganj, which entailed an 8-hour-long journey by train, tempo, on foot and by boats, accompanied by Com.Bharat Bhushan. The people we met there told us we were the only team to have come to check on their fate. They warmly recalled the role of Bharat Bhushan and other party comrades in the first days of flooding. We heard many narratives of people's courage in helping each other to survive the flood. People used electricity wires to get 60 people across the flooded water to safety. They said no Government aid or relief had reached them – not even food, though foodgrains are rotting in the FCI godown nearby.

We met Ashok Mandal of Murliganj who told us that around 50 people of two wards of Jorgama panchayat are missing. There is no provision of medical care though diarrhoea cases abound. Mahendra Bharti, a CPI comrade who is a member of the Zila Parishad too met us and warmly appreciated the role of our party comrades in the rescue and relief work. He too said we would now have to wage struggles for rehabilitation of people – the Government machinery was going to remain as callous as ever.

P.S.

* From ML Update, a CPI(ML) Weekly News Magazine, Vol 11, No.39, 23-29 September 2008.