

## Executive Summary

Kosi river, the ‘sorrow of Bihar’ breached its embankment at Kusaha 10 kms inside Nepal bordering Supaul district of Bihar on 18th August, 2008 impacting 33 lakhs of people in 5 districts of Bihar as it started flowing along a new course approximately 15 to 20 km wide and 150 km long affecting 35 blocks, 407 Panchayats and 980 villages.

Floods due to the overflowing of river-waters are almost an annual ritual in Bihar, but this was a different flood: it was massive, sudden and unexpected, caused not by overflow of water but by a breach in river Kosi and change in its course. Therefore disaster management had to be undertaken under conditions of terrible handicaps. Roads, rail tracks, bridges and telephone lines were thrown out of use. Families of those responsible for the rescue operations stood marooned, looking for shelter. The current of water was so strong that on a few occasions motor-boats engaged in rescue work capsized, causing deaths.

In this background, response was organized in the face of one of modern India's worst natural calamities wherein the state launched one of the largest evacuation and relief operation in the country initially with its own resources and later on involving all wings of the defense services, specialized disaster response force- NDRF and state agencies including police. The response was prompt and highly organized and the state was able to minimize the loss both to life and property.

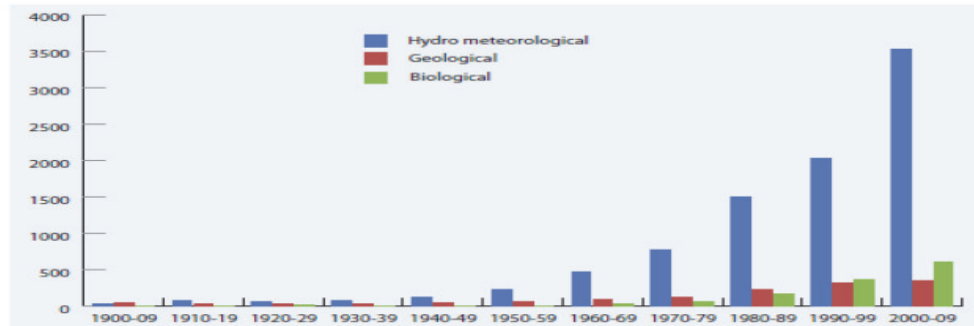
During rescue, relief and recovery work, different functions were performed by the police which were evolved as the response activities unfolded. Local policemen became the first responder. The role included helping civil administration in arranging boats and other resources, maintaining law & order and safety of property in the affected areas, providing security to government and non government functionaries involved in rescue and later on relief and rehabilitation. The police forces provided security at relief distribution centers and relief camps to prevent unrest, security at food godowns, railway stations where relief material being received from all over the country was stored and distributed.

One of the lessons learnt from Kosi has been designing and documenting the functions of the police such as to enhance response.

India is highly vulnerable to natural disasters on account of its unique geo-climatic conditions **and out of 35 States and Union Territories in the country, 27 are disaster prone.** Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides are recurrent phenomenon. Coastal states, including Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat are exposed to cyclones, 68 percent of the area faces drought threat, 55 per cent of the area is in seismic zones III and IV which falls under earthquakes-prone belt and sub-Himalayan region and Western Ghat are threatened by landslides. 12 % of land is prone to flood and river erosion and approximately 5700 kilometres of coastline is prone to cyclones and tsunami. Hilly areas risk from landslides and avalanches. On account of its multilayered vulnerability, India has witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of disasters in the past resulting in widespread devastation. The human and economic losses from disasters are enormously high in India as compared to other developing nations of the world. According to the World Bank, direct losses from natural disasters have been estimated to amount to up to 2 per cent of India's GDP and up to 12 per cent of central government revenues.

Globally too incidence and intensity of disasters are increasing over the years. The upward trend is mainly driven by 7.4% per year increase in hydrological disasters on average. Unfortunately developing countries bear the brunt of natural and man-made disasters (90% of the people affected live in Asia) and these countries lack the resources and capacities to respond effectively.

### *Disaster events globally between 1900 and 2009*



Source: Disaster Management in India, Ministry of Home Affairs

The state governments have the basic responsibility for undertaking rescue, relief and rehabilitation measures in the event of a disaster. The Central Government supplements the efforts of the State Governments by providing logistic and financial support as may be required by the affected States to meet the situation effectively. Ministry of Home is the nodal ministry for most of the disasters.

Indian disaster management set up underwent a paradigm shift with National Disaster Management Act 2005. India has established institutional framework by creating National Disaster Management Authority, State and district level disaster management authorities and a National Disaster Response Force one and the only one in the world. The NDMA and some of SDMAs are active. They have issued guidelines, SOP etc.

India has a well defined administrative structure extending up to the village level. Well defined and clearly designated, coordinating authorities are functional at each level of government. Line departments including police, health, PWD, power, civil supplies etc function under own administrative structure. However all are being coordinated by district magistrate / collector/ deputy commissioner. This administrative structure is also responsible for disaster management.

Nonetheless, disaster management operations often take place without any appropriate plans, designated authorities are not backed by professional response teams and authority and responsibility are position based. And finally there is poor resources/ inventory management leading to sub optimal deployment of men and material resulting in response at higher cost.

With regard to emergencies related to internal security, police functions are well defined in manuals and acts. But police has to respond urgently during national disasters. This function is well established. This has been recognized very well. **Administrative Reforms Commission** in its report published in 2006 mentions “The police are among the first responders in any crisis” and “It is essential therefore, that policemen at level who would be the responders are sufficiently trained’. Model Police Act, 2006 also mentions that police “to provide, as first responders, all possible help to people in situations arising out of natural or

man-made disasters, and to provide active assistance to other agencies in relief and rehabilitation measures” and **National Police Commission** speaks of “service-oriented functions of police, which are meant to provide relief to persons in a distress situation”. Some of the national and state government’s policy enactments do mention such role, but it is of general nature ie search and rescue in State government disaster management plans and subsequent SOPs. Therefore there is need for defining the specific roles that police can play in different phases of an emergency response-evacuation, relief and rehabilitation.

The functions that are being identified for the police are based on recommendations of expert commissions/ committees including National Police Commission, Administrative Reforms Commission and Model Police Act, literature of response in disasters in other countries and the experience of Kosi disaster 2008 when we had the opportunity to evolve and define the roles as problems/issues came up during rescue, relief and recovery phases.

People and government agencies perceive police as first responder due to the proximity of police station to the community. Even Model Police Act and Administrative Reforms Commission have recognized police as first responder. Therefore police is and would remain the first responder / immediate responder after the community since immediate response can be provided at the police station level only. For this police must be trained and equipped. However, police station level police is neither trained nor equipped and therefore they would not be able to perform their role properly.

While on one hand our disaster management response needs considerable strengthening, on the other, frequency and intensity of disasters are increasing over the years. At the same time response management is becoming increasingly difficult due to variety of reasons including population growth, climate change and democratisation of information, which makes incumbent upon us to bring about recommended changes in approach, policy, legislation etc. Disaster management managers specially police officers need to appreciate the enormous task that they have on hand in future.

The Kosi experience has amply demonstrated the significant role of the police in every activity of rescue, relief & recovery. Policemen were critical to evacuation of people, maintenance of law and order in affected areas and relief camps, security of responders etc. Its resourcefulness, widespread presence and organized nature made it ideally suited for role of first responder. Unfortunately, the national and the state acts related to disaster management do not delegate any significant role to the police. Given the functions that a police has to perform during such emergency, it is essential to build capacity of the responders. Finally, the organization should be provided with sufficient funds to equip it and build capacity. Only then it could fulfill the expectations of all the stakeholders including the public.

Police has prime role in disaster management. As police will continue to have the first responder role given its proximity to the incident site it has to bring about a change in its approach. It has to adopt disaster management function as a primary one and not a side work. State & district level authorities cannot afford to wait for response forces such as NDRF all the time. In addition to capacity building, State governments have to bring about changes in law to empower the police and the supporting organizations such as home guards and civil defence. Hence the local police must be trained, equipped and supported with legislation and logistics so that they find themselves capable to support the victim in the ‘golden hour’.