

Aid to Civil Authorities by Army in Bihar: A Case Study

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This article tries to examine the role played by the Army during a natural disaster. India's federal set-up tends to complicate issues and, quite often, politics dominates the humanitarian aspect, which leads to delays in the development of the army. This article is a case study of the Kosi flood of 2008 in Bihar, which was an outstanding example of civil-military cooperation. The article also analyses the successful efforts made by retired Army personnel for curbing the Naxal problems in the state. But the article also poses certain questions: Is the deployment of the army in humanitarian crises good for it? Will political controversies damage the credibility and effectiveness of the Army?

The deployment of the army in disaster management has both good and bad aspects. It is good because it is the only organization that is capable of providing relief to the victims of the natural calamities. It is unfortunate because repeated deployment in such circumstances could lead to fatigue. Armed forces across the world are closely involved for relief in natural calamities, which is accepted as part of their non-military duties, but their main task is to defend national frontiers against external aggression and maintain internal security. There are a number of factors involved in disaster management situations. The primary issue concerns decision-making because the centre and states on the one hand and civil society and state government, on the other, are not on the same page. In fact, successful disaster mitigation strategies require a combination of knowledge, technology, and expertise. The key players are the state and civil society, but it is the nation's armed forces that take control in every disaster. Owing to their training and field experience, the armed forces become an inalienable part of any disaster team.

The regions' vulnerability to flood and cyclones are known but the disaster management policy has not been able to create proper coordination between the state government and the armed forces in the state. This gap delays the implementation of emergency plans at the cost of lives and property which could have been served.

Disasters, obviously, can be natural, but are also man-made. Natural disasters include floods, earthquakes, cyclones, famine and disease; manmade disasters

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would include major industrial accidents and the accidental or deliberate use of weapons of mass destruction, insurgency, and mass killings.

It is surprising that in a natural calamity-prone country like ours there are no disaster management guidelines at the national level. This is especially significant in light of the fact that the unique geo-climatic character of the Indian subcontinent makes it vulnerable to natural disasters. The economic and social costs continue to mount year after year. Floods are a recurring hazard and around 40 million hectares of land in India is flood prone. The eastern and southern coastal areas are particularly prone to cyclones, which affect 8 per cent of the total area. Other natural calamities like earthquakes, extreme drought conditions, forest fires, and landslides take place at regular intervals. Invariably, the standard operating procedure (SOP) for the civilian administration is to call out the armed forces for assistance.

It is the Indian Army which becomes the last hope of the victims. According to World Bank estimates, India loses about 2 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) at 12 per cent of its revenue every year due to natural disasters. The Mumbai floods in 2005 cost more than Rs 5,000 crore. Similarly, the loss caused by the Surat flood in Gujarat in 2006 was more than Rs 21 crore. The purpose of disasters management is to reduce human suffering, minimize economic loss, and preserve the environment. Disaster management occupies an important place in policy framework of a country. Calamities/disasters primarily affect the poor and underprivileged. Poverty is an important factor in countries where both the frequency and impacts of natural disaster is severe.

The lackadaisical approach of the government makes a mockery of the concept of the welfare state. Article 21 of the Constitution provides ample protection to the individual. If certain calamities take place at regular intervals and the state machinery is found wanting, then it amounts to a clear violation of human rights. In fact, the post-disaster situation is often catastrophic. The complete destruction of the community's resources lead to large-scale migration, rendering thousands homeless which quite often feeds the fires of insurgency. This is what happened in Bihar during the Kosi flood in 2008. Scores of people were swept away; many became homeless while others fell victim to various diseases.

Case Study of the Bihar Flood and Role of the Army

The 2008 flood in the Kosi river proved very destructive for the vulnerable population living along the sides of the river. Like many of other rivers of the North Bihar, Kosi is a trans-boundary river and flows between Nepal and India. The Kosi is also one of the largest tributaries of the Ganga and after flowing through

nearly 70,000 sq kilometers joins the Ganga near Kursaila in Katihar district of Bihar. When the river changes its directions it destroys many villages, which is why it is called the "Curse of Bihar". But the people of Saharsha and Madhepura districts of Bihar probably forgot this because the Kosi had changed its course eastwards, and these districts never feared floods till the morning of August 18, 2008, when there was a breach in the dam located in Nepal. Within a few hours the entire northern part of Bihar, right from Birpur up north to Sarsha, Madhepura, Suol, Murligunj, Katihar, and Purnia were under 5–10 ft of water. Both the old and new course of the Kosi engulfed anything and everything that came in their way. Captain Dilip Singh surveyed the affected areas along with Major Chotke Hembrom, officers responsible in Bihar. Lt.-Col. Vijayalakshami, the national emergency consultant also visited the area and took immediate steps to relieve the people. Five hundred and seventy boats were pressed into service to evacuate the marooned people to safer places, while several relief and medical camps were set up in the affected districts that included Sitamarhi, Muzaffarpur, Dharbhanga, East and West Champaran, Saharsha, Supal, and Gopalganj to provide succor to the affected people.

About 20,000 to 25,000 people were evacuated everyday. The army deployed 37 columns for flood relief operations in the districts of Supaul, Madhepura, Araria, Purnia and Katihat. It also deployed 37 medical teams at major relief camps. Around 570 average size boats, 64 small size boats, and six helicopters were also pressed into service. Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force (IAF) deployed IL-76 evacuated 1,360 people and airlifted 290 tonnes of relief materials in 37 sorties. The AN-32 evacuated 532 people and airlifted 61 tonnes of relief material in 102 sorties. The Indian Navy sent 145 specialised divers and 24 boats for the rescue operation. More teams of the army, air force, and navy were ready to move in as when required by the state administration.

Role of Army and Challenges

There is no doubt that the army helped to save many lives in Bihar. But deployment of the army in natural calamities poses many challenges especially in decision making. Quite often during the natural calamities scores of lives become the victims of politics. The preparedness for natural disaster management comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs whereas deployment of armed forces is the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. Army deployment is ordered at the request of the state with the due consent of the central government. The completion of these formalities alone takes a lot of time while the disaster-affected areas need immediate action. Quite often the army's deployment exposes the state bureaucracy and its lack of preparedness for disaster management. The state affairs were completely mismanaged and the state police was unable to restore law and order.

The Role of Army in Naxal Insurgency in Bihar

The army also plays very meaningful role in combating Naxalism in Bihar and the ex-General Officer Commanding, Central Command, Lt. Gen. J.K. Mohanty discussed the problems posed by Naxalism. More than 18 out of 38 districts of the state are infested by Maoists. The army officials agreed to extend all possible help to Bihar government in tackling Naxalism and natural calamities by raising a new battalion of the territorial army. There are many reasons for the need to deploy the armed forces to curb Naxalism in Bihar.

Poor Capability and Numbers of Police in Bihar

The police force lacks capability to tackle the Naxal menace. The United Nations recommends 220 police officers for every 100,000 of population; India has an average of just 125. In Bihar, the ratio is as low as 60 for every 100,000. As of 2009 Bihar had 19,624 vacancies in the police force. The union government has sought to fill the void by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) unit Bihar. Moreover, a large number of police personnel are deployed to protect politicians, bureaucrats, and other influential people.

The Bihar police are hampered by lack of proper training and thus cannot deal with Maoist forces. The lop-sided physical outlook, loose morals, and widespread corruption make the police unfit to challenge well-trained Maoist forces. The 80,000-strong police force in Bihar also lacks access to modern vehicles and equipment like anti-landmine vehicles, bulletproof vehicles, and bomb disposal equipment. According to the Bihar Police Association, more than 300 police station, 92 police pickets, and many police outposts in Maoist-affected districts lack infrastructure and even boundary walls. Thus the forces have no meaningful capacity to meet the counterinsurgency challenge.

A Divided Police Force in Bihar

Bihar's police are divided along caste lines for historical reasons. During the British rule, a large number of upper caste members of society were recruited as constables. Districts like Bhojpur and Chapra had a greater share in the police force. This trend continued after independence. In the late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, the Other Backward Classes (OBC) factor became more dominant in Indian politics because of the influence of Lau Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar. Old practices of recruitment were challenged. Backward caste youth were recruited as constables. This led to a horizontal divide in the police force in Bihar on caste lines. Quite often the state and Naxals response is also dictated by caste identity.

This was proved when the Naxals released Abhay Yadav while they killed a tribal policeman on the caste lines; how can the counter-insurgency plan be effective?

Mismanagement of Police Force

Naxals have recently changed their strategy and have begun targeting the police force and state infrastructure. So, the untrained and ill-equipped policemen become vulnerable to Naxal attacks. Nitish Kumar's initiative of setting up the Special Auxiliary Force (SAF) to fight against Naxal outfits has been appreciated by all. The use of SAF definitely enhanced the confidence of the people. Many other states also plan to follow the Bihar model. Initially 5,000, ex-army men were recruited for a two-year term on merit. The age criteria were also followed strictly.

Ironically, the same elite force is being allowed to deteriorate by the police top brass with tacit consent of the political bosses. What is more irksome and demoralizing is that it is now embroiled in petty issues. A few of them were deployed to protect VVIPs in Bihar. A senior officer at the police headquarters, however, maintained that the SAF is being deputed for law and order duties due to acute shortage of personnel. In a submission before the Patna High Court earlier this year, the Bihar police disclosed that approximately 20,000 individuals, including politicians, present, and former are being given police protection. This change of forces and dilution of objectives has corrupted the elite force. The SAF is also seen extorting money from truck drivers on national highways. Quite often, the force is put on traffic duty and for catching petty criminals such gross abuse has led to completely depletion the capacity of the force.

The Government of India is aware of the urgent need for a better disaster response mechanism, but the overall trend in the nation has indicated that the level of preparedness of the centre as well as the states is extremely uneven and requires considerable strength. As the development-oriented Indian civil administration is ill-equipped for undulating disaster response activities, they tend to rely on the Indian armed forces who are being one of the most dedicated professional, modern armed forces.

Indian armed forces are inevitably involved in securing the country on various fronts. They are always in the state of operational readiness to move to any kind of disaster affected areas and have the courage to work in adverse conditions. However, there is a need for operational coordination between the civil administration and armed forces. Since the armed forces' effective response depends on immediate information made available by the state administration, delays have often led to precious loss of time owing to lack of proper communication and coordination

with the civil authority. In this regard, the state institutions must appreciate the conditions under which the armed forces function. The armed forces are autonomous in character and do not encourage civil interference. Therefore, the army needs a free hand. A free hand means no politics of the floods and misappropriation of resources have been a bone of contention in state politics for the past many years.

The credibility of army has been impeccable, especially during the natural calamities. People have strong faith in the army. Common villages have said repeatedly that presence of army in remote area becomes a beacon of hope where as the police makes them insecure. This means that the army must play a major role of not only for minimizing the effects of natural disasters but also for fighting insurgency and Naxal violence.



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