Flood Management Policy and (Re)Production of Socio-Spatial Inequalities in the Koshi plain: Nepalese eastern Terai and northern Indian Bihar

Marie-Amélie Candau
Flood Management Policy and (Re)Production of Socio-Spatial Inequalities in the Koshi plain: Nepalese Eastern Terai and Northern Indian Bihar (Politique de gestion des inondations et (re)productions d’inégalités socio-spatiales dans la plaine de la Koshi : Téraï oriental népalais et Bihar indien septentrional)

By Marie-Amélie Candau

Discipline: geography
Institution: Université Paris Nanterre, France
Date: 20 December 2018
Supervision: Olivia Aubriot and Frédéric Landy

Floods have forever been a challenge to human societies that have more or less adapted to them. In this respect, the southern Himalayan foothills no doubt represent the greatest challenge to humans due to a combination of factors such as: the force and irregularity of the flow; the strength of this sediment-laden water; the unpredictability of variations due to erratic monsoon rains; the instability of the river’s path due to the sudden rupture of the slope and the high hydraulic gradient of the rivers when entering the Gangetic plain; and the relatively high density of populations (over 500 inhabitants/km²). The management of these rivers, long neglected due to the unique combination of these factors, has become an obsession for modern Indian and Nepalese nations who have developed this plain, in northern Bihar and in the Tarai respectively, which has considerable socio-economic potential and is indeed fundamental for Nepal.

The aim of this development is to contain the capricious flow of these rivers within dikes and to divert water into irrigation canals by means of a dam. However, the expected results are not forthcoming. In recent times, flooding has increased in both frequency and duration; the areas affected have expanded and, above all, the causes have diversified, all of which clearly indicates the failure of current management strategies. Consequently, the loss of life and property has continued to
rise, culminating in the 2008 catastrophe, which resulted in over thirty thousand deaths and massive damage to property and livestock.

Fieldwork has largely confirmed these observations. It focused on six villages located between dikes or close to tributaries of the Koshi River or along the devastating path of the Koshi, both in Nepal and India in 2008. The human consequences have been dramatic. The impoverishment of much of the working class, mostly the peasant population, is of staggering proportions, with an unruly increase in the number of landless families facing destitution, with no healthcare or schools, while wealthy classes have continued to thrive.

The study of decision-making and distribution circuits reveals a semi-feudal social system controlled by the heirs of former ‘zamindars’ who have remained powerful landowners and influence all management decisions in order to protect their own property, often at the expense of the poor. Thus, a mechanism of privilege and misappropriation of wealth has been established with the help of a largely corrupt and clientelist political power at all decision-making levels, from the elected representative to the engineer, from the entrepreneur to the NGO, and in which mafia networks are now involved. With the obvious decline of central or regional power, insecurity is now rife in the region, which adds to the great vulnerability when faced with serious floods that are destroying and sterilising more and more agricultural land and threatening an increasing number of people.

Keywords: flood, embankment, risk, vulnerability, corruption, India, Nepal, the Tarai

Marie-Amélie Candau is currently assistant lecturer and researcher at Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France. marieameliecandau@gmail.com