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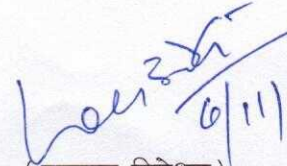
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6/11/2020
(सहायक निदेशक)

उपनिदेशक


6/11/2020

निदेशक (बा.पू.प्र.)



A flood-affected village in Saharsa, Bihar, on July 26.

SANTOSH KUMAR/HT ARCHIVE

Floods, migration key issues in Kosi

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PATNA: When Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually inaugurated a rail bridge over the Kosi river on September 18, he used the opportunity to send out a political message ahead of the assembly polls in Bihar.

He was speaking in a region that is inundated regularly by the state's river of woes -- Kosi -- which displaces 5-6 lakh people annually. This year alone, 83 lakh people across 16 districts were marooned for 16 days, forced to take shelter on highways, and in relief camps.

The annual floods coupled with the poor socio-economic indices in the region -- under MGNREGS 29.55% of households with job card demanded employment in 2017-18 at Madhepura and where child attendance was 18.6 %, according to official data -- depressed industrial growth and drove local wages downward.

The primary profession of the people in the region is agriculture, mostly maize production and cattle rearing. The bridge and associated development projects promised to reverse this condition, giving the local people a way to quickly migrate for work to major population centres in Patna, and outside the state, and thereby escape the annual spectre of floods.

With a population of 30,000, Murliganj block in Madhepura district is a microcosm of the problem. In the past month, 40 buses filled with migrant work-

ers have left the block for Murliganj. These workers had walked back, hitched rides and taken trains back to their villages during the 68-day nationwide lockdown earlier this year, but found themselves without jobs in their ancestral homes.

"No job is available in Bihar. The employers from Gujarat and Punjab provided up to ₹4,000 per family as advance and free transportation to help us return to our respective workplaces," said Mithu Singh, a migrant worker who is planning to return to Punjab.

"Most of the men of our area are seeking their fortunes outside their native villages," said Champa, his neighbour.

The Kosi region, with 13 seats across 10 districts, goes to the polls in the final phase of the assembly elections on Saturday. In 2015, Janata Dal (United), which was part of the Opposition Grand Alliance, won eight of the 13 seats, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) won four and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) one.

Chief minister Nitish Kumar understands the importance of the region and camped in Madhepura for two successive nights while campaigning in neighbouring districts. RJD's Tejashwi Yadav addressed 22 rallies in the region. Migration is not new in the Kosi region and, for decades, was exemplified by the Jan Sewa Express that used to run between Saharsa and New Delhi. Locally, the train was known as palayan (migration) express.

"The train, which only had chair car facility, used to carry

passengers from far and wide such as Supaul, Nepal and Madhepura daily," said Manish Kumar, a resident of Madhepura.

The contest in Madhepura is expected to be a direct fight between the RJD and JD(U).

"Migration will affect the voting pattern. people are frustrated because of growing joblessness in the region" said Anand Mandal, an RJD leader.

Nikhil Mandal, the JD(U) candidate, is unfazed by claims of anti-incumbency. "Migration is dependent on opportunity and people are free to go anywhere they choose to go. Be that as it may, we will try to create more jobs in the Kosi region," he said.

The flood waters have not completely receded in many areas, and the hardships have further hurt people already reeling under the health and economic costs of the Covid-19.

"Floods are an annual feature here and job opportunities is less. But we cannot leave our land like this and have to return back to our land once water recedes as it becomes very productive. Of late, we have started receiving relief materials and cash help from government as well," said Ram Vilas Tanti of Shahpur Caumukh villafe of Gwalpara in Madhepura.

The National Democratic Alliance is hoping that the electorate looks at the incremental changes taking place in the region. A railway locomotive factory, a medical college and an industrial training institute are coming up in Madhepura.