

To

**His Excellency Shri R.S. Gavai
Governor of Bihar
Raj Bhavan
Patna, Bihar**

Respected Sir,

Subject:

- 1. Request to give special attention to the vulnerable communities -Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis and the poor in the relief and rehabilitation measures.**
- 2. Request to avail of the services of 'Dalit Watch Centres' being jointly set up at the state level by the state relief and rehabilitation machinery to ensure equity and inclusion in the humanitarian aid to those affected by the floods.**

The extensive flood situation in Bihar currently has thrown life into chaos. The need to respond to the massive flooding resulting in deaths, damaging of houses, death of animals, destruction of crop and property has lead to widespread loss and human suffering. The situation demands large scale humanitarian aid to tide over the immediate present and demands medium and long term measures to bring life back to normalcy. The state has taken up the challenging task by putting its machinery into action to take up relief measures and coordinate with non-state actors too.

Dalit Experience In Disaster

We need to take conscious efforts to ensure equity and inclusion due to past experiences where relief and rehabilitation measures have failed to reach Dalit communities adequately owing to '**discrimination by default**' as well as active caste based exclusion and discrimination. These exclusion dynamics are prevalent in our social structure and everyday dynamics of both civil society as well as administration. These issues were brought to light in Tsunami and in hindsight are evident in all previous disasters and relief-rehabilitation processes.

The process of loss and damage assessment in times of disaster often overlooks and undervalues the loss among Dalit communities. Officials generally tend to gain their information from dominant caste and influential people in the village who overlook the loss and concerns of Dalits. The separate and isolated habitations of Dalits are added barriers to gain information. Officers are not found to visit Dalit tolas specifically to look at their issues and hence almost always their loss is not registered in full. Media and other sources of information too tend to collect their stories from the more influential and articulate sections of the community.

It is also found that dominant sections during relief and rehabilitation are anxious to corner all available benefits and hence do not allow the loss of other habitations in their neighbourhood, in particular those of Dalits, Tribals or minority religious groups from being registered.

Owing to traditional barriers of equal participation in public spaces, it also happens that Dalit communities may not be available in the main shelters and public places. They would tend to stay on the outskirts or the margins of the public spaces furthering their invisibility.

These social dynamics are manifested in failure to identifying Dalit communities affected, registering death and loss, not taking cognisance of their situation of hunger, not registering barriers and prohibitions in accessing relief and others. The non-recognition and non/under registration of the loss and destruction suffered by Dalit communities in disaster results in scanty relief measures to them and limited provisioning in rehabilitation. This has serious implications in their ability to get back to normalcy.

Rapid Survey to observe Inclusion:

In order to inquire into aspects of exclusion, Observations of Immediate Rapid Survey a 11-member team comprising of various Dalit organisations visited 51 villages in 4 districts on 8-9 August. The observations are listed below:

1. Water logging is severe in Dalit habitations and water has not fully drained and people were crossing the roads in 6fts water even after 15 days.
2. 369 people deaths are reported in these villages and 223 of them (60%) are Dalits.
3. 308 people were reported missing and among them 166 belongs Dalit community.
4. Village Basahi in Chariya Bariyarpur block in sub-division of Bakhari, of Begusarai, is reported to be totally washed away. People fear that about 1000 inhabitants were washed away and among them many are dalits. Among this is an incident where a 3-storey building collapsed and all the people who were taking shelter were killed.
5. Many people died because of snake bites and as no immediate medical relief measures were available for them. Team did not find any medial camps in all the villages visited.
6. No government official visited Dalit tolas and so far there is no relief provided to them.
7. Rescues operations were limited to road side villages.
8. The assessment done by the government was not reflecting the ground situation and loss of life and missing people are not fully registered.
9. Dalits have in comparison lost precious stock of grains, utensils and other consumables that are their mainstay for the season and hence are more vulnerable to hunger and starvation in the coming months.
10. Extent of Dalit houses damaged was much higher when compared to other communities because most of Dalit colonies were situated in low lying areas and poor quality of housing.

11. Currently in many villages they are staying in self made shelters on the highway. They have not received the polythene sheets provided by the government. In one village local industries built temporary shelters where 200 families are sheltered.
12. Dalits had taken shelter in dominant castes' houses and in temporary shelters. Some women were reported that they were sexual harassment and assault in places of shelter.
13. People are suffering even for drinking water. Government has not made efforts to provide drinking water.
14. In some villages people reported repeated damage and flooding every year and their repeated requests for Pucca houses to authorities was in vain.
15. Relief was not reaching Dalits and items were diverted to dominant caste localities irrespective of extent of damage. In some villages these were sold to Dalits.
16. In some villages Dalits are selling their belongings to get the food.

We list below specific vulnerabilities affecting the Dalits and minorities.

1. Dalit communities in general live outside the main village, in low lying and isolated tolas. Even ordinary rains lead to flooding in their areas. The habitations of Dalit communities are in that sense particularly vulnerable in flood situations.
2. Their houses are of poorer quality made of mud with low floors and ceiling and are easily destroyed by rains and floods. The economic situation also does not allow them to maintain the ceiling that leakage in rainy season is most common. The situation of floods thus results in total destruction of their homes, household utensils, other valuables and washing away of any property.
3. The lack of protective safes also leads to damage and destruction of documents like ration cards, school certificates, books and other valuables.
4. Being landless and casual workers, flood situations lead to total unemployment of Dalit communities. They also do not have financial resources to fall back upon and their vulnerability to food, special needs for infants, children, pregnant and lactating mothers as well as the old are particularly compromised at such situations. Hence hunger and starvation is common leading to health problems and even casualty to life.
5. By and large relief and rehabilitation tends to compensate assets and Dalit communities primarily being asset-less are left out of adequate compensation for the loss of their livelihoods that are affected by the floods. An alternate way to assess the loss of livelihood needs to be put in place and mechanisms to help them build their life back.
6. The traditional caste barriers also sets them aside or make the last to access relief measures like food packets, dry grains, clothes, medicines or space in the relief shelters and camps. These accesses are often actively prohibited and closed off too.
7. The low value accorded to Dalit girl children and women increases their vulnerability further. Disaster situations make them easy targets of harassment, violence and sexual violence.
8. It is also seen that in keeping with the practice of caste based occupation and obligatory duties of caste placed on Dalits, there is compulsion on them to take up tasks of clearing dead bodies, dead animals and debris.

We place before you the following suggestions which are needed to address the issues of equity and inclusion in relief and rehabilitation.

- 1. Officials should be instructed to visit tolas of Dalit and other marginalised communities to assess the extent of loss and their hardships on priority basis for first hand data and information.**
- 2. Request to give special attention to the vulnerable communities -Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis and the poor in the relief and rehabilitation measures.**
- 3. Request to avail of the services of 'Dalit Watch Centres' being jointly set up at the state level by the state relief and rehabilitation machinery to ensure equity and inclusion in the humanitarian aid to those affected by the floods.**
- 4. Instructions to officials and agencies to be specially conscious of exclusion and discrimination and to take stringent action against them.**
- 5. Ensure that all loss and damage are properly registered and officials acknowledge the receipt of complaints from people.**
- 6. Ensure that relief materials meet the needs of all and specially needs of infants, small children, women (baby foods, feeding bottles, milk, sanitary napkins, baby clothing) and are equitably distributed.**
- 7. Ensure proper shelter for people – in government building and these are supported by adequate facilities of drinking water, toilets, privacy for women, cooking facilities**
- 8. Medical facilities are set up particularly anti-venom for snake bite, malaria, gastro-enteritis,**
- 9. Dalits are not engaged in caste stereotype tasks of clearing and burying dead bodies, disposing dead animals, cleaning debris etc.**
- 10. Adequate measures to supply school books, registering loss of certificates and valuable documents to help the family access them later.**
- 11. Housing and infrastructure development, particularly community halls on high rise pedestals to be priority.**

Thanking you

Sincerely

(N. Paul Divakar)