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Not just a force of nature at all

Could the Kosi river devastation have been allayed by human intervention? The answer: yes

THE FLOODS are back in Bihar. And this time the governments — the state and the Centre — can't just blame the rainfall. If anyone can be blamed for the breach in the Kosi barrage in Nepal and the calamity that has followed, it is New Delhi. Under a 1954 treaty with Nepal, the safety and maintenance of the embankment is India's responsibility. But clearly, this has not been done. The result of such a lackadaisical approach is that 50,000 people in

Nepal and 2.5 million people in Bihar's five affected districts — Supaul, Saharsa, Madhubani, Darbhanga and Khagaria — have been left homeless. No wonder that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has said this isn't a flood but a "catastrophe".

But what he or the Centre is shying away from saying is that this flood is man-made. No amount of finger-pointing at Kathmandu will change this. What is more intriguing is that Indian engineers have claimed

that they could not carry out the maintenance works due to lack of cooperation from the Nepalese administration and labour strikes in Nepal. If this was the case, why didn't the authorities flag off the issue on an urgent

basis? Why weren't they ready for a disaster? Moreover, the water flow in the barrage was much less than its usual capacity when the breach happened. This exposes the kind of maintenance that was done.

The other question that will

be asked now is the efficacy of embanking a river. The Kosi, an embanked river, is known to carry a lot of silt. Over the years its silt load has increased, raising the riverbed. Once a river is embanked, it will find the path of least resistance. And this is what has happened — the river has gone back to its old course. This hullabaloo about the river changing its course shouldn't surprise us. This is not the first time it has happened. So nature has conspired with man to bring devastation.

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