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GRAY MATTER | SPECIAL REPORT

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Apocalypse now

PARAMITA GHOSH and SOUMITRA GHOSH travel to submerged Madhepura and find that the tragedy is also a spectacle and a business opportunity



'People make crores in the name of floods. The most expensive music systems and LCDs are sent to top bureaucrats once the noise dies down'

WITH EVERY passing minute, Mithlesh Singh, District Fisheries officer, Paramourhat, Madhepura, was fixing his back to his eyes. No he even took the liberty, when asked, of peering Singh off as a machinist on his back stood at some distance from the army trucks, looking into his cell phone, even in the centrality of his own experience and of the moment. "The relief material is slowly coming in, but it's raining," he says, even as villagers are taking the first steps to rebuild a 'home' on the road. "It's more important to save people than give relief," he says. Floods in Bihar are not the biggest disaster on earth, but they're a spectacle nonetheless. One Pradyum Kumar had rolled up his trousers to wade in 8 ft under water. Pradyum's concern for his grandfather is not contained within a desire to be part of the scene. "You'll get great pictures in Dimaçon 12," he says.

Each time floods come to Bihar it's a hell but floods mean death. Every year, embankments break and a disaster looms. This year, it's a catastrophe. "This time there are only two changes. Last August, there were 12... eight a accident watching the developments on TV. "People make crores in the name of floods. The most expensive music systems and LCDs are sent to top bureaucrats once the noise dies down. When the waters recede, it is the time for NGOs to get into the aid racket," says a local photographer who had witnessed an almsing a few days back. "If you see the flood area, count the districts, consider the population and count the food packets, you'll understand the percentage of people who actually get help." Everyone loves a good flood. That's the tragedy of it. And the horror. Families on the outskirts of Madhepura are sliding up their doors, locking up their houses, gifting umbrellas to their relatives, and going to temples for prayers as a last step before getting into a vehicle to go away. The orderly manner in which they chart their own displacement is concerning. Mohammed Saifur of Zargama village, whom we meet on the road but having his park of buffaloes, is surely his government's ideal subject. "If the water had come in the

morning, it would have been better. I would have been able to save my family," he says. "But it came at night. Didi's CM said we had to stay for our lives!" Reaching the elderly is another big hurdle. Mansid Bhow of Chhapra has left his elderly parents behind because they didn't want to leave. "Come for us only when the water is not high," they said. "He has been pleading for the last two days with army engineers for repairs, but it's always the same answer: No space. "The boats are not going into the interiors. When we offer to go along, they say we are only thinking of our families while they are thinking of saving every village. How will that help my father and grandfather?" asks Raj Kumar, a student who has been waiting for money from home and now will not ask for his Class 12 exams. — A yearly revisiting of tragedy, it perhaps makes people lose their minds. A woman plying a rickshaw on the main road to addi is one that the water is under water. Her family watches silently. She is laughing in many ways. Madhepura is among the best of Bihar. It's beautiful and the language is sweet. Residents feel flood victims for Bihar. Where it falls in its own way. The town has several stations. — from Paramourhat to social leader B.P. Mandal of the Madhepura Commission. — but none of them are more than 5 feet. Madhepura is the exception of its leaders' authority. A lot is being on people, though. In Sarany, the people — nearly half a century — are up on a pagoda tree. But on the 12th day of the floods, villagers have begun to complain. The administration's slow response is finally. Its time give trouble. There are millions who demand Rs. 1,000 for a seat on the boat, they say. — The cannot make a big deal about the poor surviving in these circumstances. Most of it is unaccompanied with a loss of dignity. Experiences about missing relatives are returned angrily. "How do I know about your child? Let's come you DM for a day and then see..." she a river to a woman had just saved. Her eyes are streaming. Her village is under water. The boats have taken away her home. And her husband is missing as well. She lets out a scream: "It's the end of the world. We will die... "One thing's for sure, we will all be watching.



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- 1 Villagers from Madhepura walk towards Sobarsa, an important link to relief and connection to the rest of Bihar
- 2 An army rescue boat approaches a fence in Muriganj where people had taken shelter — until it too got flooded
- 3 Army doctors distribute free medicines to flood victims, but they have enough for just around 2,000 people.
- 4 Flood victims getting close to a higher ground in Madhepura
- 5 Trucks carry two boats each — to be used for evacuation of marooned villagers, but they won't always be a safe proposition

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