

India: Varanasi flyover bridge collapse kills 18

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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At least 18 people were crushed to death and 11 more injured on Tuesday when a portion of an under-construction flyover bridge collapsed on the busiest road of Varanasi, in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's parliamentary constituency, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP).

The tragedy is a further indication that government authorities and profit-seeking construction companies are endangering the safety of workers and the public as a whole.

During evening peak-hour traffic, two pillars of the flyover in Varanasi's Cantt area collapsed, bringing down a huge slab that crushed at least 20 vehicles, including a mini-bus, six cars and numbers of two-wheelers. According to the state's highest police officer, O.P. Singh, most of the people trapped were thought to be construction workers.

While the authorities claim that police and rescue teams reached the site 30 minutes after the crash, the *Telegraph* reported that earth movers and other heavy equipment were brought to the site at 7 p.m., roughly two hours after the tragedy. The newspaper noted that angry people denounced the government's delay in rescue operations.

A *First Post* video showed Kailash Ram from Bhajipur, who lost three family members in the disaster, saying the government should take the responsibility because it failed to ensure that no people were around the construction site.

The *Hindustan Times* quoted UP Engineers Association general secretary Surjit Singh Niranjana who blamed the district administration and the construction agency for not following safety norms. "Traffic should not be allowed to move under an under-construction bridge and a proper safety net should be put in place at the construction site," he said.

Official buck-passing began immediately. State government sources told NDTV that initial investigations pointed to negligence.

Quoting state police sources, the *Indian Express* on Thursday reported that the police had sent at least five letters to the state-run Uttar Pradesh State Bridge Corporation (UPSBC), which was in charge of the construction, since last November and registered an FIR (First Information Report) in February for traffic safety regulation breaches.

UPSBC managing director Rajan Mittal, however, told the *Express* that the corporation had asked district officials and the police for traffic management during construction. "There was pressure to meet the deadline but no compromise was made on quality and it would be clear during the inquiry," Mittal said.

District Magistrate Yogeshwar Ram Mishra rejected this claim. He told the *Express*: "It is wrong to say that they had written to us." He repeated the police story of sending five letters to the UPSBC. "But they did not [act accordingly] and that is why the FIR has been registered against them."

A *Hindustan Times* editorial on Thursday said the section of the flyover that collapsed had been constructed in February. "This suggests shoddy execution and possibly poor quality material, something that plagues many construction projects in India," it said.

"Projects are undertaken in haste, often before elections, are executed with little planning and with scant regard to engineering norms. Most infrastructure projects suffer from huge delays that push costs up and encourage contractors to cut corners. This causes lethal structural failures as seen in the Varanasi case and other projects."

On Wednesday, to defuse the public anger, UP

Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad suspended four UPSBC officials, including Chief Project Manager KR Sudan. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), promised “more punitive action” after a government-appointed investigation panel submitted its report within 48 hours. He announced meagre compensation of 500,000 rupees (\$US7,369) for the kin of those killed in the incident, and 200,000 rupees for those injured.

As his usual practice in such catastrophes, BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi rushed to his Twitter account to shed crocodile tears, saying he was “extremely saddened by the loss of lives.” He continued: “I pray that the injured recover soon. Spoke to officials and asked them to ensure all possible support to those affected.”

Modi has no any genuine concerns over the loss of lives. In the past, he has repeatedly posted similar “condolence” tweets, with some minor adjustments, but such disasters only continue.

In March 2016, a half-constructed flyover collapse in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, killed more than 25 people. Referring to that tragedy, a *Times of India* editorial on Thursday noted: “[A]n expert committee found that multiple factors such as faulty design, poor quality of raw material and lack of proper oversight contributed to the collapse. Afterwards it was recommended that the flyover be razed but two years on local shopkeepers and residents are still living with the structure that has become unstable. This story of malpractices, apathy and delay in addressing urgent safety concerns is likely being repeated too frequently for comfort.”

The UPSBC website claims that it has won a number of national and international awards for its “Quality, Economy and Time Management with continual improvement of products and processes” and its paid-up capital has grown to 150 million rupees. It has constructed bridges and flyovers in many Indian cities, as well as in Iraq, Yemen and Nepal.

However, according to a *Hindustan Times* article on Wednesday, the UPSBC had come under investigation twice before. It quoted an unnamed public works department engineer who said the 1086-metre Chillgahat Bridge, built at a cost of 6.5 billion rupees, cracked within 13 days of its inauguration in 2010. The

engineer said the UP state government had ordered an inquiry but took no action against top engineers and officers.

Similarly, in 2016, a cavity developed on the Lohia Bridge in Lucknow. The UP state government constituted a four-member probe committee that indicted engineers for poor quality work, but the report was put “in cold storage,” a senior UPSBC engineer told the *Times* .

Given that record, the current government investigation will most likely make no difference. The capitalist system and its political representatives do not care about human lives, just profits. For this, dozens of workers and poor people die every day in workplaces all over the country.

The UPSBC website boasted: “No wonder, many clients have reposed confidence in UPSBC Ltd. by repeatedly awarding work to it in the face of global competition in India and abroad.” Driven by this “global competition,” the evidence already indicates that the corporation has resorted to cost-cutting operations, brushing aside basic safety norms, and costing the lives of workers and poor people.

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