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# Kerala's devastation: Why can't we learn from others?

IANIS | Aug 30, 2018, 12:38 PM IST

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Indiscriminate logging in Kerala has reduced the forest cover between 1920 and 1990 by 40 per cent, according to the report of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel.

Twenty years ago, in August 1998, then Chinese Prime Minister **Zhu Rongji** proposed, in a meeting of China's State Council, a total ban on logging in the forest slopes of Sichuan province. It was in response to the devastating flood-crisis that China was facing in the Yangtze river basin.

That policy was enacted overnight, while the floods in Yangtze river were still at its peak and rescue operations were in full swing. It was just a year after the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, but Zhu was in no mood to

analyse if that extreme event was due to climate change.

He cited that similar devastation had occurred due to Yangtze floods in 1870, 1931 and 1954 when climate change was not around. Zhu declared severe punishment for logging in the same meeting and incentivised afforestation with ambitious targets by 2000 and 2010.

The same month, but now 2018, India is facing the devastation in **Kerala**, the worst ever since 1924. With over 400 dead and a million homeless, the questions are gushing like the waters from the flood gates of its dams. Is it a natural or man-made disaster? Is it climatic event or due to global warming?

It is easy and convenient to link the causative chain to climate change. Indeed, global warming has led to a rise in ocean and atmosphere temperatures (nearly one degree Celsius over pre-industrial times) which has resulted in the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events over the last six decades.

To this extent, global warming is indeed responsible for higher rainfall. But that does not explain "extreme" and "localised" rainfall. Blaming each of such weather disasters on climate change has in reality become a way for the authorities to absolve themselves from their essential responsibility of preventing the consequential colossal damage to life, infrastructure and ecosystems. Unprecedented rainfall could not have been prevented, whether it is due to global warming or not, but the resulting catastrophe could have been contained.

Indiscriminate logging in Kerala has reduced the forest cover between 1920 and 1990 by 40 per cent, according to the report of **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel**. Nearly one million hectares of the forest land has been lost between 1973 and 2016, as per an Indian Institute of Science report. This has reduced the soil's capacity to hold the mud-slides. Illegal mining, including that of sand and stones that "bank" the flood waters, is rampant in Kerala. Over-enthusiastic water tourism has allowed the infrastructure and habitat to be vulnerably exposed to the flood waters. The uncoordinated dam-water management has left the communities and wildlife to find their own ways to save their lives.

### Is there way out?

There are numerous examples and initiatives to learn from and to participate in. The Global Precipitation Measurement (GPM) mission of **NASA** and the Japan Aerospace Agency predicted the Kerala floods just a few days in advance. Collaboration with GP and initiating disaster management measures "just-in-time" could still would have help

Switzerland (about the same size as Kerala) has 200 maior dams as against Kerala's

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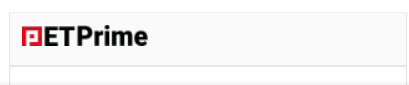
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Switzerland's designated central authority coordinates safety and the operation of the flood gates. Collaborating with Switzerland on such dam-management and inundation-mapping would prepare India in future. In Kerala, dam safety analysis had not been done for any of its 61 dams.

China has now acquired huge experience in disaster and flood management; five most deadly floods in human history were all in China. Cooperation with China would go a long way in managing and containing the flood damage.



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## Supreme Court asks Maharashtra police to present 'best evidence' against arrested activists


By [Samanwaya Rautray](#), ET Bureau | Updated: Sep 20, 2018, 11.01 AM IST



A+



NEW DELHI: CJJ Dipak Misra on Wednesday demanded that the Maharashtra police present their "best evidence" against the arrested activists who have moved the court.



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The bench, which felt that "liberty cannot be sacrificed at the altar of conjectures" will continue hearing of the case

arrested activists who have moved the court against their "random" arrests which they claim was designed to quell dissidence in the country. The bench, which felt that "liberty cannot be sacrificed at the altar of conjectures" will continue hearing the case on Thursday.

Those arrested were lawyer Sudha Bhardwaj, journalist Gautam Naulakha, poet Varavara Rao, lecturer Vernon Gonsalves and lawyer and human rights activist Arun Ferreira. They have been charged under the dreaded Unlawful Activities Prevention Act for alleged links with banned Naxal outfit CPI (Maoist) with very little chance of being released on bail. "Where is the material for the arrests? The case diary should have all the allegations," CJI Misra, who was heading a three-judge bench, said at one point. "You should place your best evidence first," he told ASG Tushar Mehta at another point in the hearing.

Mehta claimed that the activists had been part of a plot to overthrow the government, a plot hatched by the Maoists.

He said former PM Manmohan Singh and finance minister P Chidambaram figured in the letters allegedly written by the activists on the plot, a claim contested by the activists.

### Points of Contention

**Activists planning**  
"frequent protests which will lead to chaos and breakdown of law and order", says ASG Tushar Mehta

**Justice DY Chandrachud**  
advocates need for distinguishing between active subversion of a democratically-elected government and fostering dissidence

**Arrested activists** have been charged under Unlawful Activities Prevention Act for alleged links with banned Naxal outfit CPI (Maoist)

**Those arrested** are lawyer Sudha Bhardwaj, journalist Gautam Naulakha, poet Varavara Rao, lecturer Vernon Gonsalves and lawyer and human rights activist Arun Ferreira

ILLUSTRATION: ARINDAM

When Mehta spoke of the activists planning "frequent protests which will lead to chaos and breakdown of law and order", Justice DY Chandrachud spoke of the need to distinguish between actively subverting a democratically-elected government and fostering dissidence. "We are also criticised. Your shoulders must be robust and strong enough to deal with it."

Harish Salve appearing for the complainant in the case then said that the activists had a "mind-set which does not square with the Constitution". "The top court will have to examine if they crossed a line (into criminality, complicity)."

Justice Chandrachud then said that since the case involved liberty of citizens, the court would examine the material with a "hawk's eye". "Liberty cannot be sacrificed at the altar of conjectures."

Earlier, he demanded to know how government officials were witnesses in the case. The top court had on August 29, 2018, ordered that the five arrested be placed under house arrest rather than be taken into custody till the state gave a formal explanation to the court on the arrests.

Among those who had challenged their arrests were Romila Thapar, Prabhat Patnaik, Maja Daruwala, Devaki Jain and Satish Deshpande. They had claimed that the random arrests of "professionals with impeccable educational qualifications" was meant to quell dissent. Their petition was argued by senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi. The well-known Nagpur lawyer Surendra Gadling later moved court seeking parity in treatment for him and four other activists arrested earlier in June over their suspected Maoist links. The other four are professor Shoma Sen, activist Rona Wilson who heads an organisation known as the committee for release of political prisoners, Marathi poet Sudhir Dhawal and Mahesh Raut who has been protesting displacement of people by illegal mining in Maharashtra. Their case was argued in court by senior advocate Anand Grover.

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