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# Kerala, After The Flood: Tendency to back development despite warning from ecologists creates ground for future disasters

India

Janaki Murali

Aug 24, 2018 16:36:33 IST

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**Editor's Note:** *An unprecedented southwest monsoon in Kerala has left the state in shambles. According to the India Meteorological Department, from 1 June to 16 August, Kerala received cumulative rainfall of 2,227.26 mm, 37.49 percent more than the average. Described as one of the worst since 1924 by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the rains in Kerala have left over 350 dead and rendered thousands of people homeless. According to the latest tally, 80,000 have been rescued so far. Over 1,500 relief camps have been set up across the state that currently house at least 2,23,139 people. In a **multi-part series**, Firstpost will attempt to analyse the short-term and long-term impact of these unprecedented floods on the lives of the people, economy of the state, and the environment.*

Could we have prevented the loss of nearly 350 lives, displacement of 10 lakh people and the loss of property to the tune of nearly Rs 20,000 crore in the Kerala floods?

Could we have prevented the floods inundating Kodagu district of Karnataka right now?

And, more importantly, can we in the future, prevent flooding of cities, towns and villages across India, every time there are torrential rains or thunderstorms?

Yes, we can, according to ecologists.



People being rescued from flood-affected regions in Kerala. PTI

Fragile eco-sensitive zones in the Western Ghats were ignored, despite warning bells being rung by ecologists like Madhav Gadgil, as early as 2011. Gadgil led the panel which submitted the Report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) on 31 August, 2011 to the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The WGEEP designated the

entire Western Ghats as an ecologically sensitive area and, assigned three levels of ecological sensitivity to different regions of the hilly region.

The WGEEP recommended no new dams be built in the ecologically sensitive zones; that no environment clearance be accorded to hydel projects falling in the zones; a moratorium on new environmental clearances for mining; and also suggested steps to address the 'serious deficit in environmental governance all over the Western Ghats tract.

Last week, following the flooding in Kerala, Gadgil told *PTI*, "The flooding has definitely brought to light the existence of illegal stone quarries or a large number of unauthorised constructions on river beds", and added "In this sense, it is definitely a man-made calamity where intense rainfall and human intervention have made it a serious disaster."

Gadgil even warned the Goa authorities that it could face the same problems that Kerala did if it did not take adequate precautions to prevent another disaster from happening.

Illegal quarrying, mining, deforestation and construction of high rises in ecologically sensitive zones, is a problem plaguing Kodagu district in Karnataka too. Kodagu has been facing massive flooding from torrential rains. Besides flooding, the hilly terrain

also faces mudslides and landslides blocking access to far-flung regions, where people could be trapped.

But why is it, that governments wait for a disaster to strike to react? Scientists from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) have squarely placed the blame of the current damage in Kodagu to development in the last four decades, with large tracts of dense vegetation being cleared, according to a report in the *Deccan Herald*. TV Ramachandra, professor, at IISc's Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES), which conducted a detailed study across Kodagu, states, "With the clearing of vegetation, there is nothing to hold back the topsoil which has been currently washed away."

The *World Wildlife* states, "We're losing 18.7 million acres of forests annually, equivalent to 27 soccer fields every minute." That forests have a critical role in mitigating climate change is a given, as trees act as a carbon sink. The WWF estimates that 15 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions are the result of deforestation.

WWF also states that "half of the topsoil on the planet has been lost in the last 150 years." Topsoil erosion is also due to farmers opting for coffee, cotton, palm oil, soybean or wheat, which adds to soil erosion and can worsen flooding.

The Chief Justice of Karnataka, Dinesh Maheshwari, has called floods and landslides "nothing but man-made", when hearing a public interest litigation on polluted water due to quarrying in Karkala taluk, according to a report in *The News Minute*.

We don't need scientists and ecologists to tell us that vegetation holds topsoil and retains rainwater, yet damage to our Ghats has continued regardless of all the expert advice that was available to governments from ecologists and environmentalists. This degradation has not happened overnight. It has taken years and decades and government after government regardless of their political affiliation has allowed unbridled quarrying, mining, building of high rise constructions and power plants. And then, as is wont with politicians, resorted to closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

What is important is that ecologists and environmentalists have to work in tandem with the government departments to achieve success on the ground.

An excellent example of one such activist-government partnership is the reforestation efforts by environmentalists and locals in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu with the support of forest and revenue department officials. The **Annamalai Reforestation Society** (ARS) founded by like-minded naturalists and local activists in 1988, has worked tirelessly in bringing back vegetation to the once barren Arunachala Hill.

My earliest memory of the sacred Arunachala Hill was a black visage. Frequent forest fires contributed to the devastation of the hill. The sweltering heat added to the hot summers of the place. Tiruvannamalai being a major Shaivite destination for pilgrims the temple town sees hundreds of thousands converge on it every Pournami or full moon day to do the Girivelam or walk around the 14.5 km of the hill.

But today, I see a green mountain, plush with vegetation. The reforestation effort of the ARS has also brought rains back to Tiruvannamalai, filling the empty bunds and lakes. Even two years ago the temple town faced drought and an acute scarcity of water. It took ARS three decades to achieve the turnaround that it did in the bustling temple town.

# **KERALA**

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**A F T E R T H E**

# **FLOOD**

This is just one example, there are several such examples all over the country, where environmentalists have worked wonders. But while environmentalists and ecologists work on preserving and protecting our landmass, governments need to map fault lines, vulnerable and ecologically high risk-prone zones with the help of these experts, so that they are able to prevent a disaster like the kind that has hit Kerala and now Karnataka.

Meanwhile, there are media reports that the Karnataka government plans to call in experts from the Hyderabad-based National Geophysical Research Institute to study the geology of various locations in Kodagu and inspect dam structures in other flood-affected places in the state.

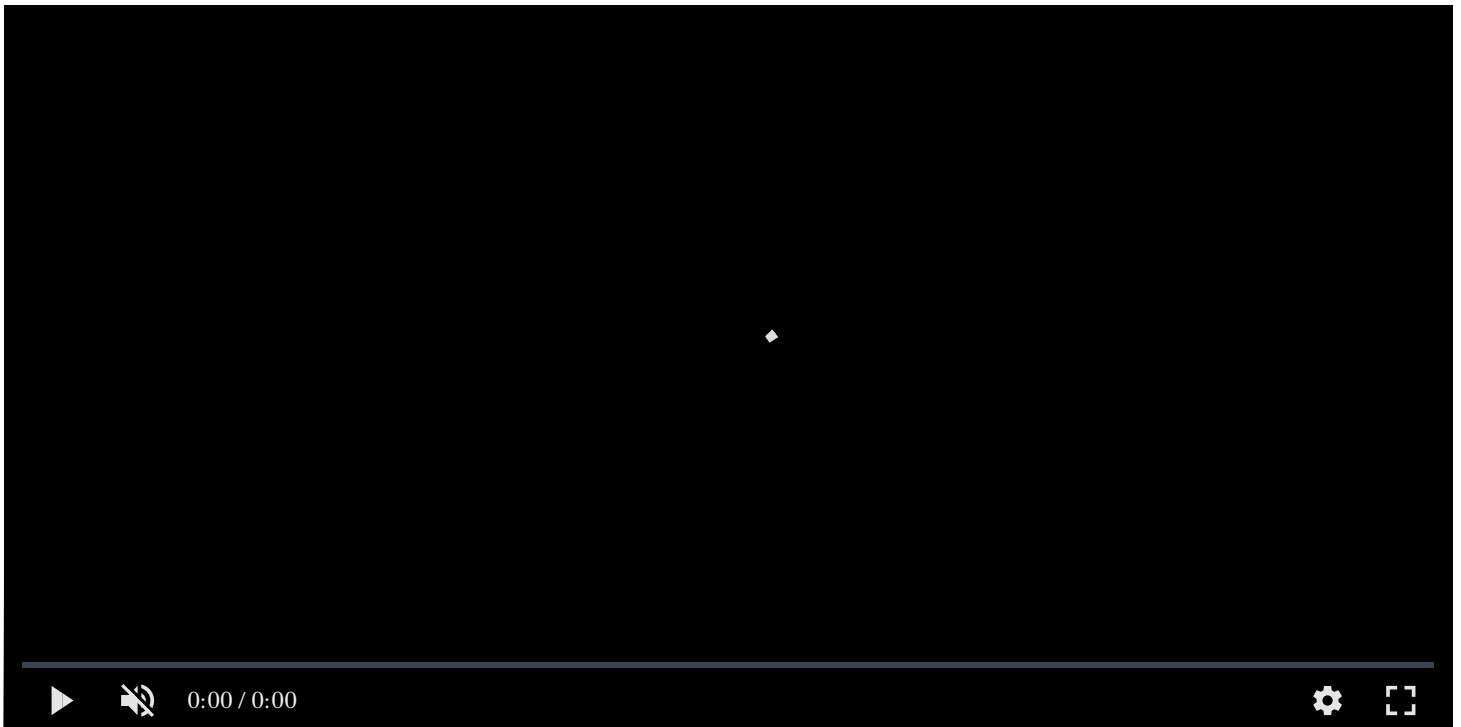
Hopefully, this won't be another study that languishes in some corner of the Vidhana Soudha.

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# Plastic ban in Bihar: Patna HC directs Nitish Kumar govt to impose prohibition; next hearing on 24 September

India

Indo-Asian News Service Aug 27, 2018 15:33:46 IST

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**Patna:** The Patna High Court on Monday directed the Bihar government to impose a ban on the usage of plastic bags.



A bench comprising Patna High Court Chief Justice MR Shah asked the state government to make a law on the ban and to use the media to create awareness. It slated the next hearing for 24 September.

Last week, a draft notification was circulated for a blanket ban on the manufacture, import, storage, transport,

sale and use of plastic after seeking objections and suggestions from civilians, institutions and stakeholders.

According to the notification, the plastic bags are non-biodegradable, produce toxic gases on burning, cause blocking of sewers and drains, reduce soil fertility and pose a threat to the life of cattle. No one will sell, store, distribute or use any kind of plastic bag for storing or dispensing edible or non-edible goods in the jurisdiction of all municipal corporations, municipal councils and nagar panchayats, it added.

Updated Date: Aug 27, 2018 15:33 PM

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## Kerala floods: Indian Navy rescued 17,000 people in deluge-hit state during 'Operation Madad'

India

Press Trust of India Aug 27, 2018 15:08:25 IST

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**Kochi:** The Indian Navy rescued nearly 17,000 people caught in gushing waters in flood-ravaged Kerala, a defence spokesperson said on Monday.

Navy personnel who were part of the rescue mission code named "Operation Madad" in Kerala, displayed their skills and courage in rescuing thousands of people, Commander Sridhar Warriar, the spokesperson in Kochi, said.



Rescue operation in Kerala. Twitter @DefenceMinIndia

In all, the Indian Navy rescued a total of 16,843 people, of which 1,173 were airlifted while 15,670 were rescued by teams using Gemini boats after Kerala experienced unprecedented rainfall, which resulted in widespread flooding, he told *PTI*.

"Such was their efficiency that in fact, no

deaths by drowning were reported in any area where naval teams systematically organised their rescue efforts," he said.

Warrier said a robust and efficient Command, Control and Logistics Organisation of the Southern Naval Command (SNC), coordinated by Joint Operation Centre (JOC), ensured naval personnel deployed in the worst-hit areas were utilised efficiently to rescue maximum number of people.

Based on inputs from the state administration, as well as feedback from the teams on ground, careful planning of the utilisation of resources available with the Command was done and teams were deployed in the general areas where distress calls were most concentrated, he said.

"Once the resources available with the Southern Naval Command in terms of Gemini boats and divers were found to be falling short, additional resources were sought and promptly received from other Naval commands," Warrier said.

SNC headquarters also coordinated with the air force headquarters for airlift of personnel and equipment from Mumbai and Visakhapatnam to Kochi.

He said deployment of teams to inaccessible areas was mostly done by airlift and even this was extremely difficult as landing grounds for the aircraft were not readily available due to inundation of most areas.

The teams were dropped off at the closest locations and, thereafter, they moved by boat/road to the affected areas.

Naval aircraft operated from the naval air station INS Garuda and were deployed from Chalakudy, Thrissur to Ayroor, Pathanamthitta to airlift survivors from locations inaccessible by road, the spokesman said.

Some of the rescued people were relocated to safe sites and the rest were brought to naval relief camps set up in the T-2 Hangar and Naval KG School inside the Naval Base, he said.

As the waters receded, de-induction of 92 teams and over 500 men began after obtaining clearance from the state government.

He said Wayanad district was the first to be severely hit as a result of the incessant rains, which resulted in flooding and landslides.

Consequently, on 9 August in view of the worsening situation and the challenges faced by the state administration, the Southern Naval Command launched "Operation Madad" to facilitate rescue and relief efforts to the affected areas, the spokesman said.

Initially, Operation Madad State III was executed on 9 August, which was raised to State II on 10 August, wherein majority of rescue and relief teams were brought to full readiness and kept on standby for immediate deployment, he said.

The rains intensified considerably from 14 August which resulted in waters in major dams crossing the danger levels and forcing the state government to order opening of the shutters of some 35 of these 39 dams.

"This resulted in major flooding at Ernakulam, Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts mainly due to opening of shutters of four dams in Idukki district and Kakki Dam in Pathanamthitta district and led to massive increase in water levels and flow in Periyar and Pamba rivers," he said.

Since the situation developed over a period of ten days, the naval deployments were also carried out in phases.

The Joint Operations Centre (JOC), Kochi became the nerve centre during the conduct of Operation Madad.

The JOC was augmented with a planning and coordination section, rescue coordination cell within the operations room and a team muster and kitting up point at the ground floor of the JOC building, in order to quickly deploy teams as per requirement, the spokesman said.

Deployment of rescue teams peaked on 19 August, wherein a total of 92 teams were deployed simultaneously across all affected areas, he added.

# **KERALA**

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**A F T E R T H E**

# **FLOOD**

JOC was also the nerve centre for planning and coordination with all other services and state agencies, and carried out this task seamlessly to maximise rescue efforts on the ground.

Over 300 people have died and lakhs displaced in the floods and landslides caused by the monsoon rains since 8 August across Kerala.

Updated Date: Aug 27, 2018 15:08 PM

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# Congress criticises Manohar Parrikar for staying silent on Rafale deal issue, accuses him of 'betraying the nation'

India

Indo-Asian News Service Aug 27, 2018 15:04:39 IST

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The Congress on Monday accused Goa Chief Minister and former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar of being silent on the controversial Rafale deal, saying he was aware of the violation of several norms linked to the purchase of the French military aircraft.



File image of Manohar Parrikar. Reuters

All India Congress Committee spokesperson Priyanka Chaturvedi while speaking to the media at the party headquarters in Panaji questioned how Parrikar, despite being the then Defence Minister, "did not know that a deal had been negotiated, signed and agreed upon?"

"A Defence Minister who knew about bypassing of the cabinet committee on security (CCS) norms, transfer of technology and not following of defence procurement procedure, continues to maintain his silence and chooses not to answer," Chaturvedi said. "So his silence is a conspiracy in an agreement that has betrayed this nation."

Chaturvedi also slammed Parrikar for his alleged flip-flop on the **Rafale deal**, accusing him of going into hiding over the alleged scam.

"Here is a Defence Minister, who just days before the deal was signed, had gone on record to say that some terms of the agreement were non-negotiable. But you were aware that those were the very clauses that were negotiated in France," she said. "And the nation saw how Parrikar continued to hide, instead of giving answers on the deal. It is a known fact that he himself was not prepared for it and was caught off guard."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had signed the Rafale deal in September 2016 while Parrikar served as the Defence Minister, to purchase fighter jets from France.

Updated Date: Aug 27, 2018 15:04 PM

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