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Cut to the quick, nature will ravage

By Dr MOHAN KANDA | THE HANS INDIA | Aug 23, 2018 , 03:43 AM IST



Cut to the quick, nature will ravage

The havoc caused by the recent floods in Kerala has taught many a lesson to all concerned. Not that such lessons have not been handed out in the past. Like a vexed teacher, the nature has whipped the cane in Kerala. However, the students, those responsible for the management of such disasters, have stubbornly refused to learn from the past.



Several questions arise in the context of this great tragedy. The first one is why the floods caused such colossal damage in a state like Kerala, which is endowed with a vast and extensive network of rivers, tanks, canals and backwaters, not to mention exceedingly well-managed water transport and drainage

systems. The state is also known for its competent and efficient administration. The second question, thus, is what the fate would be of less endowed states, if they were they to face a similar calamity.

The present rain and floods were of unprecedented intensity, the likes of which have not been seen for over a century. Nearly 30% of rainfall, in excess of the normal, was received in a short duration; 13 out of the 14 districts of the state were submerged; over 2.5 lakh people removed to safe locations and nearly 400 people died, apart from many who have gone missing.

In order to understand the man-made component of the disaster, we need to recognise certain ground realities. The Indian Institute of Science (IISc), in a report prepared last year, found that during the period 1973–2016, 9 lakh hectares of forest were destroyed in the state. IISc concluded that on account of the loss of forest cover, many adverse consequences would result, including a substantial effect on the pattern of rainfall.

Another study, conducted jointly by National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA) and Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), concluded that over the last 90 years, nearly 34,000 square km (34 lakh hectares) or 35% of forest in the state have been destroyed for use for various purposes, including construction of dams.

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) - also known as the Gadgil Commission – in its report submitted to the Government of Kerala in 2011 wanted the entire region to be declared as an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) and suggested the classification of 140,000 km of the Western Ghats into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ)s. In the first of these zones it was proposed that there be a total ban on the construction of power stations, mining, quarrying and major irrigation dams.

It is noteworthy that the hydroelectric project in Kerala, and the Gundia project in Karnataka, both fall within this zone. The Kerala government, however, rejected the recommendations feeling that too much emphasis on environment would hinder economic progress of the state. The Government of India then appointed the Kasturirangan Committee which, in its report submitted in 2013, proposed that, if not the entire region, at least 37% of the Western Ghats area be declared as an ESA.

Nothing, however, came out of those recommendations.

Once it is known how much damage has been caused to Kerala state on account of the recent floods, one will be able to form an estimate of the degree to which economic progress earlier achieved was neutralised by it. And, God forbid, if Goa too has to suffer similar misfortune in the future, that estimate would grow into even more frightening proportions.

On account of the shifting of the soil caused by quarrying and excavation, massive landslides have occurred. What is more, in the name of promoting tourism, resorts and restaurants have been set up in Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode, resulting in large-scale destruction of trees and irresponsible construction activity. The emergence of sky-rise buildings even in water zones has obstructed the flow of water from the upper reaches of the hills, causing instability of the land and aggravating the situation.

Similarly, digging of earth from the river beds in order to construct houses has caused water to flow into inhabited areas. The 14 hydroelectric projects in the region constructed reportedly in disregard of prescribed regulations have proved to be an impediment to the free flow of floodwaters areas downhill. The impact of all these phenomena was witnessed largely in Idukki and Wayanad, the two districts that bore the brunt of the fury of the recent floods.

The decreasing forest cover has also resulted in erosion of soil which, carried by the water, later settles in the reservoirs causing inevitable siltage which, it has been estimated, has reduced effectively the storage levels in the states' reservoirs by about 22%.

Such a cause-and-effect relationship between irresponsible actions and inevitable effects apply to all states in general. In fact what is being written in this column can always be read in the aftermath of any flood in any other state. There is, however, an extra factor in the present context – namely Mullaperiyar dam, located in Kerala, but operated and maintained by Tamil Nadu (TN) since it acts as a lifeline for Theni, Madurai, Shivaganga and Ramnad districts of that state, providing water for irrigation drinking and for generation of power.

TN has also been insisting on raising the water level to 152' from 142' to prevent failure of crops on its side, but Kerala has fixed the level at 136' citing possible collapse of the 100+yrs-old dam endangering the safety of people living their side. It is not heeding Supreme Court's directives. Now that the water-level has reached almost 142,' SC is asking to lower the level. But it is now the turn of TN to refuse to obey the order.

It is not uncommon for upstream states to build projects in order to hog river waters. Nature, however, usually teaches such states a lesson by causing heavy rains and forcing release of water for fear of flooding and damage to the dam. On such occasions, the water is released abruptly and without notice to the areas downstream, causing flooding therein.

For these reasons, among others, this columnist, while functioning as a member in charge of floods in the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), had suggested in the NDMA's guidelines on floods that, inter alia, representatives of each state should be part of a permanent mechanism supervisory mechanism in the other, and that the central government should join the effort to ensure sensible and methodical management of the storage and release of water – on purely technical grounds and freed from the politics.

There is not much evidence of these guidelines having been followed in actual practice. And, so long as adjoining states continue to act like siblings fighting over ancestral property, such unfortunate incidents will keep recurring.

In conclusion, one cannot help noting that a Flood Plane Zoning Regulation draft circulated, as early as in 1975, by the Government of India has, till today, only been converted into legislation only by Rajasthan and Manipur. That neither Andhra Pradesh, Telangana (where floods are frequent phenomena), nor, for that matter, TN and Kerala


(which are parties to the current tragedy), have bothered to follow that lead of the Government of India only shows the need for states to get their priorities right in the future.

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