

## COVER STORY



## Calamity in coffee country

Old-timers and environmentalists blame tourism for the devastating floods in Kodagu



By Prathima Nandakumar | September 02, 2018 14:43 IST



Shattered hopes: As many as 1,206 houses and 278 government buildings were damaged in the Kodagu floods | Bhanu Prakash Chandra

**IF THE RAINS** had not wreaked havoc in Kodagu, Karnataka's coffee country would be preparing for 'Kail Murta', a festival in which the Kodavas worship their weapons. But, the district, which got battered by flash floods and landslides that took 12 lives and rendered more than 1,500 families homeless, is now left with just one weapon: resilience.

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Unplanned construction has pushed the district to the edge. The authorities are to blame for the influx of tourists and atrocities against nature. - U.M. Poovaiah editor, Brahmagiri

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On the midnight of August 15, torrential rains started pounding Kodagu. The hills cracked up and tumbled down, and the rivers swallowed everything on their way—century-old houses, brand-new homestays, tiny tea shops, lush green paddy fields, vast stretches of coffee plantations, forests, livestock, bridges and vehicles. Incessant rains submerged low-lying areas in Kushalnagar, Somwarpet and Madikeri, pilgrimage centres like Talacauvery and Bhagamandala, and major bridges like Bethri, while landslides along the national highways turned those into death traps.

By the time the district administration launched rescue operations, the communication lines were cut off and most villages had become inaccessible. Heavy rains, tough terrain and scattered habitations made rescue operations a daunting task even for the armed forces and the National Disaster Response Force. Many people were hungry and exhausted when the rescue teams finally reached them.

Manu Madappa from Mukkodlu village said around 40 people took refuge in his homestay for three days. But with no help arriving, they decided to trek to Madikeri. “We covered a distance of 20km, walking in the rain on a muddied path, and made it to a relief camp in Madikeri,” he said.

As many as 51 relief centres have been opened across the district, sheltering 7,594 people as on August 22. NGOs have ensured an uninterrupted flow of relief material to these camps. The Kodava Samaj in Bengaluru and Mysuru are the nerve centres for organising relief material.

Local MP Pratap Simha, who was part of the rescue operations, said the devastation was unimaginable. “Incessant rains prevented airlifting of stranded people although three Army choppers were on standby. After I sent an SOS to Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the Army unit from Karwar was rushed in,” he said. “The relief centres are working well, and our next big challenge is rehabilitation. We will need huge cash donations to rebuild homes.” According to the Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitoring Centre, 1,206 houses and 123 kilometres of roads have been damaged, 58 bridges and culverts have collapsed, 278 government buildings and 3,800 electric poles and transformers have been severely damaged.

Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy, who conducted an aerial survey, said the infrastructure damage alone amounted to Rs 3,000 crore. “A team of engineers from the Border Roads Organisation and the Army engineering task force have been called in to clear roads and restore them,” said Kumaraswamy. “A team from the National Geophysical Research Institute, Hyderabad, is conducting geotechnical studies to ascertain the causes of landslides. We have deputed two IAS probationers to fasten the process of identifying the lands for rebuilding 2,000 temporary homes.” he said.

The government has promised Rs 3,800 per family, along with essential groceries as immediate relief. The chief minister has promised the affected people work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and offered to issue provisional documents for those who have lost their Aadhaar and ration cards and title deeds. “Rs 5 lakh will be given to the family of the deceased. Special classes and books for children are also being planned,” said Kumaraswamy.

The rainfall was unprecedented, but old-timers and environmentalists said the alarming plight of Kodagu was the fallout of the booming tourism industry. G.S. Srinivas Reddy, director of the Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitoring Centre, said Kodagu received 103 per cent more rainfall than normal this year.

U.M. Poovaiah, editor of Brahmagiri, a Kodava weekly, said he had never seen or heard of such devastation in the history of Kodagu. “This is the fallout of unregulated tourism that has razed down the hills to make roads to homestays. The riverbed has been encroached upon. Unplanned construction has pushed the district to the edge. The authorities are to blame for the influx of tourists and atrocities against nature in this once-pristine district. We want unlicensed homestays and construction activity to be stopped,” said Poovaiah.

The Coorg Wildlife Society, too, blamed the severe stress on Kodagu because of the change in land use and unbridled tourism. In a letter sent last May to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the CWS wrote, “Kodagu provides almost 50 per cent of the total inflow into Cauvery, which is the lifeline of South India, and provides water to over 80 million people and 600 major industries across the region. The food, water and economic security of southern India hinges largely on Cauvery River. It is therefore in national interest to preserve the Kodagu landscape and protect its ecosystems.”

Colonel (retd) C.P. Muthanna, president of CWS and co-ordinator of the Save Kodagu and Cauvery campaign, said more than 2,800 acres of paddy fields, coffee plantations and highlands were converted to residential layouts, sites, commercial complexes and resorts between 2005 and 2015. “Kodagu’s fast-paced urbanisation will turn it into a slum,” said Muthanna. Earlier this year, he had urged the Karnataka government to regulate tourism in the region and demanded an audit of water and waste and sewage management in the resorts. “While Kodagu has a population of 5.5 lakh, the number of tourists goes up to 13 lakh,” he said.

A report by the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, said massive deforestation and monoculture plantations caused the landslides. “Trees hold the top soil and also absorb and regulate the flow of rainwater. But deforestation for construction of roads and power lines have resulted in soil erosion,” said T.V. Ramachandra of the centre. “If the government wants to avert disasters, it should not take up any mega projects.”

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