

Landslides, floods in Kodagu a wake-up call

A record high rainfall in Kodagu district, nestled in the Western Ghats, caused severe landslides, flooding and large-scale displacement.



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View of a landslide at Sitharam Patti near Kalur village in Kodagu following rains | Pushkar V

When much of the nation's attention was focused on the rain-induced devastation in Kerala, a tiny part of Karnataka was facing a similar situation. A record high rainfall in Kodagu district, nestled in the

Western Ghats, caused severe landslides, flooding and large-scale displacement. More than a thousand houses were destroyed, about 5,000 people were displaced and at least 16 killed.

The rain has abated, but the scale of devastation is such it will take months before normalcy is restored. While the rainfall was heavy, experts believe the severity of damage was partly due to the rampant and unregulated development that Kodagu witnessed in the last couple of decades. There has been a scramble to cash in on Kodagu's popularity as a tourist destination.

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The result: Mushrooming of resorts, conversion of forest lands to build the necessary infrastructure and a rapid increase in population. So this was a disaster waiting to happen. Ironically, even as Kodagu was suffering, the Karnataka government wrote to the Centre voicing its

objections to the implementation of the K Kasturirangan-led panel's report, which had recommended demarcation of ecologically sensitive areas in the Western Ghats to restrict construction activities, mining and land-use changes. The panel wanted 1,576 villages in Karnataka, spread across 20,668 sq km, designated as ecologically sensitive.

An earlier report by environmentalist Madhav Gadgil, which recommended declaring the entire Western Ghats range as ecologically sensitive, was junked by the Centre itself. With the even comparatively development-friendly Kasturirangan report facing opposition, there's little hope for the fragile Western Ghats ecology. Waking up to the disaster, the Karnataka government rightly put a moratorium on land-use conversion in Kodagu. But that's the least it can do. If it wants to save the Ghats, the source of many rivers and a biodiversity hotspot, it must learn from past mistakes. The disaster should be a wake-up call to stop toying with nature.

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