

## ECOLOGIC ENVIRONMENT

# Catastrophic rain is the new normal



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## Neglect of nature and ecological mismanagement impose too high a price

When disaster strikes, it is small comfort for a scientist to say 'I told you so.' Even as Kerala limps back on the long road to recovery after a devastating deluge that killed hundreds, rendered tens of thousands homeless, and caused damage worth billions, an eminent ecologist

started on how this natural calamity has been made worse by human actions.

We need to also realise that the kind of extreme rainfall that led to the Kerala floods will likely be more frequent in the immediate future. Climate watchers have been warning that global warming driven by our penchant for unrestrained emission of greenhouse gases will lead to extreme rainfall events.

Researchers at the University of New South Wales published a report in 2016 that said **climate change** is driving an overall increase in rainfall extremes. The research's projections for the rest of the century showed continued intensification of daily precipitation extremes. The results of the 2016 study was consistent with another study in 2015 by the scientists at Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who found that global warming had boosted the number of record-breaking rainfall events.

## No escape

It is futile to expect that India will escape these planetary changes in extreme weather. Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology in Gandhinagar found in 2018 that warming driven by human activities is leading to extreme rainfall events in India, which will particularly affect the southern and central parts of the country.

Last year, weather scientists at Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, said in a study that extreme rainfall events have tripled in central India since 1950, costing 69,000 lives, leaving 17 million homeless, and affecting 825 million people.

The scientific evidence clearly linking extreme weather with climate change is also borne out by the suffering of ordinary citizens. Extreme floods that follow intense rainfall have been a consistent occurrence in India in recent years.

We need to remember the damage caused by the floods in Chennai (2015), Kashmir (2014) and Uttarakhand (2013) that followed extreme rainfall and were worsened by human folly.

In each of these instances, the impact of adverse climatic conditions was magnified by negligence, or worse, short-sighted human activity. Much of the misery that Kerala is suffering could have been avoided if we had listened to the experts. The tragedy is partly manmade, as Madhav Gadgil, founder of the Centre for Ecological Sciences, has said.

The scientist, who headed the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, said illegal constructions on riverbeds and rampant stone quarrying on hill slopes have contributed to the calamity. The panel's recommendations in a 2012 report that was submitted to the government were completely ignored.

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It is not the first time that warnings by experts have been ignored. Himalayan geologist Khadg Singh Valdiya, former vice-chancellor of Kumaon University, had for years been warning about reckless development in Uttarakhand in utter disregard of its fragile ecology.

After the 2013 cloudburst and the devastation in its wake, Valdiya said that the heavy loss of life and property was in part the result of criminal oversight by planners and developers. The deluge claimed more than 4,000 lives and caused damage from which the State hasn't yet recovered.

We cannot, and should not, let this state of affairs to continue. Global warming has ensured that extreme rainfall and cloudbursts are now a fact of life. We can no longer avoid them, but what we can do is to choose a wiser way to development. Managing our ecosystems in a more sustainable manner is the first step.

It goes without saying that politicians and economists have an important role to play in this. But are they listening?

While we chase growth at any price, we need to factor in the ecological costs and plan our development accordingly. The lives of millions cannot be held hostage to ecological mismanagement.

How many more catastrophes like Kerala do we have to endure to come to our senses?

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