

The Kerala Deluge: Global Warming's Latest Act

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Ten days of incessant downpour has turned the peninsular Indian state of Kerala into a theatre of destruction. Three hundred and sixty deaths, thousands of homes inundated, over a million people in relief camps, roads and the major airport flooded and damaged- an unparalleled tragedy in the history of the state renowned for its high social indices and progressive political ambience. The Kerala deluge is a man-made calamity predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its 2007 report.

As predicted by the IPCC the number of rainy days were less and the volume of precipitation far greater than the normal average. Uninterrupted rains lashed most of the 38852 sq km broad state from 9 to 15 August, which was over 257 per cent of the normal rainfall this period in the past years. And this unending rain was falling on a soil that was already soaked by rains that started on June 1 which was already in excess of the normal by 41 per cent. The carrying capacities of the water bodies to hold the run off water were also exhausted. The irrigation and hydel dams on the Western Ghats mountains bordering the eastern part the state were already getting to their peak storage capacity.

The rain on 15 August was an unbearable 130 mm against 10 mm average of the previous years' on the same day. What followed was a tragedy of unprecedented scale- floods across the state and landslides in the mountain areas. Deaths and destruction as never seen before in this part of the world. Kerala has the memory of a 1924 flood that was calamitous but the present one surpasses that in the scale of the havoc. Kerala enjoys a moderate climate, with no pronounced summer or winter, and characterised by two seasons of monsoon- the present southwest usually starting in early June and northeast monsoon starting in mid October, and the rains are spread across the season with interludes of sunny days. Winter clothes are alien to Kerala and air conditioners are an unwanted luxury. Kerala was unprepared to face the challenge of the deluge in the making of which it barely had any role.

Kerala has a forest and tree cover of 23280 sq kms which is 60 per cent of the terrestrial area of the state, in comparison with the 21.54 per cent forest coverage of India, as reported by the latest report on forests in the country by the Forest Survey of India in 2017. It also reports a net gain in forest coverage by 1043 sq km in Kerala during the reporting period, though this is attributed to the increase in commercial plantations. As for the water bodies in the forest districts, the state expanded its spread by 71 sq kms during the decade of 2005-15, the report records. Obviously, the local environmental factors hardly had any influence in the making of the tragedy. There are cases of stone mining in some parts of the state, which I have also been opposing at a few locales, but that cannot be attributed to the

deluge as some tend to argue. The sheer volume of the precipitation inundated the entire landscape, and wrought landslides. Global warming operates as an invisible process and one can miss it and get engaged with local factors digressing from the central issue.

The damages wrecked by the deluge are astronomical. Tentative estimates put the figure at Rs 200000 million (about US \$ 3 billion). The flood mortality was kept to the minimum by the dedication and unity of the people in rescue and relief operation. The coastal fishermen took their boats on elevated trucks to the inundated areas and rescued about 100000 people marooned on rooftops. The army too played a commendable role although the scale of deployment of their logistics was disproportionate to the scale of the disaster. The people showed remarkable solidarity and sense of sharing in helping the affected in the relief camps spread across schools, public halls, churches, mosques and temples. The greatest ever tragedy in the state also witnessed a great display of human solidarity.

IPCC had predicted the change of floods of 100 years cycles to 4-5 years. With the atmosphere having over 400 parts per million warming gases, the highest ever in the past three million years, this prediction is set to become a reality. And the Kerala deluge is one more proof. Half of the 48 million people exposed to river flooding is in Asia and this is set to increase with the growing incidents of floods. The losses from floods across the world are set to escalate from the current staggering figure of Euro 110 billion per year. And the victims have barely any role in the making of this tragedy. According to a World Bank study of 2013 the US per capita emission was 16.4 metric tonnes while India's was only 1.6 metric tonnes. All developing countries have similar or even lower rate of carbon emission than India. And this is not considering the disproportionately huge levels of carbon emission by the US in the past, and the same is the case with other industrial economies as well. Yet the Paris Agreement is inherently weak in reversing the climate change and the US is seeking to sabotage even that.

This is a debilitating blow to Kerala's economic order that spends heavily on education, has a renowned primary health care system and an egalitarian social profile. Yet the relief assistance from the federal government has been meagre in comparison to the scale of damage. Rupees six thousand million is offered when the devastation is to the tune of Rupees two hundred thousand million. This figure is not exactly because of a scarcity of funds as far more amounts have been spent by the current regime on items such as personal publicity for the prime minister, statue making, aid for a single religious festival and so on. This discrimination is perceived as due to the progressive politics and syncretism that characterise the Kerala society, in contrast to the xenophobic and fundamentalist politics of the political formation at the federal government. Unfortunately the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) of the Rashtreeya Swayam Sevak Sangh, a fundamentalist outfit that was banned for a term following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, did not stop there. Their men went on calling on people not to donate money to the relief fund set up by the Kerala chief minister, describing the Kerala tragedy as a divine punishment for eating beef, for disrespecting a certain god and so on.

That is a tragedy within a tragedy, stooping to the level of a TV anchor close to the prime minister disparaging, on air, the people of rain ravaged Kerala. A federal minister, interestingly hailing from Kerala, publicly stated that all that the battered state needed was only plumbers and electricians. An unprecedented tragedy followed by unheard of campaigns, reflecting the new xenophobic political ambience in the country. And the federal government diplomatically denied any UN support to the flood affected people. The UAE government was contemplating to provide an unconditional grant of US\$ one million, but

that was rejected by the federal government even when India is a leading recipient of foreign assistance from multiple countries and multilateral banks. India is encumbered with a staggering debt of Rs 460000 million to foreign countries and multilateral agencies during 2017-18, according to the Ministry of Finance. And India paid back Rs 57680 million to foreign donors in interest alone during the same period! But foreign assistance for the helplessly sinking state was denied, even as the federal government itself is declining to contribute to Kerala matching its massive financial need for rehabilitation. Denial of the UAE aid offer came, intriguingly, after the prime minister's tweet welcoming the support of UAE.

The global community, the developed countries in particular, has a responsibility not to let Kerala sink as it is reeling under the onslaught of global warming in the creation of which it has little role. And this should be based on the principles of polluter pays and common but differential responsibility enshrined in international law. With the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change projecting the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere the lethal 55 gigatonnes in the year 2030, it is important for the global South to see how the world responds to the onslaught of global warming in Kerala.

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