

FACE THE DELUGE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

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The southwest monsoon has left a trail of destruction this year. Nearly 500 people have reportedly lost their lives in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Assam and Bihar. In Kerala, which experienced its worst deluge in a century last year, more than 80 people have lost their lives in five days since August 8. In neighbouring Karnataka, the toll stands at 48. Northern Karnataka, which was facing drought like conditions in May, is now under water. According to Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa, the state is witnessing its worst floods in 45 years. In Maharashtra, more than 40 people have lost their lives in Sangli and Kolhapur districts, while the Marathwada and Vidharbha regions are reeling under a drought.

The floods this year have drawn attention to the changing dynamics of the southwest monsoon. Take the case of Kerala. According to India Meteorological Department (IMD) data, the state recorded a more than 25 per cent deficit in rainfall between June 1 and August 7. But Kerala has nearly made up the deficit in the past five days. Palakkad district has received 80 per cent excess rainfall after August 8, [Wayanad](#) and Thrissur have also experienced sharp departures from normal rainfall, with an excess of nearly 40 per cent. Similarly, on August 8, Karnataka received nearly five times the rainfall the state receives in a day. Kodagu, the state's worst flood-hit district, received 460 per cent above normal rainfall between August 5 and 11. In fact, monsoon rains in the past five years have followed a pattern: A few days of intense rainfall sandwiched between dry spells.

The focus this year, as in the past, has been on providing relief to the flood-affected. But questions must also be asked about the ways states prepare for, and deal with, floods. The vagaries of weather, for example, demand cooperation between states that share a river basin. This year, Maharashtra and Karnataka bickered over opening the gates of the Almatti dam on the river Krishna. By the time the two states agreed over the amount of water to be discharged from the dam's reservoirs, the damage was already done. The floods also drive home the urgency of focusing on nature's mechanisms of resilience against extreme weather events. Policymakers and planners have shown little inclination to place wetlands, natural sponges that soak up the rainwaters, at the centre of flood control projects. Flood governance in the country has placed inordinate emphasis on embankments. But the floods in Bihar and Assam showed — for the umpteenth time — that these structures are no security against swollen rivers. Of course, what is true for the Western Ghats states may not hold for Assam and Bihar. But the message from the floods this year is clear: There is a need to revisit the understanding of the monsoon and find ways to deal with its fury.

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