

BALANCING PRIORITIES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Forecasts of 'good' or 'normal' monsoons are often beguiling and belie the ominous. This year, the annual [floods that upend the Brahmaputra Valley](#) have been followed by intense spells along the [Konkan coast](#) and [Mumbai](#), and now [Kerala](#), which until the end of last month recorded a slight deficit. The [landslip in Idukki](#), that has so far claimed 43 lives and rendered several homeless, follows from a continuing spell of heavy rains in Kerala. Most districts have received three or four times more rain than what is normal. Last year too, neighbouring Wayanad saw multiple hamlets wiped out and the year before, the devastating floods in the State forced a debate on the need for new models of development. Landslips, or landslides, in the Western Ghats have a history. Following the [2018 floods](#), data from the Geological Survey of India showed that Kerala had experienced 67 major landslide events and several minor ones from 1961-2013. As part of a National Landslide Susceptibility Mapping (NLSM) programme, the agency mapped several States in the Western Ghats, North-eastern States, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand to assess how vulnerable their districts were. Nearly 13,000 square kilometres were mapped until 2018 and 6,000 were to be covered in 2019-20 in Kerala, according to the programme website. Nearly 13 of the State's 14 districts were prone to landslides and what made Kerala particularly vulnerable was the high population density — over 800 per square kilometre — compared to other States that also faced high landslide risk.

The objective of the NLSM maps is to help State and district authorities incorporate the risk of landslides into zoning laws. However, just as in the case of earthquake zonation maps, or for that matter, any exercise to scientifically ascertain the risk from natural hazards to a region, these laws are barely implemented in the right spirit. And this is not unique to Kerala. The details might vary but it is now beyond contestation that India is living in a new climate normal. Frequent high intensity bursts of rain will co-exist along with long dry spells. It has emerged from studies of Kerala's topography that quarrying and the unscientific cutting of slopes into hills aggravates the risk of soil erosion. Operationalising the State's disaster management apparatus and allocating funds for preparedness are key policy responses, but Kerala also must double down on enforcing regulations and observing zoning laws as well as ensuring that slopes carved into hilly terrain have adequate provisions for draining water. A lack of compliance with such principles is often a key reason why natural hazards end up causing a significant number of avoidable casualties. There is a cost to pursuing development goals without paying attention to environmental constraints.

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