

BURIED IN THE SANDS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Ports & Waterways

In late December, the government approved the Draft Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2018, which had been earlier circulated by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC). The CRZ consists of designated areas along the coast that are regulated by the government. The government introduced the new CRZ 2018 notification as a promise of a 'better life' for coastal communities that would add value to the country's economy. Various recommendations to the draft from research think tanks and coastal community groups during the year were largely ignored and consultation appears to have been limited to select government bodies and departments.

The coast is unclear: on the 2018 CRZ notification

CRZ regulations were first introduced in 1991 and subsequently revised in 2011. A coastal hazard line was established taking into account natural disasters including the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. While the 2011 notification recognised that there were areas of high erosion and vulnerability along the coast, few attempts were made to develop this hazard line scientifically or transparently across the country to regulate development. One amendment, in July 2018, removed the hazard line from the main regulation without consulting the public. In the new 2018 notification, as well, all reference to a hazard line has been removed and is replaced with a fixed setback line.

Also read

All along the coastline

Some areas along the coast, for example, experience very high storm surges, but will not get the protection they deserve. Formerly (in the 2011 version), the CRZ extended up to a minimum of 500 m and up to the area of the 'hazard line' if it was found to be beyond 500 m. By removing the hazard line altogether, the new notification maintains a uniform CRZ of 500 m from the high tide line. Except for the most ecologically sensitive areas (CRZ-I) and water areas (CRZ-IV), for which any development clearance requires MoEFCC approval, State governments will be responsible for regulating urban and rural coastal areas (CRZ-II and III).

The CRZ for land adjoining creeks and backwaters is reduced from 100 to 50 m. CRZ 2018 relaxes important restrictions and permits construction in urban CRZ zones and densely populated rural coastal areas. Rural areas have been bifurcated, with greater allowances, ironically, for more populated areas. The greatest number of relaxations has been accorded to hotels, resorts and the tourism sector.

Big hotels, restaurants, houses, coastal highways and small and large port facilities can now be built closer to the shoreline. Increased coastal tourism translates into further destruction of lagoons, marshland and other coastal ecosystems and their services. In fact, a limited study of the Tamil Nadu coastal districts from 2009 found that lakhs of crores of public investment, ecosystems and land are at risk from a one metre rise in average sea levels.

Time to change course

The cyclones Ockhi and Vardah are fresh in people's memories and so is the experience of loss of life and property. These frequent weather-related coastal vulnerabilities are, however, omitted

in the CRZ 2018, which moved the concept of vulnerability and the hazard line from being at the heart of the regulatory mechanism to an optional appendage in the law applicable for a vaguely worded section on 'disaster management'. The document trims the list of restricted activities in the ecologically sensitive CRZ-I areas and erases baselines. These include original baselines of what constituted this coastal zone (where it begins and ends, based on high water marks), what makes for a violation and further, what action should be taken for violations thus far and in future. Meanwhile, shorelines are already eroding due to sand mining controlled by mafias and building of seawalls along the coast.

At the recent international climate meeting at Katowice (COP24), when the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Russia refused to "accept" the special 1.5 degrees report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), India and other developing countries rightly protested that these countries were placing the world at risk. That report called for the world to prepare for severe impacts from climate change if average global temperature was to rise above 1.5° Celsius. The effects from rising seas are already visible and will worsen as temperature rises. Countries need to prepare for an increase in the frequency and intensity of very severe storms and accompanying effects on their coasts. An earlier 2018 study published in Nature Climate Change deduced that, among all countries of the world, India would experience the worst social and economic impacts from climate change.

Caution on the coastline

The CRZ notification from the Cabinet, however, now reads as a rejection of the IPCC's science and anticipated impacts from climate change, including the 1.5° Celsius report. It is not clear whose interests are being heard in this CRZ notification. This environmental legislation has seen repeated fiddling with its provisions (the 1991 version saw about 25 amendments) and regular overhauls (the 2018 version makes for three fresh re-introductions of this law). Little of this activity from the MoEFCC has been towards improving or implementing the law, but rather to reduce regulatory oversight.

The regulation now moves into another era, while existing deadlines to identify violations and phase out sewage and waste disposal and make wholesome management plans lapse. The legal mechanisms and innovations that entered the CRZ lexicon in the wake of the 2004 tsunami and coastal vulnerabilities to climate change have been deleted from the CRZ 2018. In one fell swoop, about two decades of deliberation and action to secure the coasts for the nation's citizens has been erased. With eyes wide open, the country is walking into disaster for its coast and the tens of millions who live on it.

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist who studies science, technology and policy. Aarthi Sridhar is Trustee, Dakshin Foundation. The views expressed are personal

Pakistan's identity crisis, going back to the debates since its creation, remains unresolved

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com