

INDIA NEEDS A LONG-TERM STRATEGY ON FLOODS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

If residents of the northern plains of India are grappling with a deficit monsoon, the people of Bihar, Assam, and other northeastern states are facing a problem of plenty. Pounding rains have worsened flooding in these states, killing and displacing people in Bihar and Assam, destroying property and crops and livestock worth crores, and inundating forests and wildlife in two critical habitats of the country -- the Kaziranga and Pobitora wildlife sanctuaries in Assam. While the immediate job now is to rescue people and animals (livestock and those in the wild) in the flood-hit regions as quickly as possible, the long-term work -- ensuring availability of adequate drinking water, food, clothes, and medicines; rehabilitation; and rebuilding critical infrastructure such as roads -- will also have to be done at a rapid pace.

However, these efforts won't be enough, especially at a time when climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, unless and until the State, political leaders, and civil society mull over a critical question. Are our policies making India even more vulnerable to natural calamities, and what can we do to fix existing problems? For example, since the colonial era, as Sunil Amrith writes in *Unruly Waters*, central governments have focused on gigantic engineering at the expense of local peoples and environments.

Also read: [Death toll soars to 109 in Bihar and north-east](#)

One such gigantic engineering experiment was embanking the rivers of Bihar (and now the nationwide river-linking project). But embanking a river is a bad idea because it prevents the spreading of water. Silt, which would normally spill over a vast area to form the flood plains, is confined to a much smaller area, raising the river bed. With time, the riverbed becomes higher than the surrounding land. Meanwhile, people start living near and on these embankments. When a river in spate breaches these embankments, there is devastation. The reason behind this pro-embankment policy is easy to understand - it helps perpetuate the well-oiled politician-technocrat-contractor nexus. Cuts and kickbacks are the order of the day. Naturally, no one is keen to take a call on what to do with these embankments in Bihar. The same discussion is missing when states clear projects that lead to encroachments of wetlands (which soak excess water) to construct houses or roads on them; or cut mangroves that save coastal cities from cyclones. Unless these policy/development-environment related questions are answered, India will be at the mercy of annual flooding in some part of the country or other.

Also read: [Assam floods: Wildlife rescuers save struggling baby rhino, video is viral](#)

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