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SEARING CHANGES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON HEATWAVES PREDICTED BY THE MET OFFICE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

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February 2023, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) recently said, had been the warmest since 1901 with the average maximum temperature at nearly 29.54°C. While February — considered ‘spring’ and a ‘winter month’ by the IMD — usually posts temperatures in the low 20s, it is also apparent that there has been a gradual rise, with even minimum temperatures scaling new heights. Average maximum temperatures were 1.73°C above normal and minimum, 0.81°C above what is usual. In its latest assessment, the IMD has said that these trends are likely to spill over into summer. Most of the north-east, eastern, central and northwest India are expected to post “above normal” temperatures. Heatwaves during March-May are likely over most parts of India, except for the north-east, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and coastal Karnataka. A ‘heat wave’ is when actual maximum temperatures are over 45°C or if temperatures are 4.5°C over what is normal for the region. Climate change, studies have reported, has exacerbated the impact of heatwaves in India. A Lancet study reported a 55% rise in deaths due to extreme heat and that excessive heat also led to a loss of 167.2 billion potential labour hours among Indians in 2021.

The searing temperatures over the years have impacted the yield of wheat. India produced 106.84 million tonnes of wheat in the 2021-22 crop season, less than the 109.59 million tonnes in 2020-21 season, due to a hotter than usual March that impacted the crop during its growth phase. What these temperatures mean for this year’s monsoon are yet unclear as it is only after March that global forecast models are better able to analyse sea-surface conditions and credibly extrapolate. Three of the last four years saw above normal rainfall in India primarily due to a La Niña, or cooler than usual temperatures in the Equatorial Pacific. While this is expected to subside, whether it will eventually swing to an El Niño and draw moisture away from India’s coasts remains to be seen. The interplay between local weather and climate is complex and while it is tempting to blame rising heatwave intensity as ‘climate change,’ the science continues to be uncertain. This, however, should be a wake-up call to buttress public health systems and make them more responsive to the challenges from rising temperatures. Several States have action plans and early warning initiatives but inadequate outreach, particularly in rural India. Along with promoting newer crop varieties that mature early, there should be greater stress on aiding farmers to tweak soil and water management practices to adapt to these changes.

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