

RAINING MISERY: ON ONGOING MONSOON FURY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

If Bihar is struggling to stay afloat in the ongoing monsoon, its distress can be traced to poor infrastructure and a lack of administrative preparedness. Even large parts of the capital, Patna, have been paralysed without power and communications, as the State government tries to drain its streets of water, and critical rations are distributed by boat and helicopter. The rain has not spared the more affluent residents either; those living in upscale localities including the Deputy Chief Minister, Sushil Kumar Modi, have been rescued. But the plight of people in a dozen other districts, many of them struggling with underdevelopment, is much worse. Across Bihar, there has been a significant loss of life and property. Scenes of similar distress have been reported from some other States as well, notably eastern Uttar Pradesh. The monsoon is expected to withdraw after October 10, more than a month behind normal, and its overhang is consistent with the prevalent scientific view on the effects of a changing climate: extreme rainfall and drought occurring at an increased frequency. Normal patterns will become less common in coming years, according to the current consensus. This alarming outlook calls for a far-sighted national response, with the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, given the responsibility of coordinating the efforts of other Ministries in charge of housing, urban and rural development, water management, and agriculture, as well as State governments.

Indian cities are attracting heavy investments in several spheres, but State and municipal administrations have not matched their ambitions for development with capacity building and infrastructure creation. They must focus on ensuring the safety of citizens and durability of economic assets. Ignoring urban planning and adaptation is proving costly, and losses are sapping the vitality of the economy. In its Cities and Climate Change report, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change pointed to flooding as a key danger, apart from drought and heat islands. This is particularly true of urban centres through which rivers flow — such as Patna — and are often located on the coast, facing the additional threat of cyclones. India's cities should work towards solutions that use engineering and ecology to contain the excess water from rain and put it to good use. This could be in the form of new lakes and bioswales, which are vegetated channels to manage rainwater. There is no better time to create such green infrastructure than today, as water management is a priority programme of the NDA government. States should be able to find financial and technical linkages to put up flood-handling structures. In Bihar's case, coordination with Nepal to track monsoon flows is also vital, since big Gangetic rivers originate in the Himalayan region.

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