

WEST BENGAL, WHERE EROSION LEADS TO LAND LOSS

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Coastal Landforms, changes therein and in Flora & Fauna and the Effects of such changes

Mangroves stand on an island in the Sundarbans. File | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

It's a land-starved State, and between 1990 and 2016, West Bengal lost more to erosion. A report by the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, released recently said West Bengal recorded the maximum erosion of 63%, followed by Puducherry 57%, Kerala 45%, and Tamil Nadu 41%.

The coastal stretch of West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh and located on the eastern end of the Indian peninsula, is one of the largest deltaic regions of the world. The coastline has numerous rivers and the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangroves. The 534 sq km coastline of West Bengal, regularly hit by tides, tropical cyclones and storm surges, has suffered 63% erosion. Between 1990 and 2016, West Bengal lost 99 sq km land due to coastal erosion. The land gain in the State, due to accretion has been only 16 sq km. Sagar, the biggest island of the Sunderbans archipelago, which is home to almost 2 lakh people, is facing severe erosion on its western and south eastern parts. Islands like Ghoramara and Mousuni are also facing erosion. The same trend has been observed at Jambudweep Island and Henry Island in the Sunderbans.

Other than the natural process, like storms and sea level rise, anthropogenic issues like aquaculture, port construction and other developmental activities also lead to coastal erosion, say experts.

West Bengal is a land-starved State with the fourth highest population in the country. It is also the second most densely populated State. According to the 2011 census, 1,029 people live in each square kilometre of West Bengal. The Sunderbans, which comprises most of the coastline in the State, has about 1,000 people living per sq km. The loss of more than 80 sq km of coastal land puts further pressure on the population of the island, who are dependent on economic activities centred on the coastline. This stress leads to migration from these coastal areas and islands. Researchers call the people moving out of the Sunderbans "climate change refugees." The erosion of coastal areas, coupled with climate change, is a major cause of migration from the Sunderbans, which is one of the most backward regions of the State. Reports say that of the 1,000 inhabitants of the Sunderbans, 190 eat just one meal a day and 510 are malnourished. The extent of migration can be gauged by a recent publication of the School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavapur University, which said 75% of the people living on the island are dependent on remittances from outside. According to NCCR researchers, the report on the national survey of coastline will provide inputs for framing policies to address the stress of the people residing in coastal areas, especially in the Sunderbans.

Coastal erosion has been noticed in nine States and two Union Territories. The NCCR report said 34% of India's coastline underwent varying degrees of erosion during the period under consideration, and 28% of the shoreline showed accretion and 38% of the country's coastline remained stable. A State-wise analysis of the coastal erosion suggests that more than 40% erosion was observed in four States and Union Territories.

The report states that the west coast has relatively been stable with erosion in minor pockets like

Kerala. In the west, 48% of the coastline is stable, whereas only 28% of the eastern coast has been deemed stable. When it comes to accretion, States such as Odisha (51%) and Andhra Pradesh (42%) recorded the maximum gain owing to coastline changes. Goa and Maharashtra have the most stable coastlines in the country.

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