



Editorial

India's Double Challenge

Sunita Narain/September 30th, 2014

The floodwaters devastating large parts of the Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir caught the people and the government unawares, it is said. But why should this be so? We know every year, like clockwork, India grapples with months of crippling water shortage and drought and then months of devastating floods. This year offers no respite from this annual cycle but something new and strange is afoot. Each year, the floods are growing in intensity. Each year, the rain events get more variable and extreme. Each year, economic damage increases and development gains are lost in one season of flood or severe drought.

Scientists now say conclusively that there is a difference between natural variability of weather and climate change, a pattern brought about by human emissions that is heating up the atmosphere faster than normal. Scientists who study the monsoons tell us that they are beginning to make that distinction between normal monsoon and what is now showing up in abnormal extreme rain events. Remember, the monsoons are known to be capricious and confounding. Even then scientists can see the change.

This is further complicated by the fact that multiple factors affect weather and another set of factors affects its severity and impact. In other words, the causes of devastation following extreme events—like droughts or floods— are often complicated and involve mismanagement of resources and poor planning.

The Jammu and Kashmir floods are because of unusually high rainfall. This is only part of the problem. It is also clear we have destroyed drainage in floodplains everywhere through utter mismanagement. We build embankments believing we can control the river only to find the protection broken. Worse, we build habitations in floodplains. Urban India is mindless about drainage. Storm water drains are either clogged or just do not exist. Our lakes and ponds have been eaten away by real estate—land is what a city values, not water. In all this what happens when extreme rainfall events happen? The city drowns.

It is no different in Jammu and Kashmir. The traditional system of flood management was to channelise the water from the Himalayas into lakes and water channels. Dal and Nageen lakes in Srinagar are not just its beauty spots, but the sponge. The water from the massive catchment comes into the lakes, which are interconnected.

More importantly, each lake has its flood discharge channel which drains the spillover. But over time, we have forgotten the art of drainage. We only see land for buildings, not for water. The attitude is it will rain for only a few days, so why “waste” land to manage that water. This is what has happened in Srinagar.

Residential buildings have come up in the low-lying areas of the city, flood channels have been encroached upon or neglected.

Now when it rains heavily—and with greater frequency and intensity because of climate change—the water has nowhere to go. Flood and devastation are inevitable. All this makes for a double whammy. On the one hand, we are mismanaging our water resources, thus, intensifying floods and droughts. On the other hand, climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, making the country even more vulnerable.

Indians know that the monsoon is their real finance minister. Clearly, the opportunity is to make sure that every drop of rain is harvested and used in the prolonged dry season. But this rain will come in the form of more ferocious events. We must prepare for that. Holding and channelising rain must become the nation's mission. It is our only way to the future.

This means every water body, every channel and every catchment has to be safeguarded. These are the temples of modern India. Built to worship rain.