

The rising tide: Kerala 2018 flood - “It would be dishonest of us to treat this calamity purely as a natural disaster in which we humans played no part”

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It will not be enough for us to rue the past, writes Arundhati Roy.

This year in Kerala, the monsoon that we long for, and the rivers that we pretend to love, are talking back to us. Certainly, for me, the rain was the ink in my pen, and the river, the Meenachil, drove my story. They made me the writer that I am. Now their fury is unimaginable, and the scale of the disaster and peoples' suffering is still unfolding. The Army, the navy, various government agencies, local communities, an extraordinary collective of fisher folk, journalists, and thousands of ordinary people have shown exemplary courage and fellow-feeling, risking their lives to bring others to safety. Help and money is pouring in. More help and more money will be needed. And yet, as the waters recede, revealing oceans of plastic and debris, we are faced with the fact that it would be dishonest of us to treat this calamity purely as a natural disaster in which we humans played no part.

We know by now that in the era of global warming and climate change, the mountains and the coastal areas will be the first to pay the price. The intensity and the frequency of climate catastrophes will only increase. California is burning. Kerala is drowning. Our beloved Kerala is a strip of land sandwiched between the mountains and the sea. We could not be more vulnerable.

Unbridled greed, the shocking denuding of forest land for mining and illegal development of resorts and homes for the wealthy, illegal construction that has blocked all natural drainage, the destruction of natural water storage systems, the blatant mismanagement of dams, have all played a huge part in what is happening. How could it be that the Central Water Commission did not predict this flood? How could it be that dams that are supposed to control floods ended up releasing water from their reservoirs at the height of the crisis, magnifying the disaster several times over?

With waters receding, Kerala may be staring at a 'second disaster'

Today funds are pouring in to the Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund— much of it hard-earned money from ordinary people, believing quite correctly, that it is only the government that can co-ordinate relief work that will reach the most far-flung places where the most vulnerable people live. And yet, many of us worry about these funds being controlled by the very machinery that ignored past warnings in the first place. The Madhav Gadgil Committee Report, for instance, predicted just such a scenario if the government did not take serious steps to control unplanned development propelled by corrupt politicians and avaricious businessmen and industrialists.

Disasters such as this one can bring out the best as well as the worst in people. It can bring people together, or it can widen the fissures and reward those whose deeds are to some extent responsible

for creating the catastrophe. We have seen how during other disasters, like the Tsunami, or Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, ruthless developers moved in to try and take over the lands and homes of the most vulnerable people. Here in India, sadly, various forces are at work, doing their best to spread poison and disaffection between communities, at a time when there should only be love and concern. Fortunately, the people of Kerala have never fallen prey to this, and are unlikely to now, in their moment of grief and hardship.

We hope and trust that in the days and weeks to come, while people try to put their devastated lives back together, the Kerala government will pay special attention to its most disadvantaged people, in particular dalits and forest-dwelling Adivasi people who do not have the power or the means to elbow themselves to the front of the queue for aid and relief.

It will not be enough for us to rue the past. Rebuilding and rehabilitation cannot be taken to mean a return to business as usual. We will have to take steps to correct the environmental imbalance we have created. If not, God's Own Country will cease to be fit for human habitation. For all its fury, perhaps the 2018 flood is only a very gentle warning.

Arundhati Roy

- "The rising tide: Perhaps, 2018 flood is only a gentle warning", August 21, 2018 17:41 IST:
<https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/08/21/The-rising-tide-Perhaps-2018-flood-is-only-a-gentle-warning-writes-Arundhati-Roy.html>
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With waters receding, Kerala may be staring at a 'second disaster'

As flood waters start to recede, and Kerala begins to count its losses, health experts warn of a looming health crisis.

According to the Union ministry of health and family welfare, no outbreak of communicable disease has been reported from the state yet. However, the environment will soon be conducive for "epidemic-prone diseases". "The state has been given instructions to switch to daily surveillance and monitoring for epidemic-prone diseases for detecting early warning signs of an outbreak," according to a statement from the health ministry.

With the waters receding, Kerala may be staring at a "second disaster", said Althaf Ali, associate professor, community medicine, government medical college, Thiruvananthapuram. Fears of outbreak of diarrhoeal diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and leptospirosis (rare bacterial infection)—a zoonotic disease that spreads through contaminated water—are likely to result in more casualties than those that have been attributed directly to the floods, Ali added.

"Already, in the past few years, the state has reported a relatively high number of cases of leptospirosis. Now, with people coming in contact with contaminated water everywhere, and sanitation taking a hit, the number of cases are bound to go up. It's hard to say who will get it, and who will not, and how many will be affected. So, we are recommending doxycycline tablets for everyone to prevent them from getting this disease," said Ali.

Leptospirosis is also an "occupational hazard" for workers who are tasked with the cleaning of

canals and drainage, and are obviously at a higher risk of contracting the disease. "The (doxycycline) antibiotic prescription is a blanket one, with the exception of women who are pregnant," said Ali.

To protect themselves from water-borne illnesses, people need to purify drinking water by either boiling it for 20 minutes, or treating it with chlorine tablets. Though a minute or two is good enough to kill certain microbes, boiling for 20 minutes would ensure that bacterial spores and other parasites would be destroyed too, said Ali.

"We are gearing up for a health crisis. Leptospirosis is a real danger right now. There are also fears of an outbreak of a disease such as chicken pox. The situation at relief camps is such that people with chicken pox can not be isolated from the rest. In such a situation, it is highly likely that it will be spread," said Prem Nair, medical director, Amrita Hospital Kochi.

Those in the camps are also affected because of missed medications, said Nair. "We can only hope that people in the interiors get basic medicines such as insulin, and drugs for cardiac ailments since that is crucial for them. In the relief camps, there is access to medication for diabetes and cardiac issues," said Nair.

Doctors such as Nair say they are also expecting cases of post-traumatic stress disorder to follow in the next few months.

Experts also advise that people entering their homes need to be careful, given that the structures have been under water for a few days and may be unstable. Caution needs to be taken to check for gas leaks, damaged electricity wires, snakes that may be hiding under the furniture, and kitchen and personal hygiene must be maintained, said Nair. Those with high fever need to be taken to the doctor, immediately.

"It will be a herculean task to prevent the spread of diseases. The state health departments is doing what it can. Better co-ordination between the local self governments and different state agencies is required to overcome the impending public health crisis," said Ali.

The Centre would also be deploying teams for rapid health assessment to take appropriate public health measures to prevent and control outbreak of epidemic prone diseases, said J.P. Nadda, Union health minister. "Considering the additional burden of disease in the aftermath of the floods, quick response medical teams will also be sent to Kerala to provide emergency medical care. Support under the National Health Mission will be provided to make the damaged primary health care infrastructure functional," said Nadda.

Namita Kohli

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