Floods - an opportunity for Assam

What is the issue?

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- The Prime Minister has recently announced he would appoint a high-powered committee to find “a permanent solution” for Assam’s recurring flood problem.
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- Ecologists feel that a real understanding of the problem is essential before the committee is formed.
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How was flood an opportunity for Assam?

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- Floods have not been a “problem” as such for Assam a century back.
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- For centuries, the region relied on the **annual flooding and recession** of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.
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- The **productivity of its agriculture and other non-farm activities** centred on the events of flood as it sustained the rural livelihoods.
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- Floods naturally made the **lands fertile** and people could earn a livelihood with little labour.
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- Even today, bamboo **fishing** nets and traps on water bodies and submerged agricultural lands during the monsoons emphasize the significant role of floods in Assam.
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- Also, **Kaziranga’s** annual rejuvenation by floods is essential for the landscape and its unique wildlife to survive.
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- The unique biodiversity of Kaziranga is rejuvenated by a dynamic system that connects the Brahmaputra with its alluvial floodplains.

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How have floods become a problem now?

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- The perception of floods as a “problem” in Assam is a 20th century phenomenon.
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- **Economy** - British colonials viewed the low-lying areas of the floodplains of the Brahmaputra as a potential source of revenue.
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- Also, the demand for new lands to meet the growing requirements of **Bengal’s jute industry** led to the migrated east Bengali peasants' settlement in lowlands of Assam.
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- Floods began to cause damage to the thriving jute cultivation as a result of which **flood control** started appearing on the policy agenda.
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- **Embankments** - The Assam **earthquake** of 1950 raised the bed of the Brahmaputra.
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- Resultantly, floods began to threaten the built environment of commercially important **cities**.
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- As a measure of flood control and protecting these urban settlements, **embankments** were built in huge numbers.
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- Consequently, the **confinement of the river flow** led to higher water levels and increased hydraulic pressure during the monsoon.
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- Bank erosion, **embankment failures and breaches** now have become major causes of flood devastation in Assam.
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What are the impacts?

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- Floods as against being an opportunity, now are adversely impacting the livelihoods of poorer communities.
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- As a result, there is an increase in social inequalities.
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- The diverse wildlife is being put to endangerment.
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- The unique biodiversity of the region is also losing its sheen.
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What lies ahead?

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- Assam's case presents a picture of how a natural event turns into a disaster with human intervention.
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- Thus defining the problem in relation to its past is essential to respond appropriately.
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- Assam's rivers are an opportunity for its riverine ecosystem, its people and wildlife.
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- Government's remedial measures and policy-making should consider not just deciding but also knowing the uniqueness of the region and problem of flooding.
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Source: Indian Express

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