Growth and Sustainability - Kerala, Uttarakhand Disasters

What is the issue?

The floods and disaster in Kerala and Uttarakhand highlight a common cause that is to do with the development models adopted.

What caused the recent disasters?

- Climate change is, undoubtedly, at the root of the rain-wreaked havoc that Kerala and Uttarakhand are seeing.
- Anthropogenic climate change is a key reason for such extreme weather events.
- However, the devastation in Kerala and Uttarakhand cannot wholly be attributed to climate change alone.
- The development models adopted in the states have certainly exacerbated the risks from climate change.

What is the case with Kerala?

Madhav Gadgil report (2011) - Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) - Key Recommendations

- The Gadgil Committee divided the Western Ghats into 3 ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ).
- These are the highest (ESZ1), high (ESZ2) and moderate sensitivity (ESZ3) zones. This is in addition to the Protected Areas managed under acts such as the Wildlife Protection Act.
- It suggested that ESZ1 and ESZ2 would be largely 'no-gone' zones.
- So mining, polluting industries as well as large-scale development activities, including new railway lines are restricted in these.
- It also objected to new dams, thermal power stations or massive windmill farms or new townships in ESZ1.
- The panel however recommended giving larger say for local communities and gram sabhas on matters relating to the ecology of these regions.
- It also called for -
    1. stricter regulation on tourism
    2. phasing out of plastics and chemical fertilisers
    3. a ban on diversion of forest land into non-forest applications
    4. a ban on conversion of public lands into private lands

Kasturirangan committee

> Rejecting the Gadgil report, the government appointed a new committee under the chairmanship of K Kasturirangan to "examine" the WGEEP report.

- The Kasturirangan committee did away with the graded approach in terms of ecological

sensitivity.

- It instead divided the Western Ghats into ‘cultural lands’ (where there are currently human settlements) and ‘natural lands’.
- It recommended declaring cultural lands into ecologically sensitive area (ESA). This spanned around 60,000 sq-km or 37% of the total area.
- It had proposed an area of 13,000 sq km as ESA. But under pressure from the Kerala government, the notified area was brought down to less than 10,000 sq km.

Implications

- Nearly 40% of the granite quarries in Kerala in 2014-15 were located in ecologically sensitive areas.
- Significantly, a quarter of them were in the Gadgil committee-earmarked extremely sensitive ESZ1.
- The present disaster could not have been completely avoided, but the severity could have significantly been reduced, if not for the rejection of WGEEP's proposed zoning.

What is the case with Uttarakhand?

- Development and other economic activity in the region without much thought given to vulnerabilities of ecology and topography.
- Increase in hydel power projects, encroachment of streams, glaciers, etc, for construction, roads, etc.
- The Lakhwar Multipurpose dam that had been shelved in 1992 recently received a key approval from the Centre, despite objections from experts.
- The Center has also made it easier for work to proceed in seven hydel power projects in Uttarakhand, notwithstanding criticism from experts.

The development imperative vis-a-vis population pressures cannot be wished away, but certainly can be balanced against needs of ecology and geography.

Reference:

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2. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/kerala-floods-man-made-or-natures-fury/article24762090.ece

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