Kerala Landslides - Gadgil Panel Recommendations

What is the issue?

- The repeat of landslides and consequent tragedies in Kerala this year too, after the rainfall, has caused much concern.
- The need for implementing the Gadgil panel's suggestions is felt more important now than ever before.

What is the realisation with the recent floods?

- The 2018 floods and landslides in Kerala caused huge financial losses and manifold human tragedies. Click here to know more
- It was believed by many that the 2018 tragedy in Kerala marked a once-in-a-century calamity.
- The probability of two such back-to-back events was only 1 in 10,000.
- So, it was hoped that normalcy would return soon and people could return to business as usual.
- Hence, a repeat of intense floods, landslides, financial losses and manifold human tragedies in 2019 too was something people were unprepared for.
- The 2019 events have thus made people realise that it is unwise to continue business as usual.
- This has made them seriously consider the alternatives to deal with the calamities of nature.

What does the Gadgil panel report offer?

- One set of possibilities is provided by the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) chaired by Madhav Gadgil.
- The policy prescriptions in the report were well within the framework of the constitutional mandates, and only suggested following the existing laws.
- This relates to environmental protection and devolution of powers, right down to the gram sabha and ward sabha level.
- In all, the WGEEP called for a model of conservation and development compatible with each other.
- The report sought a replacement of the prevailing 'Develop Recklessly, Conserve Thoughtlessly' pattern with one of 'Develop Sustainably, Conserve Thoughtfully.'
- This fine-tuning of development practices to the local context would have

required the full involvement of local communities.
- It would have therefore been inappropriate to depend exclusively on government agencies for deciding on and managing Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs).

What was the recommendation on ESZs then?

- The WGEEP's mandate asked the state to demarcate areas within the Western Ghats Region that need to be notified as ecologically sensitive.
- It was also asked to recommend for notification of such areas as ecologically sensitive zones under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- In line with the National Forest Policy, the panel decided to assign 60% of the total area of Western Ghats in Kerala as a zone of highest ecological sensitivity, 'ESZ1'.
- These included the region housing wildlife sanctuaries and national parks.
- The panel proposed 'elevation' and 'slope' as two key indicators of sensitivity.
- In Kerala, rainfall increases rapidly with elevation, and high rainfall and steep slopes render localities vulnerable to landslides.
- Hence, areas prone to landslides would come under ESZ1.
- The extent and quality of natural vegetation was the third indicator for classifying an area as ESZ1.
- Landslides are under control in areas with intact natural vegetation because the roots bind the soil.
- Any disturbance to such vegetation would render any locality that has steep slopes and experiences high rainfall susceptible to landslides.
- Such disturbances may include -
    i. quarrying or mining
    ii. replacement of natural vegetation by new plantations
    iii. leveling of the land using heavy machinery
    iv. construction of houses and roads
- Therefore, it was recommended that such activities be avoided in ESZ1 areas.

How successful is Kerala in devolution of powers?

- The Plachimada Panchayat of Kerala cancelled Coca-Cola company's licence.
- This was because the company polluted and depleted groundwater reserves, drying up wells and adversely impacting agriculture and livelihoods.
- While doing so, the panchayat invoked its constitutional rights, arguing that it had the duty to protect the well-being of its citizens.
- It thus claimed that it had the right to cancel or refuse permission for

anything that affected its citizens adversely.

- The company's counterargument was that the panchayat was subordinate to the State government, which had granted it the licence.
- The Kerala High Court rejected this contention, affirming that grass-roots institutions have the authority to decide on the development course in their own locality.
- Furthermore, the Kerala legislature unanimously passed a law asking Coca-Cola to pay Plachimada Panchayat due compensation for losses inflicted on them.

What is the way forward?

- Democracy is not merely voting once in 5 years; it is the active involvement of citizens in governing the country at all levels, especially at the local level.
- The powers and responsibilities conferred under provisions such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 should be fully utilised.
- The ruling that local bodies have the authority to decide on the development course in their own localities be made operational across the country.
- Implementation of the Gadgil panel recommendations would have definitely helped manage better the heavy rainfall, and reduce the extent and intensity of landslides.
- It is only wise to apply the panel's recommendations at least now.

Source: The Hindu

Related News: Lessons from Kerala Floods, Dams and Flood Control, Gadgil Panel Report

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering