

FLOOD FEUD: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON LESSONS FROM THE FLOODS IN NORTH INDIA

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The devastating floods across North India have renewed attention on the dynamic between climate change, urbanisation and the infrastructural lacunae that bedevil India's large cities. India is now right in the middle of the monsoon and it is only to be expected, given the topography of the hill States, that extended rains will cause landslips, landslides and pose extreme threats to life and property. Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Delhi are among the States that have reported record rainfall and at least 60 deaths have been confirmed though the actual toll may be higher. However, it is the inundation of Delhi, a city that is not usually associated with rains, that has brought to national focus the disasters that lie in store.

In the terminology of the India Meteorological Department, Delhi received 'excess' and 'large excess' rain on five out of eight days, from July 3-10. On July 9, it recorded 221.4 mm of rain, more than the 209.7 mm that is the average for all of July. While this contributed to the flooding, rainfall in the last few days has dramatically reduced. And yet, large parts of the city which include iconic landmarks such as the Red Fort and the Supreme Court, continue to be flooded. Delhi's officials have attributed this to the flooding of the Yamuna in upstream States, particularly at Yamunanagar in Haryana, with the barrages in Delhi unable to effectively regulate and redirect the river's flow. This however elides the role of Delhi's infrastructural development that through the years has given short shrift to restricting construction on the Yamuna's floodplains, failed to prioritise the desilting of drains ahead of the monsoon, and scrimped on steps to avoid the large-scale concretisation of the city. Though there is the case that even upstream of Delhi, riverbed mining has meant that huge amounts of silt from Haryana block the natural flow of the river, blame games and pointing to "record rains" are unhelpful. The increased probability of spells of extreme rain, given warming trends in the Arctic as well as the Arabian Sea, means that there will be several more instances of flooding in the future. While urban flooding is far more frequent in Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai, Delhi should no longer consider itself immune given that its population and infrastructural needs are only going to expand. Much like the National Capital Territory evolved a joint management strategy to tackle air pollution, on realising that clean air is interdependent on action by all cities, these States must set aside their differences and evolve a joint strategy on countering future floods.

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