

Kerala Floods 2018: Tragedy, Response, and Recovery

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Abstract

The state of Kerala, known for its breathtaking natural beauty, faced an unprecedented disaster in August 2018 when it experienced its worst flooding since 1924. This catastrophic event, triggered by incessant monsoon rains, impacted 5.4 million people, and claimed over 400 lives. Kerala's unique geographical location between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea exposes it to heavy monsoon rains, which significantly influence its maritime tropical climate. The flood's main causes can be attributed to two rainstorm episodes. Initially, flooding occurred along riverbanks due to limited dam releases as reservoirs were near capacity. Subsequently, the opening of dam shutters and torrential rainfall led to severe flooding across thirteen of Kerala's fourteen districts. Landslides added to the devastation, particularly in Wayanad, where nearly 247 landslides occurred.

Despite the crisis, Kerala's Malayalam media displayed remarkable responsibility by focusing on accurate reporting, eliminating advertisements, and actively assisting with rescue efforts. International support poured in, with relief materials and aid from various countries and celebrities.

The recovery process faced financial challenges, as the central government's assistance fell short of Kerala's estimated recovery needs. To address this shortfall, the state had to secure funds from the World Bank. Cleaning up flood-damaged homes, repairing infrastructure, and preventing waterborne diseases were immediate priorities, while long-term recovery plans emphasized environmental considerations and community resilience.

The Kerala floods of 2018 serve as a stark reminder of the need for effective disaster preparedness and response strategies in the face of extreme weather events. The state's resilience and the support it received from both domestic and international sources underline the importance of solidarity in times of crisis.

Geography:

Kerala is located between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea to the west. The terrain consists of a coastal plain that is humid and hot before gradually rising to the Western Ghats' high hills and mountains. The monsoon brings heavy rains that heavily influence Kerala's maritime tropical climate, which is mostly wet. All the rivers are completely fed by the monsoon, and many of them either turn into rivulets or completely dry up during the summer.

The Problem/Case:

To make it easier, there were two main episodes to why this happened. The first of these two rainstorms caused flooding along the banks of some rivers, and only a few dams let water out because the rain mostly fell over their catchment areas. The majority of the state's reservoirs were close to their Full Reservoir Level (FRL) following the initial heavy rainstorm, and the majority of the region's soil became saturated. And Kerala has around 40 rivers flowing into the Arabian Sea, and 80 of its dams were opened after being overwhelmed. Thirteen of Kerala's fourteen districts experienced severe flooding as a result of these torrential rains and the opening of the dam shutters. Following the opening of these spillways at the Idukki Dam, flooding initially affected only the banks of the Periyar River, but as the rain continued to fall, it soon affected the entirety of central Kerala. The opening of two shutters of the Cheruthoni Dam initially meant to be a trial run, could not be paused even for a moment following incessant rain. Soon, each of the dam's five shutters had to be opened individually. But as this discharge through shutters couldn't match the inflow, the water level kept rising till it almost touched the danger mark. Other areas soon became inundated because of this water release from the reservoirs. But things didn't stop here, in fact several blue, orange, and red alerts were issued in violation of the EAP (Emergency Action Plan) guidelines. After the red alert was issued, no proper follow-up or effective precautions were taken, particularly for evacuating people and housing them in safe locations. Eventually landslides started to occur and while Idukki experienced a total of 143 landslides, Wayanad was hit with almost 247 landslides, out of which 200 can be classified into road slips.

Media Coverage:

Throughout the coverage of the Kerala flood, the Malayalam media displayed incredible maturity and responsibility. Advertisements were removed from the channels, and public helplines were made available round-the-clock. Some channels stopped showing programming. The Malayalam channels' coverage of the flood is best summed up in one word: responsible journalism. With a focus on reducing fake news, they ensured that the public received accurate information from authorities. Even though it was the Onam season, which brings in 60% of the revenue for media outlets, the Kerala media stood out from the rest to put people first. In order to ensure that the figures and facts got to the people, they sent out more reporters and anchors. Negative news received little attention, and reporters were actively involved in rescue efforts. Asianet News stopped using advertisements. They set up a helpline that was open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for people to call for assistance or to learn more about the state's disaster. They sent a lot of reporters to the ground to report on the situation, and many of those reporters were stuck in flood-ravaged areas without adequate food or lodging, but that didn't stop them from telling the world about the plight of flood victims.

International Response:

Many international and commonwealth countries sent relief materials to Kerala during the flood and offered necessity to camps such as toiletries, clothes and food. Many international celebrities had also donated to the chief minister's fund during this period.

Recovery:

Eventually the PM of India visited Kerala during this tough time and allowed a recovery fund of 200 crores, but a survey conducted by Kerala government reported that the state requires at least 2000 crores to completely get back into shape. But this was declined by the central government and eventually they had to borrow money from the World bank to cover the damage. Cleaning up the flood-damaged homes, repairing them, and avoiding diseases spread by water were the most immediate obstacles. Plans for recovery and reconstruction were discussed from a variety of perspectives, including the environment and inclusion, and the community's remarkable resilience was emphasized.

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WASH FIELD NOTE FN/50/2020
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