

A BUTTERFLY BREEZE FROM MP

Blowin' in the wind

How many deaths will it take before we learn how to live with floods?



JOANNA VAN GRUISEN

Our tourist season begins on October 1, so this is a busy time as we prepare to reopen our Sarai after nearly five months. Tourism-related issues tend to be uppermost on our minds as we plan and project. However, this year such thoughts cannot help but be supplanted by concerns about floods and water issues. In spite of some September rains, in our eastern part of Madhya Pradesh, the monsoon is still deficient and wells are yet to fill, so this is not a local issue. But events in Jammu and Kashmir draw attention to matters too grave to ignore.

Disasters grow more frequent and serious every year: Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and now Jammu and Kashmir. Actually, the list of States that have not seen floods in the recent past may be shorter than of those that have. Headlines sear the heart with the number of lives prematurely ended and of the millions whose lives have been so dramatically disrupted. And inevitably, we hear descriptions of the floods being the worst in decades – “heaviest in 88 years”, “worst in 50 years”, “I’m in my 80s. I’ve never seen floods like this”...

But do we pay heed to these warnings? Although we claim highest intelligence for our species, we’re unable to learn from experience – unlike a ‘simple’ dog or cat. We’re not strangers to floods and landslides in the Himalayan region, we’re not ignorant of the causes and aggravations, but has this modified our behaviour to lessen their impact on human lives? The answer can clearly be seen in the many

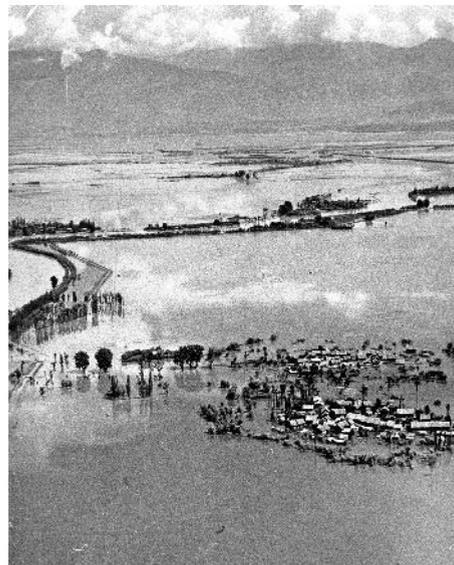
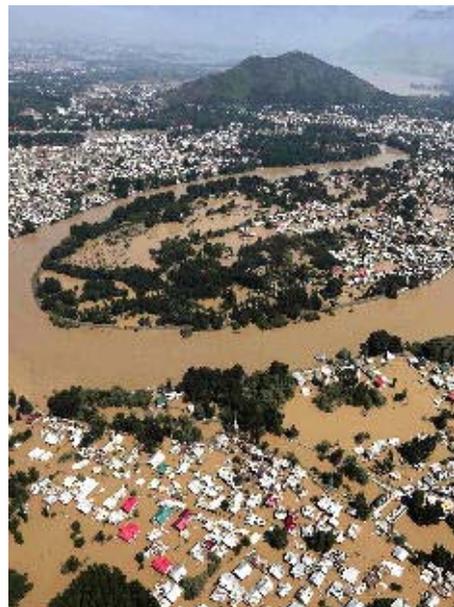
tragedies we suffer; Uttarakhand last year and Jammu and Kashmir this year are two of the more dramatic examples. Rather than lessening the impact, we usurp natural waterways and floodplains for buildings, and think we can ignore or fully control the natural forces.

The frequency and severity of extreme weather events are increasing. While experts will hesitate to predict how and by how much a particular event is the result of the change we humans have wrought in climate patterns, new studies of severe storms and catastrophic floods have added more evidence to the theory that rising greenhouse gas levels increase the odds of such extreme weather events – and perhaps make them stronger. Francis Zwiers, an expert on climate variability, and his colleagues studied half a century’s worth of rainfall data (1951 to 1999) from much of the Northern Hemisphere, including Asia, and in about two-thirds of the weather stations, the rise in greenhouse gases correlates with intensification of heavy precipitation events. Top climate models predict that extremes will increase just about everywhere. This is the first factor we must all recognise: climate change equals more extreme weather events, so it cannot be too soon to take steps for mitigation.

Since we must live with more such events, we urgently need to factor it into our behaviour, our development, our building plans, and into disaster prevention, mitigation and management. Otherwise many more will die. The answer is not more dams, not more and higher embankments. Enough has been researched and written to show how these can, and do, exacerbate the destruction. We must stop believing we are all-powerful and can contain nature’s extremes, and recognise that it would be to our benefit to understand and adapt ourselves to such powerful forces. Some cities, like Boulder, Colorado, in the US, have done this and seen the benefits. They have achieved this not with mega engineering solutions, but through good land-use planning and stewardship. When they also suffered a “1,000-year rain event” in September last year, the town was damaged but not destroyed. The community had come up with some ingenious strategies – they razed buildings from the flood plain areas and close to the river, for instance, and used rocks to channel the flow of water. But most of their actions were based on an understanding that cities will fare better if they accommodate floods rather than try to hold them back with dams and embankments. It can be done. By accepting nature’s ways and working around, and with, them.

What I find hard to understand is why we do not do this already. Most of the places where floods and natural catastrophes take place have been identified long ago; some even have detailed reports and advice from experts of what to do – all ignored. Why? As with dam-building projects, the river-linking plan, the so-called green revolution, the covering of storm drains in Delhi, reservoir building in MP and a myriad other ill-conceived projects, one really needs to ponder who benefits and who suffers. Think about this, short-term and

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History repeats itself A bird’s-eye view taken of the floods in Srinagar this year (left) REUTERS; and of a similar disaster in Sopore, north-west of the capital city, back in 1959 (right) THE HINDU ARCHIVE

long-term. Long term we all suffer. Short term a few may gain – the rest of us should stand up and ensure a different path.

It makes economic sense too. Investing time, thought and money into mitigating such disasters would be cost-effective. There are so many ways we can do this. Boulder gives inspiration for showing that we can enjoy our waterways and live with their floods. We could do well to also reflect on Naomi Klein’s recent comment: “The solution to global warming is not to fix the world, it is to fix ourselves.”

The answer is to work towards solutions as a community. As young Kashmiris have so selflessly come together in droves to help the stranded and homeless, so we should all take the initiative. It seems we cannot leave it to the government and (benefitting) individuals if we wish to ensure that projects and development are sensible, viable and give overall advantage in the long term.

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