Climate and consciousness

The Uttarakhand floods and the Texas cold snap must serve as lessons to galvanise climate action

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It is common to hear policymakers and the public refer to natural disasters, such as this year's Himalayan glacier flooding that overwhelmed Uttarakhand, or the cold snap that paralysed Texas, as "acts of God". But what precipitated both events was not the hand of God, but human-made global warming. Unless climate change is tagged as a primary culprit, climate action will continue to falter.

The melting of the Himalayan glaciers that prompted the floods and landslides in Uttarakhand have the fingerprints of global warming. In 2013, glacial flooding caused over 6,000 deaths in Uttarakhand during the monsoon months. The United States has already witnessed many deadly avalanches since the beginning of 2021. Furthermore, as glacier cover is replaced by water or land, the amount of light reflected decreases, aggravating warming – a contributor to the sweltering heat in cities like Delhi and Hyderabad, or the epic floods in Chennai or Kerala.

The extreme cold weather in Texas, like the double-digit negative temperatures seen in Germany earlier this year, is connected to Arctic-peninsula warming, at a rate almost twice the global average. Usually, there is a collection of winds around the Arctic keeping the cold locked far to the north. But global warming has caused gaps in these protective winds, allowing intensely cold air to move south – a phenomenon that is accelerating.

When the public connects cause and effect, responses are usually swift. But global warming is still seen as a danger that lies over the horizon. So, while COVID-19 triggered the mobilisation of trillions of dollars in financing, the equally frightening climate scenario has not.

For India, the third-largest carbon emitter after China and the United States, a decisive switch is needed from highly polluting coal and petroleum to cleaner and renewable power sources. China has announced carbon neutrality by 2060, Japan and South Korea by 2050, but India is yet to announce a target. The acceleration of hazards of nature should prompt countries to advance those targets, ideally by a decade.

The stakes are laid out in alarming reports, which show that India is particularly vulnerable. While HSBC ranks India at the top among 67 nations in climate vulnerability (2018), Germanwatch ranks India fifth among 181 nations in terms of climate risks (2020). But public spending does not reflect these perils.

Budgetary allocations

A vital step should be explicitly including policies for climate mitigation in the government budget, along with energy, roads, health and education. Specifically, growth targets should include timelines for switching to cleaner energy. The government needs to launch a major campaign to mobilise climate finance.

Even if major economies speed up climate mitigation, catastrophes like Uttarakhand will become more frequent due to the accumulated carbon emissions in the atmosphere. So, climate adaptation needs to be a priority. India's Central and State governments must increase allocations for risk reduction, such as better defences against floods, or agricultural innovations to withstand droughts.

A big worry is that the Uttarakhand government and the Centre have been diluting, instead of strengthening, climate safeguards for hydroelectric and road projects. Studies had flagged ice loss across the Himalayas, and the dangers to densely populated catchments, but policy response has been lacking. Similarly, Kerala ignored a landmark study calling for regulation of mining, quarrying and dam construction in ecologically sensitive places, which contributed to the massive floods and landslides in 2018 and 2019.

Sustainable growth depends on timely climate action. For that to happen, policymaking needs to connect the dots between carbon emissions, atmospheric warming, melting glaciers, extreme floods and storms. Events like Uttarakhand and Texas should be treated as lessons to change people's minds and for the public to demand urgent action.

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