These flood victims don’t make news

Times of India, New Delhi Dated : September 4, 2018

The devastation in flood-hit Kerala, its worst natural calamity in almost a century, has got everybody’s attention. But no one is talking about Assam, a state that faces the fury of floods year after year.

Assam suffers an average annual loss of Rs 200 crore due to floods. Like previous years, this time too, it has been battered by two waves of floods from June till the first week of August. The third wave may hit any time. Fifty people have died and more than eight lakh have been affected in 22 districts so far. Nearly two lakh hectares of crop land lies submerged, causing huge losses to farmers.

The intensity of the deluge decreased from the second week of August with the state experiencing 30% deficient rainfall. On Wednesday, three districts — Dhemaji, Golaghat and Dibrugarh — were in the grip of floods, with over 10,000 people affected.

Akan Gowala, 30, and seven family members spent 27 days in a relief camp in the Jamuguri area of flood-ravaged Golaghat. They had to leave their home, about 5km away, after the flood situation worsened following release of excess water from a hydel project in bordering Nagaland. On Monday, they returned home. “My house is halfburied in slush,” says Gowala, racked by fever, cough and skin infection.“Everyone in my family is ill. In the camp, we got food but no medicines.”

Every year, schools in lower and upper Assam turn into relief camps to house victims, hampering the students’ education. Assam State Primary Teachers’ Association president Jiban Chandra Borah says 2,800 schools were used as relief camps last year. “But as the intensity of floods is not as severe this time, 1,000 schools were used in June, July and August. In Golaghat, which is still reeling from floods, about 40 schools have been turned into relief camps,” he says.

In 2017, at least 160 people were killed in three waves of floods affecting more than 30 lakh people. Estimated cost of damage: Rs 10,000 crore. Nearly 400 animals perished at Kaziranga National Park where 90% of the park’s 430sqkm area went under water. In 2004, when Assam witnessed its worst deluge in two decades, the state suffered losses of Rs 771 crore and more than 150 people died.

The floods usually hit Assam in three to four waves between June and September. Fed by 21 major tributaries, including the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh, the Brahmaputra causes massive flooding. It has been a problem since
1950 and may explain why the state is lagging in development, which has triggered large-scale migration from rural areas to Guwahati and other parts of India. Of the 60,000 migrants from Assam who work in Kerala, more than half are from flood-prone districts. According to the National Flood Commission, 31 lakh hectares of the state’s total land area of 80 lakh hectares are flood-prone.

The devastation caused by floods is aggravated by soil erosion. Nearly 20 lakh people live on flood-protection embankments or government land after their houses and land were gobbled up by the Brahmaputra.

The annual tragedy has fuelled allegations that the Centre is not doing enough to solve the problem. Empathising with the people of Kerala, All Assam Students’ Union organising secretary Pragyan Bhuyan said, “We want to draw New Delhi’s attention to the fact that we have been asking the Centre to treat Assam floods and erosion as a national disaster so that a holistic scientific intervention is made and the sufferings of people are addressed."

Though local groups, NGOs, students and religious bodies raise funds for flood relief, it doesn’t compare with the funds garnered for Kerala. The CAG report last year noted a 60% shortfall in release of central funds to Assam for implementing flood-management programmes: the Centre released Rs 812 crore out of its share of Rs 2,043 crore for 141 projects between 2007-08 and 2015-16.

Assam revenue and disaster management minister Bhabesh Kalita counters this with: “As of today, we have Rs 730 crore to deal with floods. Last year, the Centre provided Rs 540 crore of which Rs 198 crore is yet to be spent. This year, we got about Rs 532 crore. So, the question of the Centre not providing enough funds to Assam is not based on facts.”

On Kerala, Kalita says: “It deserved more attention because it had not faced devastation of this scale before. In Assam, people have almost learnt to live with floods. I have been witnessing floods since my childhood.”