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1. Why heatwaves have not been included as a notified disaster in the Disaster Management Act

Why in News?

The ongoing spell of extreme heat in many parts of the country has once again reopened discussions on the inclusion of heatwaves as one of the notified disasters under the Disaster Management (DM) Act, 2005.

If the inclusion does happen, states will be allowed to use their disaster response funds to provide compensation and relief, and carry out a range of other activities for managing the fallout of a heatwave. Currently, states need to use their own funds for these activities.



What are notified disasters?

The DM Act was enacted in the wake of the 1999 Odisha super-cyclone and the 2004 tsunami. It defines a disaster as a "catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence" arising from "natural or man-made causes" that results in substantial loss of life, destruction of property, or damage to the environment. It must also be of such nature which is "beyond the coping capacity" of the community.

Invocation of DM Act

If such an event happens, then the provisions of the DM Act can be invoked. The provisions allow states to draw money from the two funds that have been set up under this law — the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) at the national level and the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) at the state level. The states first utilise the funds available in the SDRF, and only if the magnitude of the disaster is unmanageable with the SDRF, states seek the money from the NDRF. In the FY 2023-24, only two states drew money from the NDRF, namely Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

While the entire money of the NDRF comes from the central government, states contribute 25% of the money in the SDRF (10% in case of special category states), the rest comes from the Centre. The money in these funds cannot be used for any purpose other than response and management of notified disasters.

Currently, there are 12 categories of disasters which are notified under this Act. These are cyclones, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslide, avalanche, cloudburst, pest attack, and frost and cold waves.

Why heatwaves were not included as notified disasters?

Though heatwaves are not a new phenomenon in India, and heat-related illnesses and deaths have been common in large parts of northern, eastern and central India, these were not viewed as a disaster when the Act came into being in 2005. It was because heatwaves were a common occurrence during summer, and not really an unusual weather event.

In the last 15 years, however, both the severity and frequency of heatwaves have increased. Due to increased economic activity, there is a far larger number of people who have to remain outdoors for their livelihoods or other reasons, exposing them to the risk of a heat-stroke. There are 23 states, which are vulnerable to heatwaves.

These states as well as several vulnerable cities have now prepared heat action plans (HAPs) to deal with the impacts of extreme heat. HAPs involve activities like creation of shaded spaces, ensuring availability of cool water in public places, distribution of simple oral solutions, and reorganising the schedules of schools, colleges and office working hours.

These measures require expenditure but state governments have not been able to use the SDRF for them. This is the reason for the demand for inclusion of heatwaves as a notified disaster in the DM Act.

Why is the Centre not adding heatwaves as a notified disaster now?

There are primarily reasons for this:

1. Finance Commission Reluctance

States have put the demand of including heatwaves as a notified disaster before the last three Finance Commissions — the periodically established Constitutional body that decides on the distribution of financial resources between the Centre and states.

However, the Finance Commissions have not entirely been convinced. The 15th Finance Commission, whose recommendations are currently being applied, said the existing list of notified disasters “covers the needs of the states to a large extent” and did not find merit in the request to include heatwaves.

But it endorsed an enabling provision created by the preceding Commission that allowed states to utilise at least a part of the SDRF money — up to 10% — for “local disasters” such as lightning or heatwaves, which states could notify on their own.

Using this new enabling provision, at least four states — Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Kerala — have added heatwaves as local disasters.

The Centre has so far resisted demands to notify it as a national disaster, using the Finance Commission as an excuse.

2. Practical Difficulties

Although unstated, the main reason behind the reluctance to add heatwave as a notified disaster is the potentially huge financial implication of the move. The government has to

provide monetary compensation — Rs 4 lakh — for every life lost because of a disaster that is in the notified list. Grievous injuries also have to be compensated.

Heatwaves claim a large number of lives every year, even though the recorded number of deaths have not been very high in recent years. But this is changing. This year, more than 500 heat-related deaths have already been reported. Once the government is mandated to provide compensation, a larger number of deaths could be revealed.

The other reason is the problem in attributing deaths to heatwaves. In most cases, heat itself does not claim lives. Most people die due to other pre-existing conditions, made worse by the impact of extreme heat. It is often difficult to ascertain whether it was heat that made the difference. This is very different from other disasters in whose case the identification of the victims is easier and more straight-forward.

For the five year period between 2021-26, the 15th Finance Commission had recommended an allocation of Rs 1,60,153 crore to the various SDRFs, a substantial sum of money. A state like Uttar Pradesh has been allocated about Rs 11,400 crore in its SDRF for the five-year period. Maharashtra's share is the maximum, about Rs 19,000 crore. This money is meant to deal with all kinds of disasters during this period. The fear is that even this money could become insufficient if heatwaves and lightning — another disaster that claims a large number of lives every year — is added to the notified list of disasters.

On the other hand, inclusion as a notified disaster can improve the management of heatwaves. Heat-related illnesses and deaths would be better reported, and authorities would be more alert to minimise the impacts of heatwaves.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express

2. Rajan panel report on NEET, and why TN opposes the exam

Why in News?

Amid the uproar over the recent NEET-UG results that were declared, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin said that his government was the "first to foresee the hazards of NEET", and "undertook a large-scale campaign against it".

The results, published 10 days ahead of the scheduled date, have been questioned for several reasons: the unusually large number of candidates — 67, compared to at most, three in the previous five years — who secured the top rank with the maximum possible score; 'grace marks' being awarded to some 1,500 candidates for "loss of time"; and 44 of the toppers getting grace marks for getting an answer wrong only because a version of a Class 12 NCERT textbook had an inaccuracy.

The National Testing Agency (NTA, which conducts NEET-UG) and the Education Ministry have set up a committee to review the results of those who got grace marks. Congress leaders have asked for a probe supervised by the Supreme Court, and Maharashtra's Medical Education Minister has asked for the results to be cancelled. Some candidates have moved High Courts.

What Stalin said

In a post on X (formerly Twitter), Stalin said: "After coming to power [in 2021], we constituted a High-Level Committee headed by Justice A K Rajan to study the impact of the NEET-based admission process. The Committee's report, based on extensive data analysis and inputs from students, parents, and the public, has been published and shared with various State Governments to expose NEET's anti-poor and anti-social justice nature."



What Committee found

NEET is the all-India competitive examination held for admission to medical, dental, and AYUSH courses in government and private colleges across India. This year, almost 24 lakh candidates appeared for a little more than 1 lakh MBBS seats in 700-plus medical colleges.

The Rajan Committee found that after NEET was introduced in 2017-18, fewer students from rural areas, those studying in the Tamil medium, those from families with lower incomes, and those from Tamil Nadu state board schools, secured admission in medical colleges in the state.

* While English-medium students secured more seats even in the pre-NEET period, their share rose further post-NEET, while that of Tamil-medium students became smaller.

* In the pre-NEET period from 2010-11 to 2016-17, students from rural areas secured 61.5% seats on average in government medical colleges. In 2020-21, this figure had fallen to 49.91%.

* The share of students from higher-income families increased in the post-NEET period, while that of students from poorer families decreased.

* Post NEET, CBSE students came to have an advantage over Tamil Nadu state board students.

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* The report said that “the argument that the NEET mark, as opposed to HSC (higher secondary certificate of the state board) mark tests the standard of the student and signifies merit is a baseless argument”. It noted that in the pre-NEET period, the average HSC score of students who were admitted to MBBS programmes was 98.16%, compared to 89.05% post-NEET.

* On the impact of coaching centres on admissions, the report said that 99% of students who secured admissions in 2019-20 received training before NEET.

Panel’s recommendations

Concluding that NEET has “undermined the diverse societal representation in MBBS and higher medical studies” and favoured affluent sections of society, the Committee asked the state to take immediate steps to eliminate NEET from the admission process.

It recommended that HSC scores, “normalised” to ensure equality across boards, should be used as the admission criteria. It also said that “socio-economic and other demographic adversities” that may result in poor performance in the higher secondary examination may be identified, and “re-profiling of scores” should be done using the framework of an “adversity score”.

Following the report

In his X post, Stalin wrote: “Based on the recommendations in the report, a Bill seeking exemption from NEET was unanimously passed by the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. It is now awaiting Presidential assent, after an inordinate delay from the Tamil Nadu Governor’s side.”

The Tamil Nadu Admission to Under Graduate Medical Degree Courses Bill was passed by the Assembly in 2021, returned by the Governor in 2022, and passed again by the Assembly the same year. It provides for admissions to undergraduate medical, dental and homeopathy courses on the basis of Class 12 marks.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. Why Kesarapalli IT Park — not Amaravati — will host Chandrababu Naidu’s swearing-in ceremony

Why in News?

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister-designate N Chandrababu Naidu is set to be sworn in. With Hyderabad no longer the capital of Andhra Pradesh — the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014 stated that the city will be the “common capital” of AP and Telangana for a period “not exceeding ten years” — the swearing-in ceremony was initially scheduled to take place in Amravati, the new state capital.

But it will now be held near the Kesarapalli IT Park at Gannavaram in Krishna District.

Why Kesarapalli IT Park?

Inaugurated by former Andhra Chief Minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy in 2006, the Kesarapalli IT Park is built with the intention of turning Vijayawada into an IT hub.



The reasons for the shift appear to be purely logistical. Multiple leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and representatives from the central government, the BJP, and other political parties are expected to be present at the ceremony. The IT Park is located close to the Vijayawada International Airport (less than 1.5 kilometers) and is less than 20 kilometers from Vijayawada city.

In addition, the IT Park ground where the swearing-in is set to take place has a seating capacity of 50,000 people, covering around 18-20 acres of land, which may prove necessary.

On the other hand, Amaravati is nearly 35 kilometers from the Vijayawada airport which raises a host of logistical concerns considering the political stature of those expected to attend. If the swearing-in was to be held in Amaravati, at least six helipads would have to be built, to

facilitate movement from the airport to Amravati. Moreover, Amravati has seen little development in the past five years.

Why is Amravati 'not ready'?

Naidu himself laid the city's foundation stone in 2015. Spread over 217 sq km of land, the Amaravati city was the TDP chief's pet project, given Andhra Pradesh lost Hyderabad — a city which Naidu helped develop into one of India's major IT hubs — to Telangana in the bifurcation.

But after Y S Jaganmohan Reddy's YSR Congress party secured a landslide victory in the 2019 state assembly elections, it saw little progress. Instead of doubling down on Amravati's development, Jagan came up with a three-capital formula — Visakhapatnam would be the "executive capital", Amaravati would be the "legislative capital", and Kurnool would be the "judicial capital".

Jagan's freeze on the development of Amravati was devastating for farmers, who had handed over their land on being promised prime real estate in the new city, as well as developers connected to Naidu, who were looking to make a quick buck.

Over the past five years, property prices in Amravati tanked to as low as Rs 3,500 per square yard. Naidu's return to power, however, promises better times for the city. The prices now are estimated to be Rs 45,000 per sq yard.

In March 2022, the AP High Court directed the then YSRCP government that Amaravati should be developed as the state capital. The Jagan government subsequently challenged this order in the Supreme Court, where the matter is pending.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express