Daily CR Practice Sheet

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The Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill is knotty

On August 1, 2024, the central government introduced the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha. Brought in in the wake of climate-induced disasters, the Bill shows much evidence of a further centralisation of an already heavily-centralised Disaster Management Act, 2005. This Act, in its current form, already mandates the creation of many authorities and committees at the national, State and district levels. The proposed Bill further provides statutory status to pre-act organisations such as the National Crisis Management Committee and a High Level Committee, complicating the chain of action to be followed in case of disasters. A repercussion of this top-down approach is seen when there is a delayed response to disasters, antithetical to the intent and purpose of the Act.

The Bill claims to strengthen the working of the National Disaster Management Authority and the State Disaster Management Authorities to prepare State and national level plans. It also establishes an 'Urban Disaster Management Authority' for State capitals and cities with municipal corporations. However, this intended decentralisation of functions without the necessary financial devolution creates more problems than it solves.

Centralisation as a concern

The amendment Bill goes on to dilute the wording of the National Disaster Response Fund by removing the purposes for which the fund shall be used. One of the major concerns of the Disaster Management Act has been the excess centralisation of decision making on funds, especially in situations where the disaster is severe. The severity of the disaster must necessitate a prompt response by the central government, currently absent in the Act. A similarly delayed response was witnessed when the disaster relief funds from the NDRF were denied to Tamil Nadu and disbursed much later to Karnataka.

In the backdrop of a looming climate crisis, there is a need to revisit the very idea of disasters under the Disaster Management Act, 2005.

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The Bill only strengthens the top-down approach, affecting vital cooperative federalism in disaster management

Restricted definition of 'disaster'

On July 25, 2024, the Minister of State of Science, Technology and Earth Sciences, in response to questions posed in the Lok Sabha, said that the government is currently not planning to classify heatwaves as a notified disaster under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. This statement concurs with the observations of the 15th Finance Commission which did not find merit in expanding the scope of notified disasters. The notified list of disasters eligible for assistance under the National Disaster Response Fund/State Disaster Response Fund are cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslide, avalanche, cloud burst, pest attack, frost and cold wave.

This strict iteration of what constitutes a "disaster" in the times of climate change marks a sharp departure from the global narrative. Globally, there is enough consensus to classify heatwaves as climate-related disasters, given their ramifications on ecosystems and human health. According to the India Meteorological Department data, India had 536 heatwave days which is the highest number of heatwave days in almost 14 years. Rising heatwave days along with 10,635 human deaths due to heat or sunstroke in 2013-2022 portends a larger disaster in the making for the country.

The Disaster Management Act, 2005 and the proposed Bill fall short as the definition of a disaster (although wide enough to cover the idea of climate-induced disasters) remains restricted and static. This is because the notified list of disasters under the Act restricts the inclusion of climate-induced disasters such as heatwaves which display regional variability and gradation specific to a geographical area. For example, a normal summer temperature of 40° C in several north Indian States may classify as heatwave conditions in the Himalayas. The definition however, is also not inclusive enough to be able to interpret a prolonged heatwave episode to be considered as a natural disaster even if its impacts are akin to an actual disaster such as floods in terms of the loss of human life. This poses a problem as the very nature of climate-induced disasters is incongruous to the idea of a traditional disaster under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 and the proposed Bill. The incongruity is exacerbated by the localised nature and impact of climate-induced disasters.

Relevant issues

However, some questions are still valid. Is the proposed Bill adept to tackle contemporary challenges arising due to the disproportionate power dynamics between the central and State governments? Do States have to largely depend on the central government for the disbursal of funds? If the Bill claims to be an improvised version of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, it does very little in learning from the failures encountered during the implementation of the Act while dealing with past disasters. There is a need to re-visit the Centre's efforts in addressing the issue of financial preparedness when it comes to the management of and response to disasters. The conversation should not revolve around whether the Centre or State is responsible for the loss of lives in Wayanad, Kerala, but what is it that can be done to manage disasters and predict their future occurrence. After all, a blame game will only move away from realising the true spirit of cooperative federalism.

Answer Key and Explanation

Question 1: Which of the following best captures the central theme of the passage?

A) The centralisation of disaster management authority as a solution to disaster response delays.

B) The impact of climate change on disaster frequency and intensity in India.

C) The inadequacies of the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill in addressing climate-induced disasters.

D) The need for cooperative federalism in disaster management.

Answer: C

Explanation: The passage primarily discusses the shortcomings of the proposed Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, especially in the context of climate-induced disasters, which makes option C the most appropriate.

Question 2: Which of the following can be inferred about the author's stance on the centralisation of disaster management?

A) The author believes centralisation hinders effective disaster management.

B) The author is neutral about the centralisation of disaster management.

C) The author thinks centralisation is necessary but should be balanced with financial autonomy.

D) The author supports further centralisation to ensure quick responses to disasters.

Answer: A

Explanation: The author criticises the centralisation of disaster management, citing delays in response and inadequate financial devolution, indicating that the author believes it hinders effective disaster management.

Question 3: The author mentions the exclusion of heatwaves from the notified list of disasters. What does this suggest about the current approach to disaster management?

A) The current approach is inclusive but needs minor adjustments.

B) The current approach is flexible and adaptive to new types of disasters.

C) The current approach is primarily focused on traditional natural disasters.

D) The current approach is static and fails to consider emerging climate-related challenges.

Answer: D

Explanation: The exclusion of heatwaves, despite their increasing severity due to climate change, suggests that the current approach is static and does not adapt well to new and emerging climate-related challenges.

Question 4: What does the author imply about the effectiveness of the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill in decentralising functions?

A) It decentralises functions and ensures sufficient financial resources.

B) It successfully decentralises disaster management at the local level.

C) It centralises functions while pretending to decentralise.

D) It decentralises functions but fails to provide adequate financial support.

Answer: C

Explanation: The author argues that the Bill aims to decentralise functions without the necessary financial devolution, which creates more problems than it solves, indicating that the decentralisation is ineffective.

Question 5: Based on the passage, which of the following is a likely consequence of the proposed Bill's approach to disaster management?

A) Increased delays in disaster response due to complex bureaucratic processes.

B) More efficient and quicker disaster response at the state level.

C) Better management of climate-induced disasters like heatwaves.

D) Enhanced financial autonomy for states to manage disasters.

Answer: A

Explanation: The passage suggests that the Bill complicates the chain of action by centralising power, leading to potential delays in disaster response, making option A the most likely consequence.

Question 6: What does the author mean by "the incongruity is exacerbated by the localised nature and impact of climate-induced disasters"?

A) Climate-induced disasters affect all regions equally, yet are managed centrally.

B) The central government is better equipped to handle localised disasters.

C) Local governments are fully capable of managing climate-induced disasters without central intervention.

D) Climate-induced disasters have different impacts depending on the region, making a centralised approach less effective.

Answer: D

Explanation: The author suggests that because climate-induced disasters vary significantly in impact across different regions, a centralised approach is less effective, hence the "incongruity" between centralised management and localised disasters.