What is a 'National Disaster'

Kerala has been reeling under the worst floods it has experienced in a century. While the Union government is already helping out in terms of personnel as well as funds, there have also been demands to declare the Kerala floods a national disaster.

- As per the **Disaster Management Act, 2005,** "disaster" means a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence in any area, arising from natural or man-made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be **beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area.**
    - A natural disaster includes earthquake, flood, landslide, cyclone, tsunami, urban flood.
    - A man-made disaster can be nuclear, biological and chemical.
- It can be noted that there is **no provision** to declare a natural calamity as a national calamity.

Background

The 10th Finance Commission (1995-2000) examined a proposal that a disaster be termed "a national calamity of rarest severity" if it affects one-third of the population of a state.

- The panel did not define a "calamity of rare severity" but stated that a calamity of rare severity would necessarily have to be adjudged on a case-to-case basis taking into account, inter-alia, the intensity and magnitude of the calamity, level of assistance needed, the capacity of the state to tackle the problem, the alternatives and flexibility available within the plans to provide succour and relief, etc.
- The flash floods in Uttarakhand and Cyclone Hudhud were later classified as calamities of "severe nature".
- When a calamity is declared to be of "rare severity"/"severe nature", support to the state government is provided at the national level. The Centre also considers additional assistance from the NDRF.
- A Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) is set up, with the corpus shared 3:1 between Centre and state. When resources in the CRF are inadequate, additional assistance is considered from the National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF), funded 100% by the Centre.
- Relief in repayment of loans or for grant of fresh loans to the persons affected on concessional terms, too, are considered once a calamity is declared "severe".

Disaster Management in India

- The primary responsibility for management of disaster rests with the **State Government** concerned.
- However, the National Policy on Disaster Management puts in place an enabling environment for all i.e. the Centre, State and District.
- The **National Policy on Disaster Management, 2009** has been prepared in tune with and in pursuance of the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**. It provides the framework/roadmap for handling disasters in a **holistic manner.**
- Under the provisions of the Act, the Disaster Management Authority has been established at 3 levels viz. National, State and District.
- The **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA**) has been established under the **Chairmanship of the Prime Minister** and National Executive Committee (NEC) of Secretaries has been created to assist the NDMA in the performance of its functions.
- At the State level, a **State Disaster Management Authority** has been created under the **Chairmanship of Chief Minster** of the State, which has been assisted by a State Executive Committee.
- At the District level, **District Disaster Management Authorities** have been created.
- It lays down the policies, plans and guidelines for disaster management for ensuring timely and effective response to disaster and long-term disaster risk reduction.

- India is also a signatory to the **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR)** that sets targets for disaster management.

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR)

- The **SFDRR 2015-2030** outlines seven clear targets and **four priorities** for action to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risks:
  (i) Understanding disaster risk;
  (ii) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage
  disaster risk;
  (iii) Investing in disaster reduction for resilience and;
  (iv) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response, and to **"Build Back Better"** in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.
- It aims to achieve the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries over the next 15 years.
- The Framework was adopted at the third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, on March 18, 2015.

Way Forward

- Amid the demands of declaring the Kerala floods as a 'national disaster', experts are of the opinion that declaring Kerala floods as a ''national disaster' on paper is not going to help the distressed people any more than what is already being extended to the state in terms of financial aid and deployment of relief and rescue forces on the ground.
- Apart from absence of any provision for such declaration, the Central resources have already been put at the disposal of the state government.
- In countries like the United States it is essential to declare a disaster as a ''national disaster'' by way of a Presidential notification to allow the Federal Emergency Management Agency to move in.
- However, in India, there is no need for a government notification to move central forces like the Army or the NDRF to assist states for disaster relief and rescue works. As soon as the state sends a requisition to the central government, the central forces are dispatched.
- The need now is to assess the damages to life and property after the situation is under control in Kerala and bring the state on back to normal. Administratively and legally, this responsibility lies with the central government irrespective of whether it labels it a national disaster or not.

- Moreover, the best way to prepare for disasters is to build better individual-based programs, a culture of preparedness, and resilient and self-reliant communities. Disaster planning that includes input from the community produces not only higher quality plans, but also far higher levels of community approval and confidence in the plans