

ISSN 0970-7247

THIRD CONCEPT

English Monthly
Annual Subscription Rs. 200

Vol. 36

No. 424

JUNE 2022

Rs. 20.00

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Vol. 36 No. 424 JUNE 2022 Rs. 20. 00

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Published, Printed and Owned by
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Designed by: Pt. Tejpal

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Unprecedented Heatwaves

Recent weeks have witnessed unprecedented heat hitting hard and making the lives of common people miserable. Human-induced anthropogenic climate change is attributed to having spurred visitations of such heatwaves to India. Climatologists suggest that high temperatures that used to occur about every 300 years may now happen every three years. The extreme temperatures, which commenced in March and continued through April and May have already set records in the region. India experienced its highest March temperatures and third-highest April temperatures in 122 years of record.

A study was undertaken recently by the London-UK Meteorological Office about blistering heatwaves hitting India estimated how climate change was increasing the chances of such heat events, using the region's record-breaking heat events in April and May of 2010 as a benchmark. The study observed that without accounting for climate change, the probability of exceeding a heat event like the one that took place in 2010 would only be expected once every 312 years. Nevertheless, accounting for the current effects of climate change, such record-breaking temperatures are now expected every 3.1 years. The study has cautioned that by the end of the ongoing century, the chances could increase to every 1.5 years.

While noting that spells of heat have always been a feature of the region's pre-monsoon climate during April and May, an expert who has associated with this study avers that this study shows that climate change is driving the heat intensity of these heat spells. In 2010, the average temperature in April that year in India was 35.42 degrees Celsius, and 35.32 degrees Celsius in 2016. This blistering heat has claimed a heavy toll on human lives.

According to an expert who has the co-author of the study conducted by the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences at the IIT Delhi, high temperatures are common in India but what made this unusual was that it started so early and lasted so long across much of India and people had no respite for weeks, with the costs particularly high hundreds of millions of outdoor workers, and in the wake of these developments, this expert cautions that the occurrence of extreme heatwaves can be a recurring phenomenon shortly, and one needs to be better prepared for it.

NASA's Earth Observatory has observed that the Indian region is known for high heat in the spring and early summer, and May is the typically hottest month of the year. A recent study prepared by the World Weather Attribution group says that the extreme heat reduced India's wheat crop yields, causing the Indian government to reverse a plan to supplement the global wheat supply affected by the war in Ukraine.

Another effect of extreme heatwaves was that a coal shortage led to power outages in many parts of the country that limited access to cooling, compounding health impacts, and forcing millions of people to use coping mechanisms, such as limiting activity to the early morning and evening. According to the co-author of the report, in the countries where the data is available, extreme heatwaves are the deadliest extreme weather events and concurrently they are the type of extremes increasingly in a warming world, and as long as greenhouse gas emissions continue, such events as these will become an increasingly common disaster.

Climate change has made happening of heatwaves more likely and more intense worldwide. Heatwaves entail the potential of increasing the risk of forest fires and even droughts. Thousands of people in this region, who, to begin with, contributed very little to global warming, are now bearing the brunt of it and will continue to do so if emissions are not significantly curtailed globally. Admittedly, people continued to reel under scorching heat continuously for over two months and it was a sort of disaster for which both Central and State governments ought to have shown sympathy and provided some relief measures so that the people could have felt some respite.

It devolves on the dispensation at the helm to look after the people who are affected by disaster-like moments of heatwaves by providing relief supplies to those affected by heatwaves. The occurrence of such heatwaves is likely to be a recurring phenomenon and the Government should plan to deal with such emergent situations appropriately.

— BK