

Floods, Landslides and Silence: The Betrayal of Himalayan Communities

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Figure 1: Visuals of Flood and Landslides in Himalayan regions (Source: ANI)

Nature never replies to people quietly, it always roars. Dharali heard that roar again this August, when a wall of water, mud and boulders poured down the Kheer Gad river, burying parts of the village market under forty feet of debris. At least 16 residents died, and dozens remain missing, soldiers and laborers alike swept away under the sludge. Rescue teams scrambled against blocked roads, bad weather, and collapsing slopes to reach survivors. Locals insist it was no surprise, they mark Dharali's years not by festivals, but by floods, violent in 2013, quieter in the years since. Two separate studies (in 2020 and 2023) had warned that Dharali and nearby Harsil were on borrowed time, made vulnerable by rampant construction along the fragile Bhagirathi valley. The result now lies in the state archive

alongside news footage and rescue reports, yet another year when nature spoke and the world failed to listen. Beyond Dharali, the same voice rises across the hills. In Chamoli, the glacier-fed Ronti Valley erupted as an avalanche in 2021 and wiped-out hydropower projects, villages and workers in moments. Midway through this year another deadly avalanche at Mana engulfed road crews high on steep slopes. Across the region, the monsoon has become a season of ruin. In September 2025, torrential rains flooded Uttarakhand's capital. A cloudburst in Dehradun killed at least 13 people and submerged IT parks and markets. Likewise in Himachal Pradesh's Mandi district, flash floods from record rains swamped Dharampur's bus stand, sweeping away buses and shops and killing at least three residents. In Sikkim, heavy monsoon rains swelled the Teesta River, washing away the under-construction Sankalang Bridge and cutting off remote valleys. Each time, the same failure plays out, fractured governance, inadequate infrastructure and willful ignorance of warning signs written plainly in the land. The events of early 2025 in Dharali were not born from a single night of heavy rain. They came from years of subtle changes to the slope, the river and the road that threads through the valley. The debris flow that cut the Gangotri highway and left the village without road access for days was only the latest reminder that the mountains remember every cut we make into them. Residents who had rebuilt after past floods watched the same road crumble again and return isolation. For people reading the news, these incidents are just another natural disaster, but for the people living there, it is different. Meteorologists later noted that Uttarkashi's deluge brought roughly 421% above-normal rainfall in a few hours, far beyond what simple "cloudburst" statistics suggest. In the language of those who live here, it was the mountain speaking. From Kedarnath in 2013 to the Ronti avalanche in 2021, from Himachal's monsoon calamities of 2023 to the dam-burst and floods of Uttarakhand and Sikkim in 2024–25, the pattern has been the same. Each event is described as rare until the next one comes. Landslides, flash floods, glacial lake bursts and riverbank collapses have turned from exceptions to seasonal possibilities. Meteorological records bear it out by mid-2025, Uttarakhand had seen 65% of its monsoon days marked by extreme weather, up steadily from 59% in 2024 and 33% in 2022. The 2024 monsoon was the warmest on record for the state, fueling heavier downpours. Nationwide, nearly 3,000 people died in the first ten months of fiscal 2024–25 from hydro-meteorological disasters. Meanwhile, satellite imagery confirms that glaciers are retreating at an accelerating pace, weakening the natural buffers that once held these mountains together. Roads and bridges meant to "connect" villages have in some cases become the fault lines along which the earth now gives way. Yet disaster memory in the mountains is short – not because people forget, but because rebuilding too often replaces reflection. Budgets for disaster relief are allocated more swiftly than budgets for slope stabilization or early-warning systems. Writs for roads, hydropower projects and hill-cutting are issued more quickly than the necessary ecological impact studies can be conducted, let alone enforced. The very valleys that carry pilgrims, trekkers and tens of thousands of apples every season also carry the risk of an unexpected disconnection from the homeland and nation. The vulnerability of infrastructure in the Himalayan and northeastern states is not merely a matter of

geography, but also of a development model that treats mountains as flat terrain waiting to be constructed on. Roads are cut into slopes before they are stabilized, bridges are built without considering changes in the force of melting snow or dust, and transmission lines run along unstable ridges. A current analysis done by India's disaster agencies concluded that many highways in the Himalaya "were engineered without factoring in extreme weather events or the growing role of climate change – with significant reliance on a narrow range of non-dimensional engineering to calculate what are increasingly unrecoverable risks." In these areas, every broken link can mean not getting to the hospital, a supply truck, or an emergency boat. A stretch of washed-out road is not just an engineering failure – it is a lifeline cut. Connectivity in these states depends on a handful of arterial routes. When they are blocked, the cost is measured in more than lost time. During the 2025 monsoon, one night of cloudbursts stranded over 500 people around Dehradun, forcing helicopter sorties and driving the prices of food and fuel in isolated hill towns to sky-high levels. For those needing urgent medical care, isolation can mean the difference between life and death. In fact, some villages now prepare as if under siege each monsoon, stockpiling essentials because they expect the roads to fail. This is not resilience by design but survival by necessity. Disaster management plans exist on paper, yet early-warning systems remain patchy and evacuation drills are rare. Geological and hydrological surveys often sit idle in dusty files while construction pushes ahead. After every major event, committees are formed and reports filed, but the cycle between warning and rebuilding repeats. The high-altitude terrain magnifies the consequences of delay. When a slope begins to fail, there is often no second road to reroute traffic and no alternate grid to restore power. The margin for error is as thin as the ridges on which these communities live.

The disasters in the hilly states are no longer rare. They are recurring chapters in a story we refuse to rewrite. To blame only nature is a comforting lie, for it leaves us with no responsibility. A 2023 report of Himalayan flood losses found that Himachal Pradesh suffered 163 landslides and 83 flash floods in one season – at a cost of ₹1,632 crore – and explicitly blamed poorly planned roads and debris-strewn waterway. The truth is that reckless construction, weak enforcement and political short-sightedness are eroding the mountains faster than any river or glacier. Climate change may be the trigger, but our choices have loaded the gun. A bridge collapsing or a road washing away is never simply the loss of a piece of infrastructure. It is the loss of trust in the system that was supposed to protect them. It is the moment that a farmer pauses to ask themselves if it is worth risking being swept away by a landslide to get the children to school. It is the time that families start to think about leaving the mountains. The question is not whether disaster will happen or not, but the real question is how we respond, whether we can and will act in a way that respects the land, or whether we will build the house despite the signs from the earth. Each time we ignore the signs, there is a price, loss of life, the community cut off, and the slow obliteration of places that once survived because of their resilience. Nature has been speaking with an increasingly



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loud voice and will only get louder, and if we choose to remain willfully deaf to it, the greatest tragedy will not be the floods or the landslides we experience, but it will be the silence we accepted.