

Analysis

Climate denialism: Excuses change, dishonesty remains



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Author: Acharya Prashant

On 26 August 2026, a huge mass of ice and rock broke away from a Himalayan mountainside near the Nepal-Tibet border. It crashed down into the valley below, setting off a torrent of water, mud and boulders that rushed through the Bhote Koshi and Trishuli river systems. Bridges disappeared, roads were destroyed, buildings were swept away, and whole settlements were devastated. By 11 October, the reported death toll had reached 1,457, with thousands still missing. People living far downstream had little time to escape.

Then, on 11 October, another disaster struck Nepal. An avalanche and a massive landslide high in the mountains of Gorkha sent debris rushing towards the Budhi Gandaki river. A temporary blockage appears to have formed, releasing a sudden flood when it gave way. Houses and bridges were swept away, five people were reported missing, and villages downstream were evacuated. Nepalese authorities issued

warnings across several districts. These were not identical disasters, and scientists are still examining their precise causes. But they show how dangerous the interaction of ice, rock and water can become in the Himalayas. As the mountains warm and glaciers retreat, such dangers demand ever more serious attention, and those who live below them can least afford to remain unaware.

During a recent dialogue on climate change, I conducted a small experiment in front of the audience. A transparent box containing ice cubes was kept on my table on the stage. Some of the ice was melting to form a water column at the bottom. A black line marked the initial water level. The ice represented the glaciers and the water stood for the levels of the oceans, Himalayan rivers and glacial lakes. As the discussion went on, the ice kept melting, pieces broke away with loud cracking sounds, and the water rose. At one point, a large piece collapsed, and I said, "This was an avalanche." By the end of the session, almost all the ice had disappeared, and the water level had risen to many times the starting level.

Meanwhile, a young woman was presenting one argument after another used by climate denialists. We were debating whether the crisis was real even as a small model of its consequences unfolded before our eyes.

The ice was not interested in our arguments. It kept melting.

The arguments change, the conclusion does not

Climate denial has gone through several stages. Initially, the claim was that global warming was not happening at all. When that became impossible to defend, the argument changed: yes, the planet is warming, but the climate has always changed. Then came another defence: perhaps temperatures are rising, but human beings are not responsible. Later, even human responsibility was partly admitted, only to be followed by the claim that the consequences would not be particularly serious. Now the familiar objections are that climate action will destroy economic growth, that clean technology will solve everything, or that nobody has the right to interfere with how an individual chooses to live.

Observe something here. The arguments change, but the conclusion remains the same: we must not seriously disturb our existing patterns of production and consumption. When the reasons keep changing and the verdict never moves, it is clear that the verdict came first and the reasons were gathered later.

A recent disclosure shows this at work. On 7 October, a detailed report examined newly disclosed internal documents from ExxonMobil, which had entered the public record through litigation in the United States. Among them was a draft memorandum written in November 1988 by Frank Sprow of Exxon's corporate research department.

The memorandum proposed two primary objectives for the company's greenhouse research. The first was to "Protect the value of our resources (oil, gas, coal)." The second was to preserve Exxon's business options.

Think about that. Understanding the greenhouse effect and protecting the planet were part of the picture, but a central concern was protecting the commercial value of fossil-fuel reserves.

Another newly disclosed document recorded discussions at a 1997 meeting of a climate steering group within the American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's trade association. With governments preparing to negotiate an international climate agreement at Kyoto, the proposed approach was to continue questioning the scientific basis of climate action and emphasising its economic cost. Almost thirty years later, these remain among the most common arguments against acting on climate.

The company's own researchers, meanwhile, had been studying climate change for decades. A study published in Science in 2023 examined warming projections recorded by Exxon and ExxonMobil scientists

between 1977 and 2003. Many of those projections turned out to be remarkably accurate. Depending on how accuracy was assessed, between 63 and 83 per cent were consistent with the warming that subsequently occurred.

The company's science, in other words, was substantially correct, while its public communications often questioned what its own research indicated. ExxonMobil has denied misleading the public, and the legal allegations remain contested. But the internal documents and the contrast between the research and public messaging raise a serious question. How does someone know something and yet argue against it?

It is easy to blame the corporation and end the discussion there. But why did these arguments find such a willing audience? Why did so many educated people accept them?

The company was not the only party with something to protect. Millions of consumers also wanted to continue living exactly as they had been living. The commercial interest of the producer met the personal interest of the consumer. The producer wanted to keep selling, the consumer wanted to keep consuming, and both found the same arguments convenient. So the examination cannot end with the corporation. It must turn to us.

What is really happening to the planet?

Take the most familiar objection first: "Climate has always changed." It has. The Earth has gone through ice ages and warm periods. Its orbit has changed, volcanic activity has affected the atmosphere, and natural variations have influenced its temperature. Nobody disputes that. What sets today's warming apart is its cause, its speed and the conditions in which human beings now live.

First, the cause. We know that human activity is responsible for the present warming, and we know it from measurement. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was around 280 parts per million before industrialisation. It is now above 425. We can even identify the source of much of that additional carbon.

Coal, oil and natural gas contain carbon that was stored underground for millions of years. Carbon occurs in different forms called isotopes, and fossil-fuel carbon has a distinctive isotopic composition. When fossil fuels are burned, the relative proportions of these isotopes in atmospheric carbon dioxide change in measurable ways. The extra carbon leaves evidence of where it came from, so there is no need to guess at human responsibility.

Scientists have other independent evidence as well. Satellites have measured the Sun's energy reaching Earth for decades without finding an increase that could explain the recent warming. If the Sun were principally responsible, we would expect a different pattern of atmospheric heating. Instead, the lower atmosphere is warming while the stratosphere above it is cooling, just as greenhouse physics predicts.

Second, the speed. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that the planet has warmed faster since 1970 than during any other fifty-year period in at least two thousand years. The World Meteorological Organization reports that the eleven years from 2015 through 2025 were the eleven warmest on record. The year 2025 was approximately 1.43 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial average, even though natural climate variability brought some temporary cooling.

Temperature is only one measure. The oceans are accumulating heat. Glaciers are losing mass. Sea levels are rising. Coral reefs are suffering repeated bleaching. The same picture appears across many independent measurements.

The Global Carbon Budget for 2025 projected that fossil-fuel carbon dioxide emissions would reach a new record of approximately 38.1 billion tonnes that year. Ten years after the Paris Agreement, we were still increasing the amount of fossil carbon entering the atmosphere.

When I call the speed extraordinary, I mean more than the temperature rise. I mean the pace at which the climate system as a whole is changing.

Third, the way we live now. At the end of the last ice age, the total human population was only a few million. When climatic conditions became unfavourable, populations could move. Even then, climate change was not harmless. Changes in rainfall and river systems are thought to have contributed to the decline and transformation of ancient civilisations, including the Harappan civilisation.

The Sahara was once much greener than it is today. As rainfall patterns changed over thousands of years, its landscapes and human settlements changed too.

But today there are more than eight billion human beings on the planet. We live in large, densely populated cities. We have fixed farmlands, roads, factories, ports, electricity networks and enormous investments in infrastructure. Can you move a city? Can you move farmland?

If parts of the Indo-Gangetic plain become increasingly difficult to live in because of extreme heat, unreliable rainfall and water shortages, where will those crores of people go? If coastal cities face repeated flooding and rising seas, how will their inhabitants pick up their homes and move elsewhere? And where is the space left to migrate to?

In the session, I asked the audience to imagine the Indo-Gangetic plain beginning to turn into something like the Sahara. I was not predicting that the whole plain would become a desert; I wanted them to feel the scale of the danger. A climatic change that was difficult for a small population thousands of years ago could become a catastrophe for today's enormous settled population.

Back to the Himalayas. A 2026 assessment by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development reported that the rate of glacier ice loss across the Hindu Kush Himalayan region had doubled since 2000. An earlier assessment found that glaciers lost ice 65 per cent faster in the 2010s than in the preceding decade.

These mountains are sometimes called Asia's water towers. Their snow and glaciers help sustain river systems that support nearly two billion people across the wider region.

As glaciers retreat, some lakes expand and become dangerous. A sudden release of water can cause a devastating flood. Over a longer period, changes in glacier storage, snowmelt and rainfall can alter river flows and water availability. The consequences reach well beyond the mountains, into agriculture, drinking water, hydropower and regional economies.

Sea-level rise, too, is happening now. NASA's satellite measurements show that global mean sea level has risen by more than ten centimetres since 1993, and its rate of rise has more than doubled over that period.

For a coastal city, a few additional centimetres can make storms and high tides more destructive. The damage begins long before the city goes underwater. Saltwater can enter groundwater. Drainage can become more difficult. Roads, homes and public services face increasing risks.

We usually call such cities vulnerable. That word is too soft. When the sea rises far enough, it simply swallows a city.

India has particular reasons to worry. Our agriculture depends heavily on the monsoon. A large part of our workforce spends long hours outdoors. Millions lack dependable cooling, secure housing or financial protection against extreme weather.

The 2025 Lancet Countdown estimated that exposure to heat caused India to lose 247 billion potential labour hours in 2024, with an associated potential loss of income of about 194 billion dollars. Around two-thirds of those lost labour hours were in agriculture.

Behind such a number are people unable to work as they otherwise would, crops and earnings under pressure, and families losing money because the conditions around them have become too harsh. And these losses are already being measured.

The smaller excuses

Some excuses need only a sentence or two. “But it was bitterly cold last winter,” someone says. Weather is what happens at a particular place over a short period. Climate is the pattern observed across the planet over many years. A cold night does not disprove global warming, just as a hot afternoon does not by itself establish it.

Yet people with access to all the information they need keep repeating this argument. Climate science may be complex, but this part is elementary; what is missing is the willingness to understand it.

Another favourite: more carbon dioxide is good, because plants use it for photosynthesis. Increased carbon dioxide can indeed stimulate plant growth under suitable conditions, and satellite observations have shown substantial greening over recent decades. Scientific studies have identified CO₂ fertilisation as an important contributor to this increase in leaf area. But why should one favourable effect settle the question of whether the process as a whole is beneficial?

A forest is more than a collection of green leaves. It is a living system involving trees, insects, animals, soil, rainfall and countless relationships among species.

Suppose rising temperatures and changing rainfall reduce the populations of bees and other pollinators. What happens to plants that depend upon them? Will additional carbon dioxide save those plants?

Agriculture tells a similar story. Higher temperatures can reduce yields, even where additional CO₂ helps some plants grow. Increased carbon dioxide can also reduce the concentrations of key nutrients in certain crops. A little more leaf growth cannot compensate for collapsing ecosystems, damaged crops and the loss of biodiversity.

A related claim is that more people die from cold than from heat, so a warmer world should save lives. The comparison is misleading. Heat is only one of the ways climate change kills. It affects food, water, infectious diseases, floods, storms, displacement and livelihoods. Even within temperature-related mortality, the effects differ greatly across countries and populations.

A study may correctly count more deaths associated with cold than heat in a particular period. That still does not establish that continued warming will be beneficial overall. Meanwhile, the Lancet Countdown puts the rise in heat-related mortality worldwide at 23 per cent since the 1990s, reaching approximately 546,000 deaths annually.

Climate models draw a different complaint: they cannot be trusted. Models do have uncertainties, and scientists know this better than anyone. But a model can be useful without predicting every detail. A review of climate models published between 1970 and 2007 found that most had successfully projected

the broad temperature changes that followed, particularly after accounting for differences between assumed and actual emissions.

Remember that Exxon's own scientists were making useful projections decades ago. The issue was not that the science had failed. The issue was what people chose to do with the science.

The Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree target is also attacked as an arbitrary political figure. An international agreement does involve negotiation, and 1.5 degrees is no magical boundary beyond which every disaster suddenly becomes inevitable. But does that make the difference between 1.5 and 2 degrees meaningless?

Scientific assessments project very large losses of coral reefs even at 1.5 degrees, with substantially worse outcomes at 2 degrees. The risk of irreversible changes to major ice sheets and other parts of the climate system rises as warming increases.

The United Nations Environment Programme's 2025 Emissions Gap Report estimated that existing policies were putting the world on a path towards approximately 2.8 degrees of warming this century. Some will call such figures pessimistic. But a thermometer showing 103 degrees Fahrenheit is not being pessimistic about the patient. What does one do when the realistic picture itself has become pessimistic?

Growth, technology and the question nobody asks

Then there is the economy. India needs development. If we stop burning fossil fuels, how will we grow?

But who said development must necessarily involve rising carbon emissions? We need energy, but electricity can be generated from sources other than coal and gas. Renewable energy has become increasingly competitive. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency, more than 90 per cent of the large renewable projects commissioned in 2025 could produce electricity more cheaply than the least expensive new fossil-fuel alternatives in their respective markets.

Renewable energy requires investment in grids, storage and supporting infrastructure, and that investment is not free. Even so, the old assertion that clean energy is always too expensive no longer holds.

And what about the cost of continuing with dirty energy? What happens when crops fail? When roads are washed away? When factories lose working hours to extreme heat? When air pollution damages the health of millions? When people are forced to leave their homes?

What happens when a man dies? Does that lead to economic progress? Economic growth cannot be measured by counting the money made from extracting and burning fuels while ignoring the damage caused by their use.

India also has a legitimate argument about historical responsibility. Rich industrialised countries have contributed far more to the carbon already accumulated in the atmosphere. An average Indian still emits much less carbon dioxide annually than an average American. It would be unjust to demand the same sacrifices from a poor Indian family and a wealthy family owning several large homes, vehicles and private aircraft.

But historical injustice does not change the laws of physics. India cannot protect itself from climate change by pointing towards America's emissions.

We must demand fairness internationally while also protecting our own people. Our development must be cleaner, more efficient and less wasteful, not because wealthy countries have suddenly become virtuous, but because our own future is at stake.

The most hopeful argument is that technology will save us. The young woman in the session presented a picture of a world powered by abundant nuclear energy, electric vehicles and advanced batteries. Suppose we could electrify almost everything. Why worry about consumption then?

Technological improvement is essential; there is no disagreement there. We need cleaner power, better batteries, more efficient transport, stronger electricity grids and improved methods of industrial production.

Nuclear power can contribute too. It generates electricity with low greenhouse-gas emissions, though large projects demand considerable capital, planning, regulation and construction time. Fuel supply, waste management and safety are real questions that must be answered. Newer technologies may make it more useful, but no one can assume in advance the scale they will reach.

We should use every effective option available. The crisis is too serious to reject useful technologies out of prejudice. Yet technology is only part of the answer.

Take electric vehicles. A modern electric car generally produces fewer emissions over its lifetime than a comparable petrol or diesel car, even when manufacturing and electricity generation are included. The International Energy Agency's 2026 assessment finds that this advantage holds even in countries such as India, where coal still provides a large share of electricity. So let us welcome electric vehicles.

But suppose a family that previously owned one diesel car now owns three electric cars. The emissions per vehicle may be lower, yet the family's total environmental burden need not fall. Add the materials, energy and land required to manufacture the additional vehicles and their batteries. If the one car was already sufficient, why must there now be three?

Economics has an old name for this: the Jevons paradox. Improvements in efficiency can make a resource cheaper to use, encouraging greater consumption. The resulting increase in demand can offset some of the savings, and in certain cases even exceed them. Efficiency still helps; on its own, it cannot guarantee that total consumption will fall.

We keep asking how to produce more energy with fewer emissions. That is a necessary question. But a more fundamental one sits beneath it. Why must the demand remain the same? Why must it keep increasing?

We are treating demand as sacred and supply as the only thing that can be questioned. You say, *itna toh chahiye*, at least this much is needed. Then engineers and scientists are asked to find cleaner ways of providing whatever we demand. But who decided how much is needed? And what is the nature of this need?

There are real human needs. Food, shelter, healthcare, education, mobility and dignified living conditions require resources, and those who lack these things should have access to them.

But what about the demand that begins after the need has been met? The bigger vehicle, the third home, the frequent unnecessary flights, the endless replacement of perfectly usable possessions, the new luxury one must have only because someone else has it. Is this need, or is it something else?

The one who refuses to see

Here the matter becomes philosophical. The ego is incompleteness, and incompleteness runs outward as desire. Desire needs energy for its fulfilment, and today much of that energy still comes from coal, oil and gas.

If I accept that my consumption contributes to environmental destruction, I may have to examine the desires behind that consumption. And if those desires are central to my sense of who I am, examining them becomes uncomfortable. So I would rather question the climate data.

The ego does not always deny facts because it lacks intelligence. Often, it uses intelligence to protect itself from facts. It first decides what it wants and then searches for arguments that will permit it to continue wanting. That is why the educated person can sometimes become a more sophisticated denier than the uneducated one. He has more information, more language and more intellectual resources with which to defend his preferences.

Facts are the door to truth, and truth means the ego's dissolution. A dense and stubborn ego, bent on saving itself at any cost, will stay away from facts, and will pay a price to blur them.

What the ego guards so desperately takes shape early. We are born with bodily needs, and we soon begin identifying ourselves with our bodies, possessions, status and relationships. The sense of incompleteness seeks relief through things outside itself.

There is nothing wrong with eating when hungry or seeking shelter when exposed to the weather. The difficulty begins when we expect objects to settle an inner dissatisfaction that objects cannot settle.

One possession gives pleasure, and shortly afterwards we want another. A new status satisfies us for a while, and then comparison begins again. We earn more, acquire more and consume more, but the feeling of incompleteness continues.

Have you ever seen the rich stop earning because they already have enough? Does wealth necessarily bring an end to wanting? Often, the more you have, the more you want. Money turns into mania.

Some people use Maslow's hierarchy of needs to argue that human beings must first satisfy all their material wants before they can turn towards higher fulfilment. But where is the evidence that heavy consumption leads to self-actualisation? Must a person first experience every possible luxury before discovering what matters? Kabir Saheb did not need to pass through a long period of indulgence before seeing the falseness of worldly attachments.

Liberation is not an achievement waiting at the top of a pyramid. It is the dropping of a burden that one needlessly carries, and that burden has an environmental cost.

Consumption in itself is not a sin; every creature consumes something. Wearing a shirt because you need protection from the weather is entirely reasonable. Wearing a particular shirt because it establishes your superiority over someone else is a different matter. Then the shirt is not merely covering your body. It is trying to cover your insecurity.

A vehicle that meets a genuine need is one thing. A vehicle purchased chiefly to announce your importance is another. The physical object may look similar, but the intention behind it is different. One serves life. The other serves the ego.

Public discussion of climate change mostly overlooks this distinction. We talk endlessly about cleaner products, carbon offsets and greener technologies, and rarely ask why so many products are wanted in the first place.

What must change?

None of this means personal transformation can replace laws, technology or political action. We need them all.

Carbon footprints should become easier for individuals and organisations to measure and understand. High-emission activities should be made transparent. Products should provide reliable information about the environmental costs of their production. Governments must stop rewarding destruction and begin making environmentally responsible choices more accessible.

Public transport should be improved. Clean electricity must be expanded. Buildings should be designed to use less energy. Agriculture should be made more resilient. Industries must be held accountable for pollution and waste.

Food matters too. Animal-based food production generally requires more land and produces more greenhouse-gas emissions than comparable plant-based alternatives. A study published in *Nature Food* estimated that animal-based foods accounted for 57 per cent of emissions from global food production in the period it examined. A shift towards more plant-based diets can reduce environmental pressure, and when diets are properly planned, it also offers health benefits.

We must also be willing to discuss population responsibly. Total human demand depends not only on how much each person consumes, but also on how many people there are. Decisions about having children have consequences extending far beyond a single household.

This does not justify coercion, or blaming poor families for emissions largely driven by the consumption of the wealthy. But neither should the subject be excluded from an honest discussion of our future. Responsible parenthood includes thinking about the world into which a child will be born.

And in a democracy, none of these issues will become priorities just because a scientist publishes another report. Voters must begin taking them seriously, because political parties respond to what people demand.

Today, politicians can fill whole campaigns with arguments about caste, religion, personality and personal attacks while barely discussing the environment that sustains everyone. Why is the future of our rivers, our crops and our children's health not a central electoral issue?

That makes education essential. The *Ishavasya Upanishad* speaks of *vidya* and *avidya*, and the distinction matters. Knowledge of the external world has its place, but so does knowledge of oneself.

A person may know a great deal about physics, chemistry and economics and still remain ignorant of the motives behind his own actions. One can be a scientist and yet a climate denier. Such a person questions everything except the "I" that is doing the questioning; that is the first superstition.

Our education must teach us to recognise our own dishonesty as well as to gather information. What use is great intelligence if it is placed at the service of falsehood?

Nor can denial be excused as ignorance forever. Someone who has never been exposed to the relevant facts needs education. But when an informed person keeps inventing new excuses to avoid facts, something else is happening.

You can wake up someone who is asleep; who can wake up someone who is pretending to sleep?

What is your idea of a good time?

One question in the climate discussion matters to me more than most: why do we need to consume so much in order to enjoy ourselves?

I remember being out on my motorcycle one night near Sector 18 in Noida. Two large vehicles arrived with loud music playing. Four or five young men got out. For no apparent reason, they began damaging a small

roadside stall belonging to a poor vendor. Someone tried to intervene. They slapped him, and when he ran away, they laughed even more.

What were these young men enjoying? They had vehicles, fuel, music, money and the freedom to go wherever they wanted. Yet the pleasure they found was in humiliating someone weaker and destroying what little he possessed.

It struck me that they were terribly unhappy people. They did not know what to do with themselves, so they had to manufacture excitement through destruction.

This is the carbon crisis, in miniature. You do not know how to enjoy yourself, so you indulge in all the nonsense.

The same tendency that can find pleasure in needless aggression can also express itself through reckless shopping, wasteful travel, constant acquisition and the endless search for stimulation. We are not creative. We are not life-giving. But we want pleasure, so the only pleasure available to us is destruction.

That need not be our condition. There is immense pleasure available in living intelligently: a healthy body, good work, deep relationships, reading, music, physical activity, a real conversation, time spent learning something, the freedom to be alone without feeling empty. None of it needs to demand much from the planet.

The ego suffers, so its demand for pleasure is understandable. But there is lower pleasure, which depends on repeated stimulation, and there is the possibility of something higher, which we may call joy.

Joy is not another expensive experience. It comes when the ego begins to see the falseness of its own compulsions. When the demand to become someone through possessions and status weakens, much of the need for consumption weakens with it. This is the opposite of a joyless life of sacrifice.

A person who is inwardly content does not have to keep buying things to avoid himself. A person who knows what he loves need not manufacture excitement through waste. Environmental responsibility then stops being only a matter of denying oneself something and can become a consequence of living better.

When I speak of reducing unnecessary consumption, I am not asking anyone to become afraid of pleasure. Don't be afraid of joy.

Find out what really brings you alive. Find something worth giving your time to. Find relationships that are more than arrangements of convenience. Find work that is worth your life. Find a way of living in which every unoccupied hour does not become an invitation to buy something. And when you stop wasting resources on meaningless activities, you may find that your life is becoming richer, not poorer.

This is why I say that technology cannot be the final answer to the climate crisis. Technology can change the means by which desires are fulfilled. It cannot, by itself, examine those desires. For that, a human being must look within.

Towards the end of our discussion, I looked at the transparent box. The ice had disappeared. The water stood much higher than when we began. "It's gone. Finished. All you need is the Noah's Ark now."

There was laughter. I asked where Mumbai was in that little world, and where Chennai was. Both had disappeared beneath the water. We laughed at the absurdity of the miniature disaster while knowing that the actual planet is undergoing changes whose consequences will be far more serious.

The ice that collapsed in Nepal had no regard for the people who lived downstream. The ice in our little experiment had no regard for the arguments being made beside it. Neither was interested in what we

believed.

The difference is that we have the ability to understand what is happening and to change our course. We know the causes. We have the measurements. We have the technology to reduce much of the damage. What remains uncertain is whether we have the honesty to act upon what we know.

During the session, I had asked the audience a question. It is the same question I would put to everyone, whether or not they call themselves environmentalists. What is your idea of a good time?

Life is time. If you do not know what a good time is, what are you living for?

And if you have no answer except more consumption, what exactly are you burning the planet for?

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-examination and its application to contemporary life; Views presented are personal.



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