

August 29, 2026

Nepal tragedy: Why hide the real cause?

Copy Link X WhatsApp Share

By Acharya Prashant



Picture this. It's nine in the morning. Along the Trishuli river, the shops are opening as they do on any day; pilgrims are setting out for Kailash; labourers have begun the day's shift on the hydroelectric projects strung along the water. Take one of them. A pilgrim of sixty, say, from a town in the plains, who finished the circuit of Kailash the day before and is being driven down towards the border this morning with the photographs still on his phone, feeling, as anyone would, that he has done something with his life. He is on the road at nine. It looks like one more ordinary morning. And then the mountain roars.

On the morning of the twenty-sixth of August, high above the Lhende river in Tibet, some twenty kilometres north of the Nepal border, a vast slab of ice and rock broke away from a glacier and fell into the river below, damming it. The water stopped, gathered, rose, and when enough of it had gathered it burst the wall it had made and came down all at once into Nepal's Rasuwa district, carrying everything away: whole villages, the bridges, the roads, more than ten hydroelectric projects along the bank.

Latest News

- 

India-China and the test of trust
Aug 29
- 

India's talent hunt must look beyond the Olympics
Aug 29
- 

Himalayan tragedy: A disaster in Nepal, a...
Aug 28
- 

After Red Corridor: India post-Naxal challenge
Aug 28
- 

Gen Alpha's AI shadow: Protecting the right to...
Aug 28
- 

India needs institutional reform — now!
Aug 27

Advertisement

Your ad could be here. Contact us for advertising opportunities.

Learn More

Popular News

- 

Chandrasekaran Announces Exit as Tata...
Aug 12



Ads by Google

Ad options

Send feedback

Why this ad? ⓘ

list of the missing. That the toll ran so high is not the flood's doing alone; it is also a measure of how much has been built in the water's path, the settlements and dams and border posts crowded onto the banks of rivers that were long known to do exactly this. And it was not a monsoon flood, rain the ground could not absorb. It was the second kind of flood, the kind that no longer needs rain, and the kind that hardly any forecast will see coming. [India business news](#)

And here is the part that the word "flood" hides. No rain had fallen that day. No cloud had burst. This disaster did not come down from the sky as water; it came down from the mountain as ice. The glacier broke, and a piece of it fell across the river. And why did the glacier break? Because the Himalayas are heating, and heat, applied to a great body of ice, breaks it. Rising heat weakens the ice and thaws the permafrost that holds the steep slopes together, so that avalanches, landslides and sudden lake bursts all grow more common. Whether warming pulled the trigger on this particular morning is a question the scientists will take months to settle. What is already settled is that warming loaded the gun and has been loading it for decades, and that is the cause, whatever the trigger.

And yet one can read through most of the coverage for a long time before meeting the single word that explains it. What one meets instead is a vocabulary built for not meeting it. "Cloudburst," "natural calamity," "freak event," "unprecedented," "the fury of nature," "an act of god." And, of the pilgrims, this: "God was so fond of them that He called them home." It's nauseating. Everything else is named, the bad luck, the lost pilgrims, the wrecked trade post, the sheer scale of the water; the one word that should not merely be spoken but shouted, climate, is the one being stepped around. A few reports have used it, and used it as one more item in the list, a label filed and forgotten; hardly anyone has asked what the word means, or whom it names. That avoidance is not an oversight. What kind of conspiracy is this, and whom is it meant to deceive? It is the first disaster and the deepest, the refusal to see what has already been seen, and written on every warning list, for years. In place of that one word, everything else is performed: politicians issue condolences, holy men send blessings and shed tears, reporters climb the wreckage to find a survivor to interview. The grief is real and deserves respect, but under cover of it the cause goes unnamed, while the next glacier is already straining. A reader who wants to do one thing today can audit the publications he pays for, and stop paying the ones that have no room for the word. If we would only stop talking, we might hear the ice cracking. And we would hear that it is cracking on no foreign map. It is cracking on the map we worship.

The Same River, Twice

And it was not the first time. This same small river had flooded in almost exactly this way fourteen months earlier, in the summer of 2025, when a glacial lake up in Tibet, swollen by a spell of high mountain heat, overflowed and drained without warning, killing nine people and taking out the bridge that joined the two countries. The year



Syama Prasad Mookerjee...
Jul 06



ECI announces Rajya Sabha Bypolls for 3 Wes...
Jul 06



2,000-year-old gold rings with ancient Indian scrip...
Jul 06



Ram Mandir Trust to decide on Champat Rai,...
Jul 06

Stay Updated

Get the latest news delivered directly to your inbox.

Subscribe

before that, in August 2024, two lakes burst above the village of Thame in the Everest region, emptying some four hundred and fifty-nine thousand cubic metres of water, about a hundred and eighty Olympic pools, and driving rock and water eighty kilometres down the valley, destroying twenty-five homes and displacing a hundred and thirty-five people. In September 2024, Nepal endured its heaviest rainfall since 1970, and more than three hundred people died. One small river. Fourteen months. Two catastrophes. This is not coincidence; it is a pattern. It is not a single episode; it is a process.

None of it was unforeseen, and that is the part that should be hardest to forgive. Five years ago ICIMOD, the region's mountain-research institute, working with the United Nations, drew up an inventory of the glacial lakes most likely to burst into Nepal's rivers, and found forty-seven of them dangerous: twenty-one inside Nepal, twenty-five across the border in Tibet, one in India. The corridor that flooded this week was named among them. Nepal has recorded twenty-six such outbursts since the late 1970s, in a sequence that runs back at least to a lake that destroyed a hydro station in 1985, and it now loses, on average, more than three hundred lives and over seventeen million dollars a year to natural disasters of every kind, and the share taken by ice and water is growing. One especially dangerous lake was drained to a safer level in 2016; the rest were left as they were. This flood did not fall on a place nobody was watching. It fell on a place that had been marked, on paper, in an official inventory, for years. Every one of those lakes should be drained, and draining them will buy years, not a cure; the lakes are only where the wanting has pooled. [India business news](#)

It is worth understanding what warming actually does to a mountain, since the reports rarely say. Three things happen at once. The glaciers are thinning, and a thinning glacier does not melt tidily; it fractures, and no one can predict which of the range's sixty thousand glaciers will shed a mass of ice next, or where it will fall, which is why more sensors and better forecasts, for all their use, will buy minutes and not decades; they can tell a village to run, they cannot tell the ice to hold. The permafrost, the permanently frozen ground that has cemented these young and still loose mountains for millennia, is thawing, so the slopes lose their glue and the rock begins to come away. And the snow that once fell and settled, banking water to be let out slowly through the dry months, now falls increasingly as rain, which does not settle but runs off at once, in a rush, as a flood.

The melting is not a matter of faith. In one Nepali valley, in the same district this flood destroyed, stands a glacier that has lost two-thirds of its mass since the 1970s and drawn back nearly eight hundred metres, and that is expected to be gone by the 2040s. Last year scientists, officials and Buddhist monks climbed above five thousand metres to hold a funeral for it, the first such ceremony for a glacier anywhere in Asia, and set a plaque in the rock recording the carbon in the air that month: 426 parts per million. Consider what that plaque is. It is not a measurement; the measurement is taken every day by machines that grieve for nothing. It is a confession, set in stone at the scene, by people who walked up to look at what they had done. In the whole of this story it is the one moment where the mountain and the human interior have been allowed to meet, and it took a funeral to arrange it.

The numbers behind the funeral are these. The Himalayas are warming faster than the

plains below them, by somewhere between a third and three-quarters of a degree above the global rate, because thin high air heats more readily than thick low air; their ice is now vanishing about twice as fast as it was at the turn of the century, and some 65 per cent faster in the last full decade than in the one before, the mountains having shed as much as twenty-seven metres of ice thickness since the 1970s; and this past year brought the thinnest snow cover the region has seen in more than two decades. This is the Third Pole, the largest store of ice outside the Arctic and Antarctic, some sixty thousand glaciers holding around six thousand cubic kilometres of ice and feeding ten of the great river basins of Asia, barely a handful of them monitored to any international standard, and most of them expected to be gone before the century is out. Around two hundred glacial lakes across it are now rated dangerous, and the risk of them bursting is expected to keep climbing for another quarter of a century before it even peaks. A flood like this is a lifestyle disease. A heart attack does not arrive from nowhere on a particular Tuesday; it is the sudden, visible form of something that has been building, without symptoms, for thirty years. A flood that falls without rain is the same event, on the scale of a mountain range.

And the floods are only the loud half of what is coming. This is what glaciologists call peak water. For now the great rivers run full, fuller than in living memory, because the ice is melting faster than it can be replaced; but that fullness is borrowed against the future. These glaciers are the subcontinent's oldest fixed deposit, laid down over ten thousand winters, and for a hundred centuries we have lived on the interest, the ordinary thaw of an ordinary summer. Now the deposit is being broken and poured into a current account, and for the first time we are spending not the interest but the principal itself. Around 2050 the flow fed by these glaciers is expected to crest and then begin to fall, a little less every year, so that the same rivers will swing between fiercer monsoon floods and drier, more desperate springs, and in time cease to be perennial at all, carrying only what the monsoon gives them; not even the holiest of them is exempt. On the present course, as much as eighty per cent of the region's ice will be gone by 2100; even were the world to hold warming to the gentlest limit it has promised itself, a third of it would still go. Some two billion people downstream, and two hundred and forty million in the mountains themselves, will have to remake their lives around water that no longer keeps to a calendar, for more than four in every five of the springs that feed the high villages run on this snow and ice.

An Arm of the Ganga

And no one in India should imagine this is a neighbour's tragedy. Look at the map. The stream that flooded is a headwater of the Trishuli, and the Trishuli feeds the Narayani, which crosses into India as the Gandak, runs down through Bihar, and pours into the Ganga a little above Patna. It is the same Gandak whose canals, drawn off at the Valmikinagar barrage on the border, water millions of acres of farmland in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The water that came down as ruin in Rasuwa this week is, a little downstream and a little later, the irrigation of our fields and the aarti at our ghats. The pilgrims who died were walking India's sacred geography, and that geography is the melting one: Kailash and Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath all stand on the same thawing ice. The map we worship and the map that is failing are one and the same. If any of it is still sacred to us, then the devotion the hour asks for is not to scale these mountains or to boast of having stood on them, but to save them, for the abode of the

gods is turning, at a stunning pace, into barren and collapsing rock. It is the ice that holds these young mountains together; strip it away and they are not scenery but rubble in slow motion. What, then, would India be without the Himalayas?

The connection is not only one of maps. When a Himalayan glacier comes apart, the silt it carries settles in the riverbeds of the plains and raises them, and a shallower river brings a fiercer flood with every monsoon. Bihar is already the most flood-prone state in India, and most of its floods come down these very rivers from Nepal; the barrages on the border are opened, and within hours the water is in the fields of Champaran and Saran. In the forests of Chitwan and the Valmiki reserve that adjoins it across the line, gharials and Gangetic dolphins live in this same water. The Trishuli, in other words, is no foreign river. It is an arm of the Ganga. The wound cut into the Himalayas bleeds out across the plains below, the Indian plains. And still we treat these mountains as a fairground. Not the pilgrims, who walked; but the machinery we have built to carry the rest of us up there without walking: we widen the roads and cut the helipads and run the railways higher, inviting ever more traffic into the most fragile terrain on earth, and we call it development. Every road driven deeper into a thawing mountain is another wound in a body already bleeding. It is not development. It is the same demand, arriving now as a holiday.

So let the demand be met with a bill. The Himalayas are not a place for cheap tourism, and the first honest step is to say so at the toll gate: a steep entry fee on every road that climbs into them, and a heavy tax on every vehicle that does, heavy enough to be felt, not as punishment but as justice. Whoever goes up must pay the whole cost of going, and the whole cost includes what it costs the mountain. Instead the invitation is the other way round. Come, come, come, on the SUVs and the chartered buses; and if that is still inconvenient, we will cut the hills for helipads and run the railway to the top, for this is development. This is death.

Nor does the ice stop at any one border, because it was never divided the way the map is. One continuous body of Himalayan and Karakoram ice lies across Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, India and Pakistan, and it fails in each of them by the same mechanism, and after each failure the same thing is done. In October 2023 a lake above Sikkim gave way, destroyed a twelve-hundred-megawatt dam and killed more than fifty people; there was an inquiry, and a report, and a promise of sirens on the lakes. In 2021 a mass of rock and ice broke off a peak at Chamoli in Uttarakhand and killed around two hundred; there was an inquiry, and a report, and a fund. Bhutan lost twenty-one lives to a lake in 1994 and has spent thirty years lowering the ones beside it. Pakistan holds more than three thousand glacial lakes, thirty-three of them hazardous, with seven million people in their path, and has recorded more outbursts than any country on earth; the warning systems there are the best funded in the range. And the next one came anyway, each time, because the sirens and the reports and the funds were built to catch the water, and none of them was built to reach the heat. Worldwide, some fifteen million people now live within a few kilometres of a glacial lake, more than half of them in these mountains. Some of these places have already been struck; the rest are only waiting. A border on a map means nothing to meltwater.

The Cause That Is Not in the Mountain

Now put the question that no one is putting, the question that made this worth saying

aloud. Who heated the glacier? Not the monsoon, which stayed away; not the mountain, which only held the ice. We did. Not the people of Nepal, who burned almost nothing, but all of us, the whole of humanity, and the way of living we have agreed to call normal. When something breaks in the outer world, the first tendency is to run outward for the cause, and to keep running, tracing the flood to the lake and the lake to the glacier and the glacier to a line rising on a graph, and at no point in that outward journey does the search turn round to look at the one conducting it. Outside, there are instruments; inside, there are none. We can measure a river to the centimetre and the air to a tenth of a degree, and about the desire that set the whole machine in motion we can say almost nothing, because no dial has been built for it and no satellite can be turned to face inward. A camera can show the mud and count the dead. It cannot photograph the wanting that warmed the ice, because that wanting is not in Tibet, or in the monsoon, or in the river. It is nearer than any of them, and much better hidden.

That wanting is not exotic, and it is not somebody else's. The climate crisis is not, at bottom, a technical problem. It is a disorder in the ordinary human interior. We have been told, by school and market and screen and family alike, that we were born to consume, and that consuming will make us happy; that progress means owning more, and that a nation is to be ranked by how much it produces and consumes. So the emptiness inside is something we try to fill from the outside: one more car, one more house, one more holiday, one more thing bought and brought home. But the emptiness within is bottomless, and so the consumption must be bottomless too, and to consume without end some eight billion of us must burn the earth without end. Consumption is emission; between the two there is no gap at all. That burning is the temperature of the Himalayas. That temperature is what broke the ice. The difficulty is that the emissions are not attached to anything we hate. Everything that you love is carbon dioxide. Nobody loves CFCs, but you love the tea, and that is the problem. Trace the chain back and it does not break anywhere along its length: the emissions come from burning, the burning from the wish for energy, and the energy is spent on desires that do not fulfil us even when they are fulfilled. The engine is not the factory, and not the aeroplane. It is blind desire, the rush towards every object within reach that a person makes when he does not know who he is, and therefore does not know what he actually wants.

So the ice of the Himalayas, if the truth be told, is not melting in any factory's furnace. It is melting in our tendencies, in the ego itself. It is the ego that is heating, and the ego that is scorching and melting everything it touches. The mountain is not taking revenge; it is only where the ice happened to be. That flood did not come from the cloud, and it did not finally come from the glacier. It came from the way we have been taught to see life.

This is the case I carried across Britain this year, to the Cambridge Union and to Oxford, to the London School of Economics and King's College London, through the sessions of London Climate Action Week, and to the House of Lords: that every outer crisis has a centre, and the centre is the one who consumes, who has never once been asked to look at why he wants; and that no summit, treaty or efficiency gain will hold, because not one of them reaches him. I have put it to those audiences as a question about a drunk driver. When a man is drunk at the wheel, we do not sober him; we give him smoother roads, softer barriers, a faster ambulance, and call it safety. Our laws

and our green technologies do the same, managing the wreckage of human desire without once touching the desire itself.

It is also why the arithmetic of the disaster is so obscene. Nepal is responsible for about a tenth of one per cent of the world's greenhouse gases; a Nepali puts into the air, in a year, roughly half a tonne of carbon dioxide, an American about fourteen, a Chinese about eight, an Indian about two. The people this flood killed had burned almost nothing at all, and those who burned the most were nowhere near the water. The ones who are responsible will, almost without exception, get away with it. It will be, as it always is, the poor and the voiceless who are left to suffer, and to die. Carry that logic to its end and it reaches the creatures with no footprint at all, the animals and the forests, which have burned nothing and will lose everything. And yet the deepest flaw in the complaint, justified as every word of it is, is the belief that there are other people at all. Nature keeps no register of nationality; a sickness that begins in one city empties the streets of every city, and a molecule of carbon burned in one hemisphere warms the ice in the other. To speak of foreigners and their emissions is already to have forgotten that mankind is a single body, which is why the only sane answer to distant smoke is to raise the alarm wherever it rises, however impractical that sounds. Nor may India hold itself apart and reckon only what it is owed: our emissions are small per person, but our numbers are so vast that we now stand among the three largest emitters on earth, and the supply lines of the world would buckle if the two billion of us in this subcontinent reconsidered what we consume, and why.

And the deeper cruelty is that the many who drown do not even resent the few who profit; they line up to become them. We are worshipping our exploiters. The affluent whose lives we study and envy, the ones whose footprint is largest of all, are the very people writing the sentence; and we admire them for the scale of the claim on the earth that is killing us, having made that same claim the purpose of our own lives. We worship war in the same breath, and war is among the largest engines of this burning, though the emissions of no army are ever counted; we buy the tanks and the fighter jets from the very nations whose smoke is melting our ice, and pay them a profit for the privilege of warming the world a little faster. The demand that warms the ice is not forced on anyone at gunpoint; it is sold, and bought gladly, because when you manufacture a product, you also have to manufacture a buyer.

One ground alone lies beyond the reach of every government and every market, and it is the only ground from which that wanting could ever be withdrawn. Your interior is your own sovereign place. No power in the world has any right to your inner space.

That is where this flood was authored: in a few hundred crore private interiors that have signed their sovereignty away without noticing, each one certain it is merely living a normal life. A system is never more than the condensed tendencies of the individuals who compose it; there is no economy or market or civilisation apart from the wanting of ordinary people. That is the culprit no seismograph will record. It is the ego, the false sense of "I" that treats the earth as fuel for its own restlessness, that calls the burning progress, and that, when the fuel has done its work and the water is in the street, calls the flood an act of God.

And the consequence does not end at Rasuwa. For twenty years I have been saying, to

anyone who would hear it, that beside this one question every other question is small, and the numbers have been public that whole time. Scientists now say we stand at the mouth of the sixth great extinction, and that of the five before it, three were driven by the very thing we are now manufacturing for ourselves, too much carbon dioxide in the air. What is new is not the mechanism. It is that for the first time in the history of the planet, a species is destroying its own habitat knowingly, with all the evidence laid out in front of it, the inventories drawn, the lakes numbered, the plaque set in the rock. Destruction in ignorance might be forgiven; destruction in full knowledge cannot. And the ones who did it will not be there for the reckoning. Those who emitted the most will die, comfortably, in the coming decades, and this burning debris called the planet will be left for the young to cope with. We have not only destroyed what we received from our ancestors; we have destroyed the future of our children, and we are hiding the fact from them. The range that trembled this week is the water tower of some two billion people; their drinking water and their crops come off that ice. For thousands of years the glaciers gave that water as life; they are beginning now to return it as death, because we have dealt death to them, and they do not vanish quietly but retreat with a bang. What Nepal and India heard this week was one of those bangs. There will be others. This is not one country's flood. It is a trailer held up to the whole of mankind, a rehearsal of its own near future. We may be the last generation to live what we still call a normal life; within fifty years, perhaps within twenty or thirty, the earth may show us a ruin we cannot today imagine.

And there may be less time to choose than we like to tell ourselves. Warming does not travel in a straight line that a change of heart could simply stop; it moves through feedback loops, processes that, once set going, drive themselves. The plainest is written on the mountains. White ice throws the sun's heat back into the sky, but where the ice melts, bare dark rock is left, and dark rock drinks the heat in, and that warmth melts more ice, which bares more rock, which draws down more heat, faster each year, like a ball let go on a slope. At least ten such loops are already turning. Even if every one of us mended our ways this morning, the planet would go on warming for a long time yet, and it is honest to say we may already be past the point of return. That is a reason neither for hope nor for despair, since both are ways of looking away. It is a reason to stop waiting for a cleverer technology or a firmer treaty to arrive and save us. And it is a reason that does not depend on the outcome. A man who sees his own wanting clearly does not stop consuming blindly because the planet can still be saved; he stops because he has seen. Whether the ice can be kept is not in his hands. Whether he goes on burning without knowing why is.

So the answer, too, is not outside but within, because that is where the crisis began. The climate is already exploding, and the ice already loosened will melt for a long while yet, whatever is resolved in any capital; no scheme and no summit has ever reached the one who wants. Until a human being knows himself, he will go on devouring the earth, and we have very nearly devoured it. Green technologies are necessary and policies are necessary, but they are not sufficient, and alone they will fail. You cannot cure a disease by treating it where it is not; work on the symptom alone and the symptom returns, because the sickness was never in the symptom. The sickness is in the wanting, and the wanting is not on any mountain. The only measure equal to the cause is a mass education of the self. Self-knowledge is the last

environmentalism, and in truth the only one, for a person who has seen what he is not has seen through his wanting as well; he learns what no purchase will ever give him, and then he no longer consumes blindly, and the emissions fall of their own accord. Ask what a sane relationship with the earth would look like, and the honest reply is that it cannot be drawn up in advance. There can be no definition. The moment we premeditate it, we kill it. All that can be done is to hold up a light, and then leave the rest to the person. Seeing, by itself, changes nothing; it is only the point at which change first becomes possible, and it is the one labour no one can perform in another's place. The way out is the way in.

Can we reconsider the way we live? Or we can let the Himalayas do it for us.

That flood was not a piece of  [news](#). It was a mirror. Nature is holding it up to us again and again, and breaking the mirror will not change the face in it. Our pilgrim was carrying that mirror in his pocket when the water took him, in a photograph of himself standing on the ice, as any of us would have taken; so is every one of us. The only question left is whether we still have the courage, and the honesty, to look, and to see that the face is our own.

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

 0 Likes  0 Dislikes  Bookmark  0 Comments

Leave a Comment

Share your thoughts...

Post Comment

Related News

Indian cities are becoming unliveable

Aug 27

Bengal's inclusive and plural identity

Aug 27

Air turbulence more frequent and violent in...

Aug 26

AI: A doomsday scenario lurking in the...

Aug 26

The Naxal war is over.
The battle of ideas is...

Aug 26

Commercialisation is
killing middle-class...

Aug 25

THE PIONEER

Trusted journalism • Breaking news • Top stories

SECTIONS

- INDIA
- BUSINESS
- WORLD
- SPORT
- TECH
- ENTERTAINMENT
- TRENDING
- IMPACT
- PAGE1
- LAW & JUSTICE
- AGENDA

CATEGORIES

- OPINION
- DELHI
- ANALYSIS

MORE

- TRENDING
- EXOTICA
- PRIVACY POLICY
- TERMS & CONDITIONS

SERVICES

- SUBSCRIPTION
- ADVERTISE
- CONTACT