The October 2025 Nepal-Darjeeling Floods: A Familiar Vocabulary of Loss and Precarity

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Torrential rain in Nepal's eastern district of Ilam and India's north-eastern district of Darjeeling unleashed a slew of landslides on the 6th of October 2025. A total of 110 landslides were triggered, claiming 70 lives across the region, leaving many others injured, homeless or stranded, and devastating vast swathes of public infrastructure and private property.

A concentrated downpour started on the 3rd of October, exceeded the 'exceptionally heavy rainfall' warning issued by the Indian Meteorology Department in just 12 hours. This led to flash floods that gushed through the steep mountainous slopes, populated valleys, roads, bridges, tourist areas and tea gardens, that line up the Eastern Himalayan slopes of Nepal and Darjeeling. Aside from the personal and property damage, the floods caused tremendous ecological destruction, washing away a large quantity of fertile topsoil, uprooting countless trees and devastating habitats of several plants and animals in an otherwise biodiversity-rich landscape. The October 2025 floods raise several questions for the human-nature relationship, the ever-increasing precarity of fragile landscapes and the preparedness for natural disasters that continue to unleash their fury ever so often.

Damaged Dudhia Bridge near Mirik

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The town of Mirik in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India was worst hit, with 28 dead in Mirik alone. The Dudhia Iron Bridge, which connects Mirik to Siliguri across the Balasun River, collapsed due to the flood. The Balasun River is a tributary of the Teesta River and is part of the Teesta River Basin. The Teesta is a major tributary of the Bramhaputra River (Jamuna in Bangladesh), which it meets in Bangladesh. I was scheduled to visit Mirik with a colleague in early October, but had to replan our trip, now setting base somewhere else in North Bengal. As I write this from Sonada, a town near Mirik, road transport to Mirik remains

Flood-damaged house in Mirik

Waste dumped on a hillslope in Mirik

suspended via the Dudhia bridge, which is undergoing repairs. Simultaneously, the construction of a new bridge a short distance away on the Balasun River is underway. Many locals, including Darjeeling's District Magistrate, Preeti Goyal, believe that the new bridge will meet the same fate as the Dudhia bridge, as the planning around it and materials used may not withstand another disaster.

My colleague and I eventually reached Mirik to conduct field research on waste management and water contamination. We tried to gain insights on our core subject area by visiting the Block Development Office, landfills - that were either designated as 'landfills' in government records or undesignated dumping areas which could be any area where people threw their waste as a matter of practice, and areas where waste ought to be segregated, but wasn't.

One gentleman, Mr Suraj Tamang, showed us his backyard, which had grown into an undesignated landfill over several years. He now works for an organisation that specialises in waste management (TIEEDI) and works in setting up and running segregation and processing units in Takdah and Rishap. He hopes to replicate this in his hometown, Mirik, if nothing else, to at least clean his own backyard someday. While we toured the area, the flood damage was unmissable, and the issue of waste seemed unimportant compared to the bigger problems brought by the October floods.

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While the Eastern Himalayan Region has been notorious for natural disasters, the backdrop in which they occur has changed drastically over the past few decades. The population has steadily increased, alongside an increase in tourists who visit the region every year. The growth of the tourism industry, along with a rising middle class, has led to several development projects, dams, bridges, highways, hotels and housing projects, and an increase in the consumption of goods and services supplied from long distances. Drastic changes in land use, including the filling up of (jhoras) streams, changed paths for hydrological flows, and deforestation for the purpose of infrastructure development, have added to the precarity of the landscape. Furthermore, the impact of climate change has been distinctly felt through glacial melting and changing microclimates.

Meeting with Suraj Tamang discussing waste, water and floods in the Mirik region

Speaking to locals in Mirik and neighbouring areas within the Jorebungalow Sukhiapokhri subdivision of Darjeeling district, there is a palpable sense of what climate change means for the local environment here, and how the next disaster could wipe out yet another section of the hills. Multi-generational households have lived through the changes described above, and speak ambivalently about the impacts of population influx, the resultant rise in development that has increased job opportunities and a standard of living for a few, but also led to the loss of tranquillity that used to characterise the hills. With the rise in tourists, there has been increased pressure on local resources, with many locals describing how local streams have been diverted towards hotels and homestay lodges, while forest slopes have become unauthorised landfills, with untreated solid and sanitary waste dumped there. Many elderly members of the community here are keenly aware of how natural disasters foretell a future of harsher realities and lessons not learnt.

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The administration of this area is rather fragmented, which is a major impediment in preparing for the next disaster. On the one hand, the international border between Nepal, India and Bhutan split the River Basin into three separate national sections. In Nepal, the October floods hit the hilly Ilam district, but impacts were severely felt in downhill Rautahat, Bara and Parsa districts for several days following the 6th of October.

These districts lie on the Terai flat plain in the mid-south of Nepal where there is little to no elevation to redirect floodwater.

With respect to Bhutan, the October rains did not directly impact the country. However, Bhutan alerted the West Bengal government after its Tala Hydropower Dam on the Wangchu River (Raidak in India, another tributary of the Bramhaputra River, just as the Teesta) suffered a malfunction on the 5th of October and began to overflow. This exacerbated the situation in North Bengal which was already reeling with heavy rainfall and floods by this time.

In India, the Teesta River Basin spreads over 2 states – Sikkim and West Bengal. In West Bengal, the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts are administered simultaneously by the state government as well as the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), while Sikkim is administered by its own state administrative architecture. The preparation and management of floods falls on all these varied entities, including the National and State Disaster Management Authorities, which ought to be well-equipped and resourced to prepare for a wide range of calamities.

What followed the floods was an immediate rescue and repair operation carried out the military forces of Nepal and India. Their efforts have been lauded by many local people who see the army as the only reliable and efficient disaster-response institution. In terms of long-term disaster management, a slurry of blame-games followed the October tragedy: between state and central governments, between the West Bengal and Bhutanese governments, and between the West Bengal state government and Gorkha authorities, each blaming the other for a lack of preparation, timely warning and evacuation, and effective response.

As I write this, 2 weeks after the event, there is a gloomy sense that business is continuing as usual despite vivid knowledge and experience of future disasters. Members within the state administration blame the central disaster management authority, and the Gorkha Territorial Administration, lacking much-needed professionalism, and sense of agency in handling such devastation. Municipalities of Darjeeling and gram panchayats in the Sukhiapokhri subdivision, lack the funds, technology and resources to effectively deal with the next disaster.

Our research on waste management revealed how increased consumerism and tourism in Mirik have impacted the water availability and quality in the region. Towns higher up than Mirik, like Darjeeling, Sonada and Kurseong used to be water-sufficient approximately a decade ago, but now water must be pumped up from the low-lying Balasun River every now and then when the mountain streams/jhoras cannot meet the demand.

A lot of untreated waste finds its way into the Balasun from Mirik and other upstream areas. Drastic changes in this ecologically fragile region have created a mosaic of vulnerabilities, interlinked problems and consequences that are very hard to unravel.

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The October floods tell a story of growing loss and precarity. Afterall, multi-scalar impacts of climate change are often manifested through natural disasters. On this basis, no disaster is ever truly 'natural' – either in its cause or in its effect. In terms of effect, the outcome of any 'natural' disaster is a result of several decisions around deforestation, development, building technology, and other types of changes in land use.

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Restoration work near Teesta Bazaar

In his The Hungry Tide, author Amitav Ghosh describes the Sundarbans as a “liquid landscape”, where land and water negotiate their boundaries and spaces daily. In several of his other works, Ghosh gives voice to the ‘non-human’ – the tides, the mangroves, the nutmeg and varied species amongst which humans are only one, who exist in cohabitation with non-human entities. Pallab Das’s post-Amphan reading of The Hungry Tide showed how literary works such as Ghosh’s fiction and non-fiction writings on climate change can become prophetic in revealing how reckless development, ecological neglect, and social marginality intertwine to create disasters and bear an excessive brunt therefrom. The Sundarbans lie at the southern tip of Bengal, while the mighty Himalayas lie at the northern tip. Both these landscapes share a similar vocabulary of loss and precarity. Just like collapsing embankments in the Sunderbans, the post-landslide crumbling of mountainous roads and bridges is both a literal and symbolic breach of ecological wisdom and policy foresight. They both force a sense of humility before the terrain and the acceptance that the hills, much like the Sunderbans tides, are not silent witnesses or inert backdrops to human drama. They are making an urgent plea to humans to relearn coexistence, a way of ‘being with’ rather than ‘being above’ these landscapes.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

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