



## Science Reporter

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## Nature's Warning!

The recent widespread devastation unleashed by cloudbursts and sudden torrential rains in the hills of Uttarakhand was tragic. Thousands lost their lives, villages were washed away, buildings crashed into rivers, those who survived lost their livelihoods. Many are still missing and the state of Uttarakhand is busy counting its losses.

Well, natural phenomena unleash disasters all the time. But natural disasters transform into national calamities only because of human action and inaction. Gross commercialisation, burgeoning buildings and structures, and uncontrolled tourism have robbed the hills of their beauty and tranquil calm. Mindless and unplanned development, rampant mining, blasting of hills to make way for roads, uprooting of trees, change in the soil structure, unabated expansion of hydro-power projects, and an overall insensitive attitude towards the highly ecologically sensitive region has led to widespread ecological degradation of the hills. This, in turn, has severely compromised the carrying capacity of the hills, robbing them of their natural strength and resilience.

With thousands of trees uprooted to make way for buildings and structures on hill slopes, the soil structure on the slopes has undergone a change and is unable to hold water. The fragile Himalayas are home to more than 200 glacial lakes formed by glacial melt that can turn dangerous when they breach their walls leading to what is known as a glacial lake outburst flood. When rampaging flood waters come rushing down, there is nothing to hold them back, and the mushrooming building structures merely become weapons in the hands of the racing flood waters to unleash more damage. Rivers in the hills are also under tremendous pressure because they have had their beds filled up with silt and construction material and sewage. When they change course, destruction is bound to happen, especially in places where human intervention has exceeded beyond a point.

This is what happened in the third week of June 2013, and will again happen if those who matter in managing the affairs of the hills continue to look the other way while the hills of the young Himalayas are crushed under the weight of human greed. There is definitely need for early warning systems to warn of impending disasters. There is also need for emergency plans to evacuate people under such circumstances. But why not a stitch in time?

There is a dire need for some sense and sensitivity to prevail when it comes to drawing development plans for hilly regions with fragile ecologies. There is a need for sensitizing the political and the bureaucratic class that development at any cost will one day extract a huge cost, and that phenomena like global warming and extreme weather are no more in the realm of fiction. The recent devastation should serve as a good case study to communicate to policy makers and people at large the dangers of exploiting the hills' meager resources beyond a point.

Nature gives its own warnings. Heed them and only then will the drama of death and misery not play out every time there is a natural disaster.

Hasan Jawaid Khan



Printed and published by Deeksha Bist on behalf of the National Institute of Science Communication And Information Resources (NISCAIR), CSIR, Dr K S Krishnan Marg, New Delhi-110 012 and printed at Thomson Press (India) Ltd., Faridabad.

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**Subscription:** Inland: 1 yr: ₹ 300/-; 2 yrs: ₹ 570/-; 3 yrs: ₹ 810/- Foreign: 1 yr (Air Mail): US \$ 90 (Annual)

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