

How landslides threaten Darjeeling, and why this has national security implications for India

Unsustainable development, climate change, and lack of institutional will to remedy matters are pushing Darjeeling to a precipice. This harms the region, as well as India's economic and national security interests.

Written by Mahendra P. Lama

New Delhi | Updated: October 6, 2025 12:24 PM IST

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Rescue operations underway after a bridge collapsed in a landslide-hit area following heavy rainfall in Darjeeling, on Sunday (NDRF via PTI)

The Queen of Hills has once again been battered and devastated by heavy rain, which [took several human lives](#) and caused massive destruction. The rain that started on the night of

October 3 exceeded the ‘exceptionally heavy rainfall’ warning by the Indian Meteorology Department issued just 12 hours before. This concentrated downpour of six hours destroyed the Dudhia bridge over Balason river which links Siliguri to the tourist town Mirik, and disrupted all the national and state highways.

Long history, rapid change

Darjeeling, known for its beauty and salubrious climate, has been a victim of several natural disasters in the past. Available records show that massive landslides occurred in 1899, 1934, 1950, 1968, 1975, 1980, 1991 and more recently in 2011 and 2015. The year 1968 saw devastating floods, also in October, killing over a thousand people.

The State of Environment Report, 1991, published by the non-profit Centre for Science and Environment, stated that during 1902-1978, there were nine cloud burst occurrences in the Teesta Valley.



Rescue operation underway after landslides hit the area following heavy rainfall, in Darjeeling, Sunday, Oct. 5, 2025. (NDRF via PTI Photo)

Landslides in these hills have been vividly captured by public intellectuals and professionals in their memories. The 1950 landslides were captured by Leila Seth, former Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh, in her book *On Balance* (2003). Seth once lived in the Railway Estate in Craigmont Hills in Darjeeling. She wrote, "...at 7.30 they heard an enormous, ear bursting, crumbling sound and rushed out. Before their very eyes, the whole building, with all their loved possessions inside, had caved in like a house of cards."

While natural disasters do have a long history in the region, the backdrop in which they play out has changed drastically and structurally over the years.

Firstly, the population in the hills has increased, mainly because of influx from the plains and neighbouring countries. The land-and-property-buying spree recorded metamorphic changes in the last three decades.

Secondly, the impact of climate change has been quite distinctly visible in the changing rainfall pattern. The rainfall that remained fairly spread over from May and September has now become more intense and incessant, lasting for just a few hours over a few days. What is locally known as '*mushaldhare varsha*' (intense rainfall) has replaced the traditional steady and smooth '*sawnaay jhari*' (monsoon shower).

Thirdly, the rivers and *jhoras* (streams) have shown unprecedented course changes, thereby generating new paths for hydrological flows and intrusions into human habitations and livelihoods.

Fourthly, heavy, unsuitable and unsustainable development projects, like hydro power, railways, hotels and other installations, have been a massive onslaught on the limited carrying capacity of these hills.

And finally, the flooding of river beds, streams-*jhora* sidelines and other natural corridors with unplanned and unauthorised settlements have triggered arterial clogging.

A tragedy foretold

There are scores of studies and institutions that keep warning the governments and the people about impending dangers.

In the Landslide Atlas of India 2023 published by Indian Space Research Organisation ([ISRO](#)), Darjeeling was ranked 35th as the most exposed area among 147 districts.

Several local NGOs, including Save the Hills led by Col Praful Rao of Kalimpong, have been highlighting these threats on social media and also through substantive debates and awareness campaigns.

The [Glacial Lake Outburst Flood \(GLOF\) in Sikkim](#) in October 2023, triggered by the Lhonak lake breach, was very emphatically warned about in the Sikkim Human Development Report 2001. This GLOF not only claimed many human lives, it swept away the 1200-mw Chungthang Hydro power project, destroyed several public and military installations, and caused an estimated damage of over Rs 25,000 crore, almost 60 per cent of the GDP of Sikkim of 2022-23.

The tail-end destructions it caused in the lower riparian of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in West Bengal and further down in Bangladesh remain largely unaccounted for.

This shows that the very nature of disaster, its cause, and scale, leading to disproportionate destruction, has undergone a literal transformation.

The action needed

However, seriously lacking is the required urgency in Central and state governments in both forewarning the hill communities and also in managing the aftermath of damages.

Besides the relatively weaker institution of the District Collector, there is no professional agency to handle such devastation. The local administrative institutions, like the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and the municipalities and panchayats, have neither the knowledge and skills to handle such disasters, nor the funds, techniques, technology and manpower to effectively deal with these dangerous trends.

The municipalities in the hills, set up in the 1860s, once remained an example of sound governance to other towns and cities in India. Today, they do not even have a simple solid waste management unit. This itself has become a major disaster-causing factor.

The most blatant example of this institutional failure is the state of damage in Darjeeling and Kalimpong that remains unattended after the GLOF. For instance, in the Teesta Bazar area, river water continues to crisscross the highways, blocking the flow of people, goods and services almost every week.

National security ramifications

Climate change-triggered impacts have dangerous portents and very deleterious national security ramifications in Darjeeling and surrounding areas.

Many of Darjeeling's products have played a role in India's globalisation journey — its famous tea; cultivation of anti-malarial drugs like quinine; Mt Kanchenjunga-led natural beauty and tourism; and educational institutions. All these historically crucial bastions of India's foreign exchange earnings have been doubly affected and eroded by climate change.

What the hill folks today are crying for are national institutions, including on climate change studies and disaster management, that would cater to the entire Himalayan regions of India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and the Tibet region. The long-standing plea made by organisations like Darjeeling Dooars United Development Foundation, to convert the historic Forest Rangers College in Kurseong as the first climate change studies and management centre in the Eastern Himalayas, remain unaddressed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in [Delhi](#).

Given the Darjeeling district's sensitive geopolitical location at the chicken's neck, its politico-development status has to be now determined exclusively from the national security perspective. It has to be a national interest project in India's Act East Policy context.

Prof Lama, former Member of National Security Advisory Board , Govt of India, prepared the 1st Plan of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1989.

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