What happens if the Himalayas die

India must face up to the fact that the Himalayas are on their deathbed and understand what happens if those mountains die

The useful question is no longer how to save the Himalayas. It is how to govern the consequences of not saving them (Nepal Army/Handout via REUTERS)

Hindol Sengupta Sep 18, 2026

On August 26, 2026, roughly two square kilometres of rock wall and glacier ice detached from the high slopes above the Nepal-China border and fell some 1,400 metres, from about 5,150 metres to a valley floor at 3,750 metres, releasing so much energy that seismometers first registered it as an earthquake. The combined toll across both countries now stands at 1,446 dead and at least 6,669 missing.

The scientists who examined it treated it as a symptom: the World Weather Attribution group concluded that the disaster was not caused by any single extreme weather event but was a compound crisis shaped by long-term warming, glacier retreat, permafrost thaw and geological instability, with relentless warming lifting the altitude of the freezing threshold and exposing

ice and permafrost deep in the bedrock to longer periods of thawing temperatures.

That distinction — event versus condition — is the whole argument. Consider the numbers that rarely travel beyond the reports in which they appear.

Snow cover across the Hindu Kush Himalaya fell to 27.8 per cent below the long-term average in 2026, breaking the previous year's record low and marking the fourth consecutive year of below-normal snow persistence. Ten of the 12 major river basins are now below normal; the Mekong, Tarim and Tibetan Plateau recorded their lowest levels in 24 years of monitoring. Between 2003 and 2026, 14 winters were below normal — a recurrent pattern of rising frequency and intensity. The rarely reported part is the compounding: four consecutive deficit years have prevented groundwater and soil moisture from adequately replenishing, so every dry spell now lands harder. This is not a bad season. It is a reservoir being drawn down with no refill cycle.

Two ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development) reports released in March 2026 found HKH glaciers losing mass at double the rate since 2000, with total losses of up to 27 metres of ice thickness since 1975, and 12 per cent of glacier area and 9 per cent of estimated ice reserves gone between 1990 and 2020. Across 50 years of field observation, roughly 89 per cent of recorded years show negative mass balance. Not a trend with noise — a near-monotonic decline.

The 50-year synthesis rests on data from 38 monitored glaciers, of which only seven meet the benchmark standards of the World Glacier Monitoring Service. A range holding tens of thousands of glaciers, feeding a quarter of humanity, is being assessed on the basis of a handful of instrumented sites. Unlike the Alps or the Rockies, the region simply lacks a long historical record of field measurement. Uncertainty is not comfort here; it cuts both ways, and it means policy is being written against a picture we cannot fully see.

Some 100 million people in the HKH depend on springs for drinking, cooking, sanitation and minor irrigation, and a 2018 NITI Aayog report found nearly half

of the estimated three million springs in the Indian Himalayan region dry or drying. In Almora, more than 83 per cent had dried up. Spring failure is invisible: no footage, no body count, just villages quietly becoming unviable.

More than 600 large dams have been built or are planned in the seismically active Himalayas, most probably not designed for the worst earthquakes the region can produce; of 273 projects analysed across India, Nepal and Bhutan, about a quarter are likely to face severe damage from quake-triggered landslides. As of November 2022, the Himalayan states had 81 large hydropower projects operating, 26 under construction and 320 more in the pipeline. ISRO's Landslide Atlas maps roughly 80,000 landslides across India for 1998–2022. In Joshimath, more than 800 buildings developed subsidence cracks before construction was halted in January 2023.

Critically, 'saving' the Himalayas is probably the wrong verb.

First, much of the loss is already committed. Modelling published in *Nature Climate Change* in May 2025 found that a 3°C peak-and-decline pathway produces 11 per cent more global glacier mass loss by 2500 than holding to 1.5°C without overshoot — irreversible consequences for glacier mass and runoff over centuries. The same work identifies a phenomenon it calls 'trough water': in basins where glaciers regrow after peak warming, runoff falls further than if the glaciers had simply stabilised, for decades to centuries. Even the recovery scenario contains a water crisis.

Second, the mountains warm faster than the planet. Global warming of 1.5°C is expected to mean roughly 2°C in the mountains, affecting half the region's glaciers. At 1.5-2°C, HKH glaciers lose 30-50 per cent of their volume by 2100; at 3°C, the trajectory that the world's current policies roughly describe, the Eastern Himalayas lose up to 75 per cent. There is no politically plausible emissions path on which the ice stays.

Third, the non-climate drivers are accelerating in the opposite direction from the science. Roads, tunnels, dams and pilgrimage infrastructure are expanding precisely where permafrost is thawing and slopes are losing their frozen

binding. The WWA authors were blunt about where this leads: Walter Immerzeel described the region as undergoing fundamental, irreversible shifts. Their report title says the rest — geohazard cascades beyond adaptation limits.

The Karakoram behaves anomalously, and sub-regional variation is real even as the overall trajectory points to sustained shrinkage. And the thinness of the observational record means every projection carries wide error bars.

But the strategic conclusion survives both. The useful question is no longer how to save the Himalayas. It is how to govern the consequences of not saving them: mapping and evacuating dangerous glacial lakes, halting construction in cascade-prone valleys, treating spring revival as national water infrastructure, building the dense monitoring network the region has never had, and planning Indian, Nepali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi water policy for a post-glacial century. That is triage, not salvation.

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