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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's Pre-Monsoon Becomes Bipolar — Heat in the West, Floods in the East, Climate in the Middle

 **DOWN TO EARTH**2 May 2026 · **GS3** **GS1**

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 Down to Earth

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

On May 2, 2026, India's pre-monsoon weather painted a portrait of climate-changed India. Rajasthan's western districts, Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi-NCR are in the grip of a sustained heatwave with temperatures of 44-48°C through May 5. Simultaneously, IMD has issued heavy rainfall warnings for the entire North-East — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura — with isolated very heavy rainfall over Assam and Meghalaya during May 2-3.

This bipolar pattern — extreme heat in the northwest, extreme rain in the northeast, simultaneously, in the same week — is not new in absolute terms. India's climate has always shown regional variation. What is new is the **intensity at both extremes** and the **frequency** with which compound events of this magnitude occur. The State of India's Environment 2026 documented that India experienced extreme weather events on **331 of 334 days in 2025**. Such statistics translate into a different lived reality of seasons: pre-monsoon is no longer a transitional period. It is a season of compound weather extremes.

WHAT CLIMATE CHANGE HAS DONE TO INDIAN PRE-MONSOON

The traditional Indian pre-monsoon (March-May) had two distinct elements: rising temperatures across much of the country and localized convective storms in the northeast (Norwesters/Kalbaisakhi) and peninsular India (mango showers). These were predictable and seasonally normal.

Climate change has reorganised this pattern in three measurable ways:

1. Higher peak temperatures. Maximum temperatures in pre-monsoon 2025 broke records in multiple states. Phalodi (Rajasthan) crossed 50°C. Delhi crossed 49°C in 2024. The temperature ceilings — which used to cap around 45°C in extreme conditions — are migrating upward.

2. Earlier and longer heatwaves. Heatwaves now begin in March in some regions and extend into June. The pre-monsoon “heatwave window” has widened from approximately 30-40 days historically to 60-75 days now. This gives heat-related stresses (mortality, water scarcity, crop damage) more time to accumulate.

3. More intense Norwesters. The northeastern thunderstorms are showing higher rainfall intensity in shorter time periods. This produces more flash flooding, more landslide triggering, more agricultural damage. Lightning frequency is rising — India’s annual lightning fatality rate of 2,500-3,000 deaths is partly a consequence.

The bipolar pattern visible on May 2, 2026 is, increasingly, the normal pre-monsoon weather rather than an unusual coincidence.

THE COMPOUND EVENT PROBLEM

Climate scientists distinguish between **independent extreme events** (heatwave OR cyclone OR flood) and **compound extreme events** (heatwave AND prolonged drought; cyclone AND storm surge AND flood). India’s pre-monsoon is showing increasing compound events:

- Heatwave + lightning casualty cluster
- Drought + sudden thunderstorm + flash flooding
- Heat-driven crop failure + immediate-followup hailstorm
- Coastal heat + concurrent inland flooding
- Glacial lake outburst (driven by accelerated heat-induced melt) + downstream flash flood

Compound events are harder to forecast, harder to manage, and produce non-linear damage. The institutional capacity to respond to any single extreme can be overwhelmed when two or more occur simultaneously or in rapid succession.

WHAT INDIA’S DISASTER FRAMEWORK LACKS

India’s *Disaster Management Act, 2005* was framed in pre-climate-emergency thinking. Disasters were treated as discrete events. The architectural assumption was that NDMA-SDMA-DDMA would coordinate response to a specific hazard.

Climate change scrambles this. A heatwave that begins in March, drives prolonged power demand stress, weakens the elderly population, and is followed by a flash flood in May creates cumulative **vulnerability** that single-hazard frameworks cannot capture.

India needs:

- 1. Climate adaptation provisions in DM Act.** Explicit recognition of climate-driven hazards as a category requiring separate planning.
- 2. Multi-hazard early warning integration.** IMD heat forecasts, INCOIS tsunami warnings, GLOF monitoring, lightning prediction, and cyclone tracking integrated into a single dashboard for state and district administrators.
- 3. Compound event preparedness.** State Disaster Plans should explicitly address concurrent multi-hazard scenarios — not just “what if a cyclone hits” but “what if a cyclone hits during a heatwave.”
- 4. Climate-adapted infrastructure standards.** Roads, buildings, power lines, water systems should be specified for the projected climate of 2050, not the historical climate of 2000.
- 5. Long-term financing.** The 16th Finance Commission (2026-2031) cycle is the next opportunity to redesign disaster funding around climate adaptation rather than only emergency response.

WHAT CELL BROADCAST CANNOT DO

The May 2 launch of India’s nationwide Cell Broadcast emergency alert system (SACHET / C-DOT / CAP-based) is technologically impressive. It will deliver alerts faster, to more people, in more languages, in more time-critical situations. This is genuinely useful for tsunamis, earthquakes, lightning, gas leaks, and chemical hazards.

But Cell Broadcast cannot solve the compound event problem. Cell Broadcast cannot make agriculture climate-resilient. Cell Broadcast cannot extend HAP coverage to all 28 states. Cell Broadcast cannot reduce India’s emissions to slow the underlying climate driver. Cell Broadcast is the alerting layer; the response layer requires sustained political and financial investment that is harder to deliver but more essential.

THE LARGER ADJUSTMENT

India’s pre-monsoon is no longer a benign transitional season. It is a season of compound weather extremes that test institutional capacity, infrastructure resilience, and political will. The May 2 launch of CB technology is welcome. The institutional adjustments needed to match the changing climate are still pending.

The 1960 Bombay Reorganisation Act (commemorated yesterday, May 1) was India’s response to the political reality of linguistic identity. The 2005 Disaster Management Act was India’s response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The next legislative framework — for climate adaptation — has not yet been assembled. May 2026, with its bipolar pre-monsoon, suggests that conversation is overdue.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Environment	Climate change adaptation; compound extreme events; SOE 2026
GS3 — Disaster Management	DM Act 2005 limitations; multi-hazard early warning; HAPs
GS1 — Geography	Norwesters; pre-monsoon climate; bipolar weather patterns

Mains Keywords: Compound extreme events, climate adaptation, DM Act 2005, Heat Action Plans, Norwesters, Kalbaisakhi, SOE 2026, multi-hazard early warning, GLOF, climate-resilient infrastructure

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Heatwave region (May 2026)	West Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi-NCR
Heatwave temperatures	44-48°C
NE rainfall warning	May 2-4, 2026
2025 extreme weather days	331 of 334 (SOE 2026)
2025 extreme weather deaths	4,419
Phalodi (Rajasthan) record	Crossed 50°C in 2025
Cell Broadcast launch	May 2, 2026 (HM Amit Shah; Comm. Min Jyotiraditya Scindia)
16th Finance Commission cycle	2026-2031

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