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## EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# The Mountains Are Warning Us: Shyam Saran on Himalayan Fragility

 INDIAN EXPRESS

28 August 2026

ENVIRONMENT

IR

GEOGRAPHY

GS1

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# The Mountains Are Warning Us: Shyam Saran on Himalayan Fragility

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GS1

GS2

GS3



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Every major Himalayan river that reaches India begins outside it. India is downstream of China on the Brahmaputra and the Sutlej, and downstream of Nepal on the Gandak and Koshi. How much of India's water security is actually inside India's control?"*

Source: [Original editorial](#)

The Indian Express

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

## THE LIFT LINE

A former Foreign Secretary who has walked these mountains for forty years says the eternal is becoming episodic. That is not a metaphor. It is a description of what happens when a stable seasonal cycle turns into a series of discrete catastrophes.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Written by a former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to Nepal, this piece does something few environment columns manage: it treats a Himalayan disaster as **simultaneously an ecological, a diplomatic and a development problem**. That triple framing is exactly what a high-scoring Mains answer needs, and it spans GS1, GS2 and GS3 in a single case.

**GS Paper 1:** Salient features of the world's physical geography; important geophysical phenomena. **GS**

**Paper 2:** India and its neighbourhood relations; bilateral and regional groupings involving India. **GS Paper**

**3:** Conservation and environmental degradation; disaster and disaster management.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

### The event

On **26 August 2026**, a **massive avalanche** occurred about **20 kilometres east of the Rasuwagadhi border crossing**, which connects **Nepal's Rasuwa district with Gyirong county** on the Tibetan side. It sent surging water and sheets of mud down the **Lhende river**, sweeping away villages, settlements and large numbers of people downstream.

The author notes the avalanche **may have been triggered by a magnitude 4.4 earthquake** recorded in the area minutes earlier, though other accounts do not support the seismic trigger.

The floods spread south from **Rasuwa into Dhading, Gorkha and Nuwakot districts**. **Chinese media reported similar loss of life and property across the border**.

### The author's longer argument

Shyam Saran writes as a frequent visitor to the Himalaya of India, Nepal and Bhutan over four decades. His claim is not about a single flood. It is that he has watched **relentless spoliation of a majestic but fragile mountain zone**, in which accelerated melting from global warming has been compounded by **indiscriminate ecological degradation**, and that persistent and alarming warning signs have been met with continued extraction and construction.

## THE ANALYSIS

### On the terminology, be careful

The author describes the event as a **glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF)** and explains the mechanism accordingly: a mountain river blocked upstream by a portion of a glacier breaking away or by an avalanche, forming a lake, whose loose banks then burst under pressure.

That description of the mechanism is accurate for what appears to have happened. Whether the label **GLOF** is the right one is contested, and the distinction is examinable.

| TERM                                                | REQUIRES                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>GLOF</b> in the strict sense                     | A <b>pre-existing glacial lake</b> , usually moraine-dammed, that fails |
| <b>Landslide or avalanche-dammed outburst flood</b> | A <b>newly created</b> impoundment from debris, which then breaches     |

Assessments by regional scientific bodies have characterised this event as an **ice-rock avalanche** into the Lhunde drainage rather than the failure of an established glacial lake. The Hindu's own editorial the same day described it as a glacier collapse or ice-rock avalanche, **possibly followed by a temporary river blockage and its sudden failure**, which is the second category.

**Why this matters beyond pedantry:** a pre-existing lake can be inventoried, monitored and in some cases artificially drained. A blockage that forms and fails within hours cannot. The two hazards call for entirely different preparedness investments, and using the terms interchangeably conceals that.

## The transboundary structure of the problem

This is the piece's most valuable contribution, and it is a point about **institutions rather than about ice**.

The hazard originated in **Tibet**. It killed people in **Nepal**. Among the missing were **hundreds of Indian pilgrims** on the Kailash Mansarovar route. The river carrying the flood, the Trishuli, joins the Narayani and enters India as the **Gandak**.

So a single physical event crossed three jurisdictions. **No institution exists that spans all three for the purpose of warning.**

| RIVER SYSTEM                         | ORIGINATES             | FLOWS THROUGH    | REACHES      |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| <b>Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo)</b> | <b>China</b>           | Arunachal, Assam | Bangladesh   |
| <b>Sutlej</b>                        | <b>China</b>           | Himachal, Punjab | Indus system |
| <b>Gandak (Narayani, Trishuli)</b>   | <b>China and Nepal</b> | Bihar            | Ganga        |
| <b>Koshi</b>                         | <b>China and Nepal</b> | Bihar            | Ganga        |

India is the **downstream** party on every one of these. That single fact organises much of India's Himalayan water diplomacy, and it is why real-time upstream data is a strategic interest rather than a technical courtesy.

## What exists, and what does not

India has a **Memorandum of Understanding with China on the provision of hydrological information** on the **Brahmaputra** and the **Sutlej** during the flood season. These are periodically renewed, have lapsed during periods of tension, and cover **water level and discharge data during a defined season**, not glacier or slope instability, and not year-round.

With **Nepal**, cooperation runs through long-standing bilateral instruments, principally the **Koshi Agreement (1954)**, the **Gandak Agreement (1959)** and the **Mahakali Treaty (1996)**, and a **Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood Management**. These are built around **irrigation, power and embankments**, which is to say around **water as a resource**, not around **water as a sudden hazard**.

**Nothing covers the mechanism that actually killed people here:** ice and rock instability in high-altitude terrain across a closed international border, on a timescale of hours.

## On the development pattern

The author's charge of "human greed and cupidity" is strong language, but the underlying point is structural rather than moral. Himalayan valleys are the **only flat land in a vertical landscape**. Roads, settlements, hotels, pilgrimage infrastructure and hydropower all concentrate in exactly the corridors that also serve as the runout paths for debris flows. That is not carelessness; it is topography imposing a choice.

Which is precisely why the decision has to be made **deliberately, with the hazard priced in**, rather than by default.

## DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

### PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

26 August 2026: avalanche about 20 km east of Rasuwagadhi, down the Lhunde river; flood spread from Rasuwa into Dhading, Gorkha and Nuwakot.

Rasuwigadhi connects Nepal's Rasuwa district with Gyirong county, Tibet. It is a major India-Nepal-China trade and pilgrimage route.

The author reports a possible trigger of a magnitude 4.4 earthquake minutes earlier; other assessments do not support a seismic trigger.

Shyam Saran is a former Foreign Secretary of India and a former Ambassador to Nepal; he also served as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Climate Change.

The Trishuli joins the Narayani, which enters India as the Gandak and joins the Ganga near Patna.

India-China MoUs on hydrological data cover the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) and the Sutlej (Langqen Zangbo), during the flood season.

India-Nepal treaties: Koshi Agreement 1954, Gandak Agreement 1959, Mahakali Treaty 1996.

ICIMOD, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, is headquartered in Kathmandu; its eight regional member countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan.

The Hindu Kush Himalaya is often called the Third Pole and the Water Tower of Asia; ten major river systems rise there.

Nepal's Prime Minister is Balendra Shah. India's Prime Minister spoke to him on 26 August 2026 to convey condolences and offer humanitarian assistance.

GSLEP, the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Programme, covers 12 range countries across the same mountain zone.

**the Gandaki and Koshi are different basins.** *The Trishuli and the Rasuwa Bhote Koshi belong to the Gandaki system and reach India as the Gandak. The Koshi system is further east and reaches India through a separate set of tributaries. A river named “Bhote Koshi” is not necessarily in the Koshi basin, and this flood was a Gandaki basin event.*

**India has no comprehensive water treaty with China.** *What exists are MoUs on hydrological data sharing for specified rivers during specified seasons, which are renewable instruments and not a treaty regime. Do not describe them as a water-sharing agreement.*

## THE DEBATE

**For the author’s position:** the warning signs have been visible for decades to anyone who has watched the region; the frequency of catastrophic Himalayan events has risen; and the development pattern in the valleys has continued regardless of what each disaster demonstrated.

**A caution on the framing:** attributing individual events to “greed and cupidity” risks obscuring the harder truth that the valleys are the only habitable land available, and that hydropower and roads serve genuine development needs in some of the poorest districts in the subcontinent. Telling communities that their presence is the problem, without offering an alternative, is not a policy.

**The reconciliation:** the argument is strongest when it targets **siting and standards** rather than presence. Not whether to build in the Himalaya, but where within a valley, to what code, and with what assessment of the slope above.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame: **when the hazard is transboundary and the governance is national, the gap between them is where the deaths occur.** This is a general structure. It describes river pollution across state lines, air quality across the National Capital Region, locust swarms, pandemics and cross-border haze in Southeast Asia.

The diagnostic sequence: identify the **physical unit** of the problem, identify the **institutional unit** that governs it, and measure the gap. Policy proposals that do not close that gap will not work regardless of how well funded they are.

Applied here: the physical unit is the **Hindu Kush Himalaya river basin**. The institutional units are **national governments with limited seasonal data-sharing arrangements**. That gap is the finding.

For GS2 specifically: note that this is an area where India’s interest and China’s cooperation do not naturally align, since India is downstream on every shared river. Arrangements that survive periods of political tension are therefore worth more than arrangements that are generous but suspended whenever relations sour.

## WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Extend hydrological data sharing beyond flood-season water levels** to include glacier and slope instability monitoring, and make the arrangements **year-round and insulated from political fluctuation**.
- ❷ **Use ICIMOD as the technical venue**, since it already includes both India and China as regional member countries and can carry scientific cooperation where bilateral diplomacy stalls.
- ❸ **Build an India-Nepal early warning corridor** for the Gandaki and Koshi basins, with automatic gauging and a direct alert path to district administrations on both sides.
- ❹ **Apply hazard zoning to pilgrimage and tourism infrastructure**, since the casualties here included large numbers of pilgrims concentrated in a known runout corridor.
- ❺ **Distinguish hazard types in planning documents**, because a pre-existing glacial lake can be monitored and drained while an avalanche-dammed impoundment cannot, and preparedness money should follow that difference.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Connects to standing themes on **India and its neighbourhood, transboundary rivers, and climate change impacts on the Himalaya**. Practice question: *“India is the downstream riparian on every major Himalayan river system it shares. Examine the implications for water security and disaster preparedness, and evaluate existing cooperative arrangements.”*

Source: The Mountains Are Warning Us: Shyam Saran on Himalayan Fragility — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in the Indian Express, former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran argues from four decades of travel in the Indian, Nepali and Bhutanese Himalaya that the region is suffering relentless and accelerating degradation, with snows on the high peaks melting faster from global warming and the damage compounded by indiscriminate construction and resource extraction, and that Nepal's catastrophic flash flood, which swept down from just across the Tibetan border and spread from Rasuwa into Dhading, Gorkha and Nuwakot, is the latest instance of persistent warning signs being ignored until the mountains exact a cost from the communities living in their valleys.



#### SUPPORTING

- The event originated across an international boundary, about 20 kilometres east of the Rasuwagadhi crossing that connects Nepal's Rasuwa district with Gyirong county in Tibet, and Chinese media reported comparable loss of life and property on their side, which makes it a shared disaster rather than a Nepali one.
- The immediate mechanism was a massive avalanche that sent surging water and mud down the Lhunde river, sweeping away villages, settlements and large numbers of people downstream, with the avalanche possibly triggered by a magnitude 4.4 earthquake recorded in the area minutes earlier.
- The pattern the author draws from experience is that the eternal is becoming episodic: what was a stable seasonal cycle of snow and melt is now a sequence of discrete catastrophic events, which is a change in the character of Himalayan hazard rather than only in its frequency.



### MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

#### QUESTION

*Himalayan hydrological hazards are transboundary in origin but national in governance. Examine the implications for India's disaster preparedness, and discuss the scope for regional data-sharing arrangements in the Hindu Kush Himalaya. (250 words)*

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