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# Times Echo

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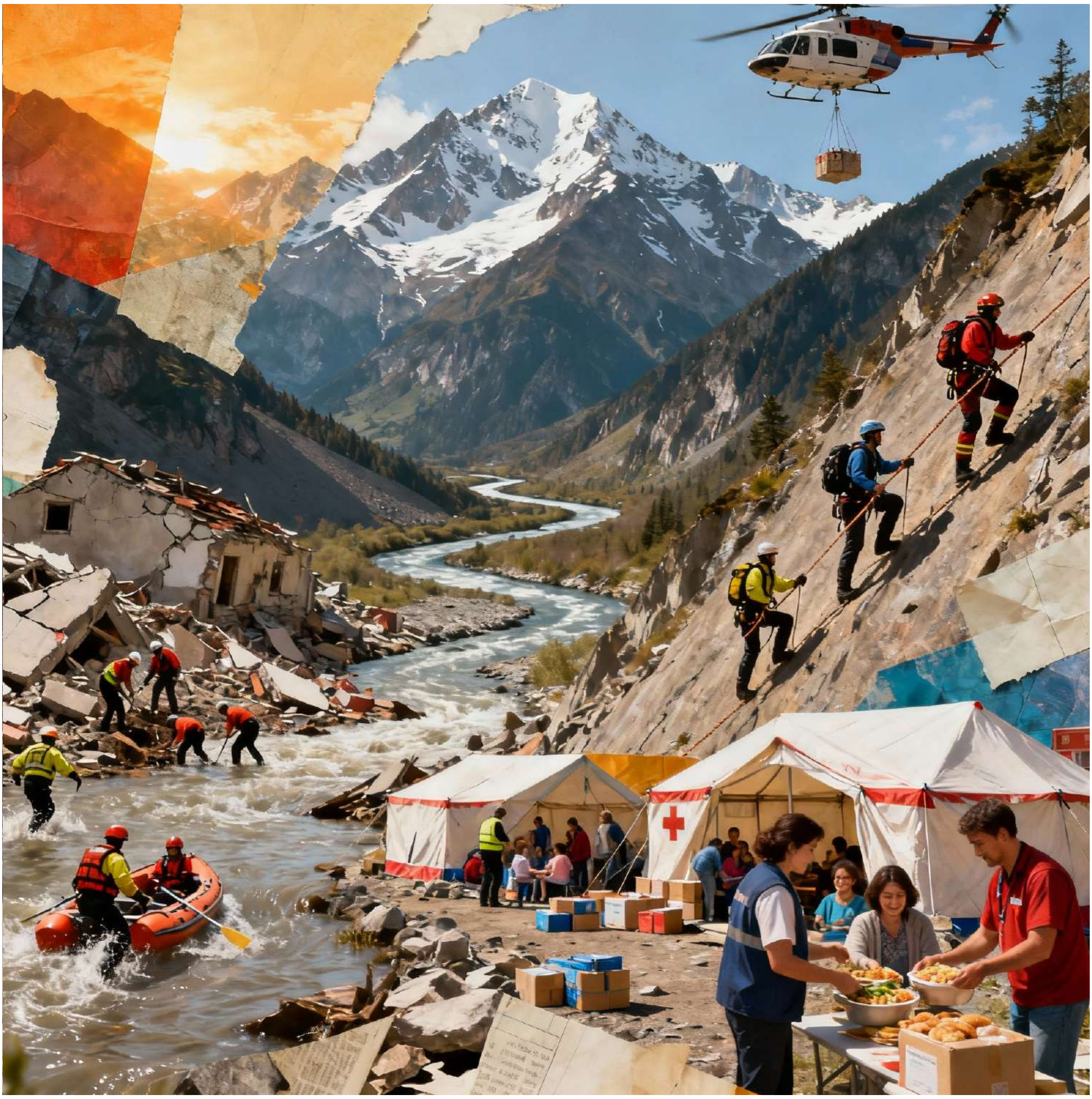
# A SPECIAL EDITION ON DISASTER MANAGEMENT



SPECIAL EDITION ON
DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Times Echo

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## Editor Speaks

# Media in Disasters

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, test the resilience of societies and the strength of their institutions. In such moments of crisis, the media emerges as one of the most crucial pillars of disaster management—serving as the bridge between authorities, experts and the public. From early warnings to post-disaster rehabilitation, the media's role extends far beyond mere reporting.

In the pre-disaster stage, timely and accurate information dissemination can save countless lives. Media outlets, through television, radio, newspapers and social media platforms, can raise awareness about disaster preparedness, promote safety guidelines and educate citizens about potential risks. A well-informed community is a resilient community.

During a disaster, the media becomes the lifeline of communication. Real-time reporting helps people stay updated on evacuation routes, relief centres and emergency services. However, this stage also demands responsibility and sensitivity. Sensationalism, misinformation or panic-inducing coverage can worsen the situation. Ethical journalism—grounded in accuracy, empathy and verification—becomes the need of the hour.

In the post-disaster phase, the media plays a pivotal role in mobilizing relief, highlighting the affected regions and keeping attention focused on rehabilitation efforts. It holds authorities accountable for relief distribution and reconstruction while also giving voice to the voiceless—the survivors whose struggles and resilience inspire recovery.

The emergence of digital and citizen journalism has further expanded the scope of media in disaster management. Social media alerts and user-generated content often provide the first signs of an unfolding disaster. Yet, this also calls for stronger fact-checking mechanisms to combat rumours and false narratives.

As climate change continues to intensify the frequency of disasters, strengthening the partnership between media, government agencies, and civil society is imperative. Media must balance speed with responsibility, emotion with ethics, and coverage with compassion. It is not merely a spectator in times of disaster—it is a participant, an educator and often, a saviour.

The current edition of *Times Echo* sheds light on the role of media in disaster management through a handful of research-based stories. We believe that informed journalism can transform chaos into coordinated action, fear into awareness and tragedy into a lesson for resilience. Cit quiam qui ut odigent volupidemque laciam,

# Heatwave emerges as silent disaster, leaves Kashmir sweltering in 2025

NAZAKAT ASLAM/ SUHAIB MANSOOR

In the erstwhile temperate valley of Kashmir, June 2025 broke not only temperature records but also long-held presumptions about the region's weather. Srinagar recorded its hottest June since 1978—the second hottest June on record after 1892 at 35.5°Celcius.

Qazigund had its hottest June in more than 50 years. Kupwara registered the highest temperature in the valley at 34.7°Celcius in the first week of July, pointing to the severity of the climate crisis in the valley.

Even the cooler hill resorts of Pahalgam and Gulmarg were not immune, with readings of 30°Celcius and 24.5°Celcious, respectively. What was once considered an occasional summer discomfort has turned into a slow-burning crisis, affecting everything from public health to agriculture and water security.

At SMHS Hospital, Srinagar, staff have been grappling with an uptick in heat-related illnesses and cases they weren't traditionally trained or equipped with to handle.

The farming community, already suffering from untimely hailstorms in May this year, has received a double blow. Fruit drop between 7–12 percent, smaller apples and sunburnt skin caused by heat stress are common complaints from farmers in Shopian and Sopore. Paddy cultivators, meanwhile, postponed transplantation or switched to low-yield, drought-resistant varieties.

Young farmers in Chitragam say they are losing interest in agriculture due to repeated water crises.

"What's the point when there's no support, no water, and only losses every year?" laments Abdul Basit, a 31-year-old farmer.

The suffocating heat has changed the way Kashmiris live, learn and socialize. The effect has been even more glaring on children.

"I can't play outside in this weather. And when I come home, I don't have the energy to study," complains Saadaat Mukhtar, an 8th-class student.

**Crisis Flows:** A man collects water from the Himal and Nagrai Springs on a scorching afternoon amid the reduced water flow at Safan Naman.
PHOTO: SUHAIB MANSOOR/IUST

"We have received numerous cases of dehydration, heat exhaustion and people collapsing of weakness or dizziness, mostly labourers, elderly folks and even some youngsters," says Dr. Yawar, MD in Medicine, Resident at SMHS.

Children are particularly vulnerable, with dehydration and fatigue-related symptoms becoming common complaints across both hospitals and schools.

**"We have received numerous cases of dehydration, heat exhaustion and people collapsing of weakness or dizziness"**

"Hospitals like SMHS have been managing, but you know, we weren't exactly built for this kind of heat. We need to upgrade to better cooling in wards, and raise more awareness among the public, especially at the PHC (Public Health Centre) level. Right now, we are firefighting, but in the long term, we need a clear plan," he adds.

The Jhelum River, once the lifeline of Kashmir, posted its lowest level of 0.57 feet at Sangam. Major streams and springs supplying valley towns are running 30 percent lower, as snowfall last winter was down by almost 40 percent.

South Kashmir municipalities have been reliant on daily water tankers. In Anantnag and Kulgam, furious citizens have taken to the streets in protest against the unpredictable water supply.

Meanwhile, the drinking water supply across Kashmir has been severely disrupted, with residents from various areas voicing growing concerns over the ongoing shortage.

Outdoorsmen, street vendors, and transport operators have been rescheduling their work to escape peak heat hours.

The Kashmir heatwave is not unique. It is part of a larger South Asia-wide climate disturbance. June 2025 was 0.9°Celcius above the three-decade average. Globally, the number of extreme heatwaves in the Himalayan region is likely to increase by 5–8 times by 2100, according to recent climate projections.

This is no longer a weather freakout, it is a slow-motion disaster. And the longer it is allowed to be treated as a short-term irritation, the greater the harm it will do to health systems, food availability, biodiversity and the already vulnerable economy of Kashmir.

Experts have demanded the immediate roll-out of a Heat Action Plan, based on adaptive models employed in other Indian states.

This includes setting up cooling shelters and shaded public areas, establishing early warning systems for people at risk, upgrading hospital infrastructure, launching public awareness campaigns at PHC and school levels, and investing in climate-resilient agriculture and wetland conservation.

In Kashmir, heatwave used to be an infrequent phenomenon. But now, it is a regular threat. The Valley is not just warming up, it is a clear warning to all.

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# JAMMU & KASHMIR'S BATTLE AGAINST NATURE: ARE WE PREPARED FOR NEXT DISASTER?

KHADIJAH QASIM KAMILI/ AADISH FAROOQ

Nestled amid the towering Himalayas, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is a region defined as much by its natural beauty as by its vulnerability to nature's unpredictability. Sitting on a volatile geological and climatic crossroads, the Valley faces recurring threats from earthquakes, floods, landslides and avalanches—disasters that have repeatedly disrupted lives and livelihoods.

With the frequency and intensity of these events increasing due to climate change, disaster preparedness is no longer optional; it is a necessity. Experts and meteorologists alike emphasize that while disasters cannot be prevented, their impact can be significantly mitigated through robust preparedness measures.

As Prof. Shakeel Ahmed, Secretary, Asian G-WADI—a flagship programme of UNESCO for Water development and Management in Semi-Arid areas—aptly notes, "We cannot completely eliminate the occurrence of disasters, but we can surely minimize the risk. If we use our scientific acumen sincerely and take society into confidence, the impact of disasters can be significantly reduced." This seasoned perspective highlights the stakes of being unprepared, tracing the region's devastating encounters with natural calamities.

### A History of Devastation

J&K has witnessed some of the most catastrophic natural disasters in the Indian subcontinent. Historical records paint a vivid picture of nature's wrath and its consequent impact. As per a research article on History of Natural Disasters in Kashmir Valley, Jammu & Kashmir, with Special Reference to Earthquakes in the International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJIRSET), up until October 2005, Kashmir was witness to multiple small-scale tremors and tectonic plate disturbances of mild intensity.

In May 1885, an earthquake with an epicenter near Srinagar shook the region with devastating consequences. Spanning an area of 1,30,000 square miles, it claimed 3,000 lives, destroyed 20,000 houses and impacted 30,000 cattle. The aftershocks of this event lingered for months. Similarly, in September 1902, another earthquake emanating from the Hindu Kush mountain ranges struck with an intensity that resonated across the Valley for over two minutes. Besides, the 2005 Muzaffarabad earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.6, caused widespread destruction in the region, serving as a grim reminder of the area's seismic vulnerability.

**"We cannot completely eliminate the occurrence of disasters, but we can surely minimize the risk"**

The Jhelum River has often overflowed its banks, engulfing the Valley. As per the Directorate of Health Services Kashmir (DHSK), the flood in 1957 was a result of a breach in the Jhelum at Batwara area of Srinagar, with floodwaters reaching up to Sonwar, where it was restricted by a massive bund put up near the bridge. The 1902 flood submerged Srinagar for two years, taking a heavy toll on lives and property. The 2014 floods, among the most devastating in recent memory, paralyzed the region, leaving thousands stranded and homes destroyed.

In another report by the India Meteorological Department (IMD), Kashmir has also been a witness to heavy snowfall and avalanches in the region. With heavy snowfall being a distinctive feature of Kashmir's winters, avalanches are a recurring threat. The highest recorded snowfall in the region was in February 1967, with Gulmarg receiving 8.4 meters.

In January 2017, an avalanche struck the region and hit an Army camp, claiming 24 lives, 20 of whom were Army personnel. Even as recently as February 2023, a tragic avalanche in Gulmarg killed two Polish tourists and demanded a large-scale rescue operation.

### Future Predictions: What Lies Ahead?

Experts warn that the intensity and frequency of disasters in J&K are likely to increase, driven by climate change and environmental mismanagement. Prof. Shakeel Ahmed, a noted geoscientist and visiting Professor at Islamic University of Science and Technology, points to the rising risks associated with water disasters. "Extreme events like massive rainfall in short spans, followed by prolonged dry periods, are already becoming common," he says, adding that floods, cyclones and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) are now more predictable with advanced technology. However, Prof. Ahmed warns that "while natural causes like climate change are unavoidable, human-induced factors such as industrialization, mismanagement and pollution exacerbate these risks."

### Technological Advancements and Preparedness

Meteorologist, Muhammad Hussain Mir, from the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), Srinagar, highlights advancements in technology that aid disaster prediction. "With tools like Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) models, doppler weather radars and satellite imagery, we can now monitor weather systems more accurately," he explains. These technologies, combined with real-time data sharing between the IMD, NDRF (National Disaster Response Force), as well as SDRF (State Disaster Response Fund) allow for quicker responses to disasters.

However, Mir acknowledges the challenges posed by climate change. "There is a noticeable increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. While we adapt to climate variability, climate change presents irreversible challenges, worsened today by pollution," he points.

**"Managing disaster- related policies requires active participation from the community, however, we often neglect this responsibility"**

Despite technological advancements, J&K remains ill-prepared for large-scale disasters. Prof. Ahmed candidly states, "After the 2005 earthquake and 2014 floods, we are still not adequately prepared. Decisions based on scientific studies are often ignored, and funding for research is insufficient." He stresses the need for long-term planning and collaboration between all stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions and local communities.

Talking to *Times Echo*, Prof. Shakil A. Romshoo, Vice Chancellor of IUST and a seasoned expert in Geology and Earth Sciences, highlighted the susceptibility of J&K as a disaster-prone region. "Policies and strategies exist at the government level, but the biggest challenge is that we are not a disaster-conscious society. Managing disaster-related policies requires active participation from the community, however, we often neglect this responsibility," he stated.

Prof. Romshoo further emphasized that society tends to forget the consequences of its actions both before and after a disaster. "We must take responsibility and change our ways." This pressing call to action underscores the need for a cultural shift toward proactive disaster preparedness and collective responsibility.

### Collaborative Solutions: A Community-Centric Approach

Disaster preparedness, experts agree, requires a multi-pronged approach:

### Educational Reforms

Disaster awareness should begin at the school level. Prof. Ahmed emphasizes that early education on natural processes and their impacts can foster a culture of preparedness. "Such education ensures that future generations are not only aware but equipped to mitigate risks and respond effectively," he adds.

### Community Awareness

It is being stressed that local communities must be aware of the actions to take during disasters. Prof. Ahmed highlights that sustained efforts, like discussions in schools and neighborhoods, can build a culture of preparedness.

### Government Commitment

Both experts stress the importance of government support, not just in relief and rehabilitation, but also in funding scientific research and implementing preventive measures. Ahmed remarks, "Timely investment in preparedness saves not just money but countless lives too."

### Technology and Infrastructure

Strengthening infrastructure in seismic zones and flood-prone areas is crucial. The IMD's advancements in predictive tools, such as doppler radar systems and satellite imagery, coupled with robust infrastructure, offer a dual approach to reducing disaster impacts.

### Conclusion: A Shared Responsibility

J&K's vulnerability to natural disasters is an inescapable reality, but the impact of these events can be mitigated through foresight, planning and collective effort. As Prof. Ahmed aptly puts it, "Disaster preparedness is a shared responsibility that starts from basic education and extends to policy implementation at the highest level."

With advancements in technology, scientific knowledge, and community collaboration, J&K has the tools to navigate its challenges. The question remains: Will we rise to the occasion, or will we continue to react only after disaster strikes? The answer to this question will determine the future resilience of this Paradise on Earth.

# 'J&K vulnerable to multiple disasters; collective preparedness holds key'

Disaster preparedness is vital for saving lives, reducing damage and ensuring a quick recovery after emergencies. It helps communities respond effectively and strengthens resilience against future disasters. In an exclusive interview with *Times Echo* reporters, *SUALIHA ZUBAIR* and *MURTAZA GULL*, Vice Chancellor, Islamic University of Science and Technology, (IUST), **PROF. (DR.) SHAKIL AHMAD ROMSHOO** talks at length about effective disaster preparedness and mitigation.

Pertinently, Prof. Romshoo has been engaged in research on hydrology, glaciology and climate change with the geographical focus on the Himalaya. Being a member of policymaking committees and working groups on environment, water, climate change and disaster management at state, national, and international levels, Prof Romshoo's 37 years of experience in research and academics in earth and environmental sciences make his insights over the topic highly valuable.

**Q. What have your contributions as a Scientist been in disaster assessment with special focus on J&K?**

A. To begin with, under the national disaster management act 2005, different disaster management authorities were established in J&K, including the state disaster management authority, divisional disaster management authority and district divisional level authority. I have been a part of these authorities and committees right from 2005. These committees have been instrumental to lay the groundwork for effective disaster response in our region.

I also contributed to modifying the state disaster management act around 2016, ensuring it remained relevant to the evolving needs of disaster management in J&K. Recognizing the threat posed by Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs), J&K Government constituted a high-level committee and I am a member of this GLOF expert committee. My expertise extends beyond J&K, as I am also involved with similar committees in Sikkim and Uttarakhand.

As an academic, I have been honoured to be elected as a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences (FASc), the Indian Society of Remote Sensing (FISRS), and the Indian Society of Geomatics (FISG). My research focuses on critical societal issues such as flood vulnerability in the Jhelum basin, hydrology of the basin, glaciology and the impacts of projected climate change on water, energy and food security in the Kashmir Himalayas.

**Q. What are the primary disaster risks that J&K faces at the moment?**

A. I have been emphasising that while nature has blessed J&K with a picturesque landscape, we are also vulnerable to multiple hazards. Our region exhibits overall high vulnerability to various disasters. If you name any disaster, Kashmir is susceptible to it, such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, avalanches, forest fires, climate extremes and so on.

Given that we are situated in seismic zone 4 and 5, earthquakes pose a significant threat. I worry about the catastrophic impact of an earthquake of magnitude 7 or above could have on us, especially considering our history of earthquakes with magnitudes 8 and above.

Floods are another pressing issue. We have experienced devastating floods in the recent past, with damages estimated at 1 trillion rupees during 2014 floods. The memory of our city centre, Lal Chowk being submerged for weeks is still fresh in our minds.

Landslides are a constant danger, frequently blocking our national highways—our lifeline and the only reliable road communication link to the rest of the world. Every day, we hear reports of landslides affecting our connectivity, particularly along the Srinagar-Jammu, which isolates us from the rest of the world.

Additionally, the far-flung areas of our region are vulnerable to snow avalanches, and the Chenab Valley faces risks of GLOFs. While we cannot eliminate these disasters entirely, I believe we can minimize their impact by being prepared to respond effectively to these challenges.

**Q. How effective are existing disaster management policies and frameworks in addressing disaster risks in Kashmir Valley?**

A. I believe, there are numerous policies designed to protect us, however, the real challenge lies in their implementation and the lack of a disaster-conscious society here. It is not solely the government's responsibility to manage disasters; common citizenry plays a vital role in disaster risk reduction.

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, IUST students interview Hon'ble VC of IUST, Prof. Shakil A. Romshoo, at the VC Office, IUST, Awantipora PHOTO: KHADIJAH QASIM KAMILI/IUST

**"If you name any disaster, Kashmir is susceptible to it, such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, avalanches, forest fires, climate extremes and so on"**

Usually, it is implementation of these policies where we fall short. Management of disaster-related policies requires active participation from the community, yet we often neglect this responsibility. For instance, authorities have established building codes intended to safeguard our homes and structures in the eventuality of a disaster, but instead of adhering to these guidelines, many seek dubious ways to bypass them. It is disheartening to see that we are willing to spend lakhs and crores on building our homes, but hesitate to invest in making them resilient against disasters particularly earthquakes.

Additionally, government must make concrete plans and build capacity of ordinary people on how to respond when disasters strike. To address these issues, I believe, we need to create massive awareness among public starting from the grassroot level. It is crucial to begin with our school children, instilling in them the spirit of disaster preparedness and resilience from an early age. Only then can we hope to build a society that is truly prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

**Q. What role do you think local communities should play in disaster preparedness and response?**

A. In my opinion, local communities play a crucial role in disaster preparedness and response. Every social institution has a specific responsibility and it is essential for all pillars of society to come together. For instance, an influential role could be played by our religious scholars such as masjid imams and community leaders. Their voice is generally heard by the masses and just imagine the impact it would have if they emphasize disaster preparedness among people in their Friday sermons. Researchers and scholars should have outreach with religious scholars, and explain to them the issues in plain language so that they can then disseminate it further down in an impactful way. It is also important for every institute, office or even a household in J&K to have their own family disaster response plan in place. By working together, we can build a disaster conscious and a more resilient community that is better prepared for any disaster that may come our way. If government is for policy making and execution level, we as educators can help at knowledge generation and awareness level and as citizens we all have a role in implementation of rules, regulations and policies.

**Q. How can academic institutions, government agencies and local communities collaborate in enhancing disaster preparedness in Kashmir?**

A. Well, I believe that academic institutions should play a crucial role in enhancing disaster preparedness in J&K, particularly because they have access to young minds. They can effectively shape attitudes and foster a disaster-conscious citizenry. For example, universities like IUST have established various clubs including Disaster Risk Reduction club to in calculate a spirit of disaster consciousness among our students. There are different sub-clubs focusing on specific types of disasters, such as an earthquake club, a flood club etc.

These clubs organise a variety of events and awareness programmes, including workshops led by experts who educate the community on the do and don'ts related to different disasters. Additionally, conducting mock drills should become a routine to practice our responses in the eventuality of a disaster. Furthermore, creating centres for disaster reduction in every university would serve as knowledge generation hubs, providing a platform for research and innovation. IUST has established the Centre for Disaster Risk Reduction. The Centre allows students to engage in projects that build the capacity of students and other stakeholder to build their capacity to effectively implement disaster risk reduction strategies. The insights gained from the research and knowledge generated at these centres could feed into policy-making processes of government, ultimately strengthening overall disaster preparedness in the region.

**"By working together, we can build a disaster conscious and a more resilient community that is better prepared for any disaster that may come our way"**

**Q. What are some of the major challenges faced by stakeholders in implementing effective disaster management practices?**

A. One of the major challenges is how to translate and transfer research and knowledge outcomes from labs to common man, and even policymakers in an easily understandable manner, avoiding the complex technical jargon. Sometimes, technicality of the research presentation makes it difficult for policymakers and the media to easily understand and interpret the findings related to disasters. As a result, it sometimes poses a significant challenge for scientists to translate and transfer their work from the lab to society in a manner that is easily grasped and understood by common masses. Therefore, effective science communication is essential for bridging this gap.

However, the most pressing challenges are also often encountered by the administration and authorities working on the ground while responding to a disaster. They must navigate various logistical, financial, and operational hurdles in implementing effective disaster management practices. There is a need for clearly spelling out the Standard Operating Practices (SoPs) for various stakeholder so that their response to disaster is efficient and timely

**Q. How can traditional knowledge and practices be integrated into modern disaster risk management strategies?**

A. Integrating traditional knowledge with modern technologies is essential for developing effective disaster management policies and for effective response to any disaster. I believe, our ancestors in Kashmir possessed remarkable wisdom regarding disaster preparedness, which is evident in the architectural designs and construction techniques they employed. For instance, the traditional *'taak'* and *'Daji devari'* systems of construction in Kashmir and the specific materials used in building our structures have demonstrated resilience against past earthquakes.

Currently, we have over 2.7 lac houses in Srinagar city along, with more than 97 percent of them being masonry type with load-bearing structure having no reinforced concrete frame. These houses are particularly vulnerable to earthquakes. It is crucial that we learn from the historical construction practices of Kashmir to create disaster-resistant buildings. By doing so, we can not only enhance their structural integrity but also incorporate energy-efficient designs that align with modern sustainability goals.

Similarly, avoiding construction on floodplains and wetlands for housing development in the Kashmir Valley can significantly reduce our vulnerability to both floods and earthquakes. These areas naturally act as buffers by absorbing excess floodwaters, and building on them not only disrupts their ecological function, but also makes these settlements vulnerable during extreme events.

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# Gulmarg strengthens avalanche preparedness

AADISH FAROOQ/ MARYAM KHALIQ

Even though Kashmir is known for its stunning natural beauty, it is also faced with severe challenges due to its harsh winters. Among the biggest threats during this time are snow avalanches, which can be deadly at times.

An avalanche happens when a large amount of snow suddenly slides down a slope. This can be triggered by new snowfall, strong winds or changes in temperature, which often destroys everything in its path.

One area in Kashmir that is particularly at risk is Gulmarg–a popular destination for skiing. The region's steep slopes and unstable layers of snow make it especially prone to avalanches. Some of the most dangerous spots in Gulmarg include the Affarwat mountain range, Kongdori slope and Gulmarg bowl. For those living in or visiting this region, it is crucial to be cautious during the winter season.

Avalanches in Kashmir often happen due to a mix of heavy snowfall, strong winds and rising temperatures. When a lot of snow falls in a short time, the different layers of snow do not stick together well, making them unstable. Winds can move the snow around and create dangerous buildups in certain spots. Warmer temperatures melt some of the snow, further weakening it and increasing the chances of an avalanche. With its steep and rugged terrain, Kashmir faces more risk than many other places, especially during heavy snowfalls.

To keep skiers and visitors safe, the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department has created a Gulmarg Ski Patrol Team. This team of 15 members has been working for over 20 years and gets annual training from international experts in snow safety. Each year, snow safety officers from other countries are hired for three months to train the team on how to predict avalanches and carry out rescues.

The Ski Patrol Team is based in Kongdori and has advanced tools, like the Avalanche Balloon System (ABS) and transceivers, to help save lives. Transceivers are devices that help find people buried under snow. However, they need to work fast. If there is no signal from a person within 15 minutes, it often means the person has not survived.

Mehraj Ahmad Dar, an Assistant Snow Safety Officer in Gulmarg, explains how their system works. "We warn people before avalanches by classifying them into D1, D2 and D3 categories. D3 is the most dangerous. Our equipment helps us locate survivors quickly, but time is critical. After 15 minutes, the chances of survival drop significantly."

Gulmarg Ski Patrol Team rescuing a foreign female tourist, who suffered a femur bone fracture while skiing. PHOTO: MURTAZA GULL/IUST

Despite the efforts of the Ski Patrol Team, avalanches can still lead to tragedies. Earlier this year, on February 22, a large avalanche struck the Affarwat mountain range in Gulmarg. A group of experienced Polish skiers was caught in the avalanche while exploring an off-piste area. Rescue teams responded quickly, using snow bikes and special equipment to find and save the skiers. Unfortunately, one skier lost his life, while two others were injured and rushed to hospital.

**"Mountains are beautiful, but they are dangerous too. Acknowledging their power is the main way to stay safe"**

Tour guide Shabir Ahmed Bhat, who has years of experience in leading groups through risky areas, says avoiding these zones during the first 72 hours after snowfall is key. "The first 48 hours are the most dangerous. Natural avalanches happen in 70-75 percent of cases during this time. Even after that, people should stay alert because human-triggered avalanches can still occur," he explains.

Bhat, who has faced avalanches during his tours, says staying calm and using proper communication tools can make a big difference in emergencies. "During heavy snowfall, radio communication is very important. Phones don't always work, so radios are more reliable. The first thing we do is make sure the entire group is together," he suggests. "If someone is missing, we find them immediately and move everyone to a safe place," he adds.

When asked about the training guides receive, Bhat says, "We are trained in basic avalanche rescue and first aid. Some of the knowledge comes from experienced guides who share their skills with us. Even without formal training, their advice can be life-saving."

Educating people about avalanches is a big part of staying safe. Local authorities and the Ski Patrol Team regularly issue warnings about high-risk areas and advise tourists to avoid certain slopes during heavy snowfall. Technology, like the Avalanche Balloon System and transceivers, has improved rescue operations, but awareness and preparedness remain the most important tools for survival.

"The mountains are beautiful, but they are dangerous too," Bhat warns. "Acknowledging their power is the main way to stay safe."

With the combined efforts of local guides, rescue teams and international experts, Gulmarg continues to strive for a balance between welcoming tourists and keeping them safe in its breathtaking but risky winter landscapes.

# Decade later, Rohmoo bridge restores village link lost to floods

ARSHINA ASLAM/ SAQIA MUZAFFAR

After nearly a decade of waiting, a long-stranded bridge in Rohmoo village of district Pulwama–washed away during the catastrophic 2014 floods–has finally been reconstructed, bringing relief and restored rhythm to the daily lives of the residents.

The story of the Rohmoo bridge is not just about concrete and steel; it's about disruption, delay and the quiet resilience of those who waited. Originally damaged during the devastating floods that gripped the Valley in 2014, the bridge had remained inoperative for years, cutting off access and impacting education, mobility and livelihoods.

**Students' Struggle**

Students residing in adjoining areas narrate their ordeal. "We missed so many classes because the school was inaccessible," recalls Mumin Shabbir, a class 10 student. "There was a temporary diversion, but even light rain would wash it away. We had to take a longer route from Wahibhugh and Newa, and sometimes we were chased by stray dogs." His school, like many others in the area, remained shut for long periods during monsoon seasons.

**An Eyewitness to Collapse**

A 47-year-old resident of the village, says, he still remembers the exact moment the bridge collapsed. "It was 2014. The floods had already damaged Srinagar and many other areas. Then one day, the bridge just washed way. It was like watching a lifeline snap," he says. "We are grateful that the government finally restored it. For years, funds were the issue. But now, things are back to normal."

A Delayed Journey to Reconstruction

In 2016, the then J&K Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti, laid the foundation stone to rebuild the bridge. Initially, the project was assigned to the Jammu and Kashmir Projects Construction Corporation (JKPCC). However, the work remained incomplete under JKPCC and was eventually handed over to the Roads and Buildings (R&B) Division, Pulwama. Under the supervision of the then Executive Engineer Javed Ahmed, the project was revived and gradually brought back on track.

Once destroyed by floods, Rohmoo bridge reconnects the villages it once divided. PHOTO: ARSHINA ASLAM/ IUST

Inside the RebuildThe bridge, constructed at a cost of Rs 25.97 crore by the Public Works (Roads and Buildings) Department under the World Bank-funded Jhelum Tawi Flood Recovery Project (JTFRP), connects over 80,000 residents of several villages including Rahmoo, Mitrigam, Pakherpora, Zagigam, Putrigam, Tujan, Mirgund, Thokerpora, Tilsar, Char-e-Sharief, Yusmarg, Kamrazipora and adjoining areas of Pulwama district.

**"The bridge is double-laned, allowing two-way vehicle movement "**

Feroz Ahmad, a worker involved in the bridge reconstruction, shares technical and financial insights. "The project was based on a budget of around Rs 26 crore, which has been fully utilised," he says. "The steel–called 'girders'–was sourced from Delhi. Transporting them took time due to traffic issues, and that delayed us."

Construction began in 2017 and was completed in December 2024, while formal inauguration of the took place on April 15, 2025 by J&K Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah. The 50-meter-long vital bridge has connected the three districts of Shopian, Kulgam and Pulwama with the capital city Srinagar.

The newly-built structure stands more robust and modern than its predecessor. "The earlier bridge was single-laned. This one is double-laned, allowing two-way vehicle movement. We have also added footpaths on both sides for pedestrians–something the previous bridge lacked," says Ahmad.

When asked about the bridge's durability in the face of climate change, he affirmed, "Yes, it is built to withstand such events. That is exactly why we used higher-grade steel and iron."

**Return of Normalcy**

Today, the bridge is more than just a structure–it is a restored connection to schools, markets, healthcare and daily life. It is also a reminder of how slow but steady government efforts, backed by persistent community hope, can overcome even decade-long inertia.

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# Hail Hits Hard

## Kashmir's Apple Belt Hit by Successive Storms; Losses Mount

NAZAKAT ASLAM/ SUHAIB MANSOOR

On a morning in mid-April, orchards in Balpora lay damaged after a sudden hailstorm. Apple blossoms were left scattered across the ground, bruised by heavy ice. Manzoor Ahmad, 52, a local orchardist, surveyed the damage to his trees following the storm.

"I had borrowed money from the bank hoping the apple harvest would be enough to clear it and marry off my daughter. But these hailstones destroyed not just blossoms, they ruined our future as well," he narrates.

In South Kashmir's Shopian, Pulwama, and Kulgam districts, hailstorms have struck with increasing frequency and intensity over this year, leaving widespread devastation in their wake. Shopian, often called Kashmir's "apple bowl," where nearly 80 percent of families rely on apple orchards for their livelihood, has borne the brunt of the damage.

Several waves of hailstorms have battered the region this year, each hitting during critical phases of the apple-growing season. The first major storm struck on April 18, affecting more than 58 villages across Kulgam and Shopian. Areas like Shadab Karewa, Kanipora, Zawoora, Manloo, Narapora, Pargochu, and parts of Shopian town were lashed by hail just as the apple trees were entering full bloom. Farmers reported that the unseasonal hail damaged the fragile blossoms, raising fears of a drastically reduced yield.

In May, the situation worsened. Hailstorms returned twice, on the 5th and again on the 25th, further compounding the damage in Shopian. With each new wave, the growth cycle of the apple trees was disrupted, and the cumulative losses mounted for orchardists already under stress.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Farmers had just begun the crucial second round of pesticide treatment– one of the most vital and expensive phases of orchard care. Shabir Hussain, an orchardist from Voter Pora, struggled to find the words.

"Our orchard wasn't just a source of income, it supported my parents' treatment and medicines. This hailstorm didn't just destroy apples, it has suspended our lives in uncertainty."

Just as farmers began assessing the damage and hoped for a reprieve, another blow followed on June 3. In just 20 to 30 minutes, it caused extensive damage across nearly 80 percent of the villages in Shopian. In areas like Wadipora, Reshipora, Handew, Nagbal, Bandpawa, and Hushanpora, the hailstones were unusually large and jagged.

In Kashmir, apple farming is more than a trade, it is a lifeline. The yearly harvest determines whether children attend school, whether elderly parents get their treatment, and whether long-standing debts are finally paid off.

In Batpora, orchard damage has impacted students as well. Danish, an undergraduate studying in Srinagar, says, his family had mortgaged assets to fund his education. "Now I don't know if I'll be able to return to college next semester," he adds.

This year's storms are not isolated incidents. Records show a worrying trend. From 2007 to 2022, a total of 203 hailstorm events were reported, with a significant increase in intensity and frequency. The districts of Baramulla and Kupwara in the north, and Pulwama, Shopian, and Anantnag in the south are especially prone.

Experts link shifting weather patterns to climate change, observing that extreme occurrences are increasingly common. Small-scale farmers lament long periods of delay and ambiguous compensation policies in government-initiated crop surveys under disaster relief schemes.

**"These hailstones destroyed not just blossoms, they ruined our future as well"**

Behind every ruined orchard is a deeper grievance, one that stretches far beyond a single season. Farmers have long urged the government to introduce a comprehensive crop insurance scheme to compensate for the mounting losses they have faced for over a decade, losses that only worsen each season.

They point out that while anti-hail nets are effective, their cost over Rs 5 lakh per hectare, makes them inaccessible to the most. In regions where many farmers struggle to afford even basic pesticide sprays, such protective measures remain a luxury.

"Are we supposed to invest in nets when we can't even afford chemicals for trees?" a frustrated farmer in Chitragam asks.

A single Kanal of orchard, typically home to 18 apple trees, can yield around 200 boxes of apples in a good year, translating to nearly Rs 2 lakh in earnings. However, orchardists, say, they invest lakhs each season on fertilizers, pesticides and labour, only to see everything wiped out by a single storm. In such cases, compensation of just a few thousand rupees feels not just inadequate, but cruel.

When asked about the need for a more reliable and fair policy for farmers, a government official admitted that concrete solutions were lacking, but claimed that "things might change."

"The cost of maintaining even a single Kanal is steep, and the relief amount doesn't cover even basic maintenance costs," says the official pleading anonymity.

The lack of a comprehensive crop insurance scheme has turned natural disasters into a manmade crisis. Horticulture sustains over eight lakh families and contributes nearly 10 percent to the economy of the Union Territory, making it far too vital to be left vulnerable.

Crop insurance must become mainstream. Reliable weather forecasting tools, better road connectivity and timely compensation mechanisms should not be treated as favours but as the foundation of a critical rural economy. Kashmir's horticulture sector doesn't need pity, it needs protection and a prompt action.

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SPECIAL EDITION ON
DISASTER MANAGEMENT

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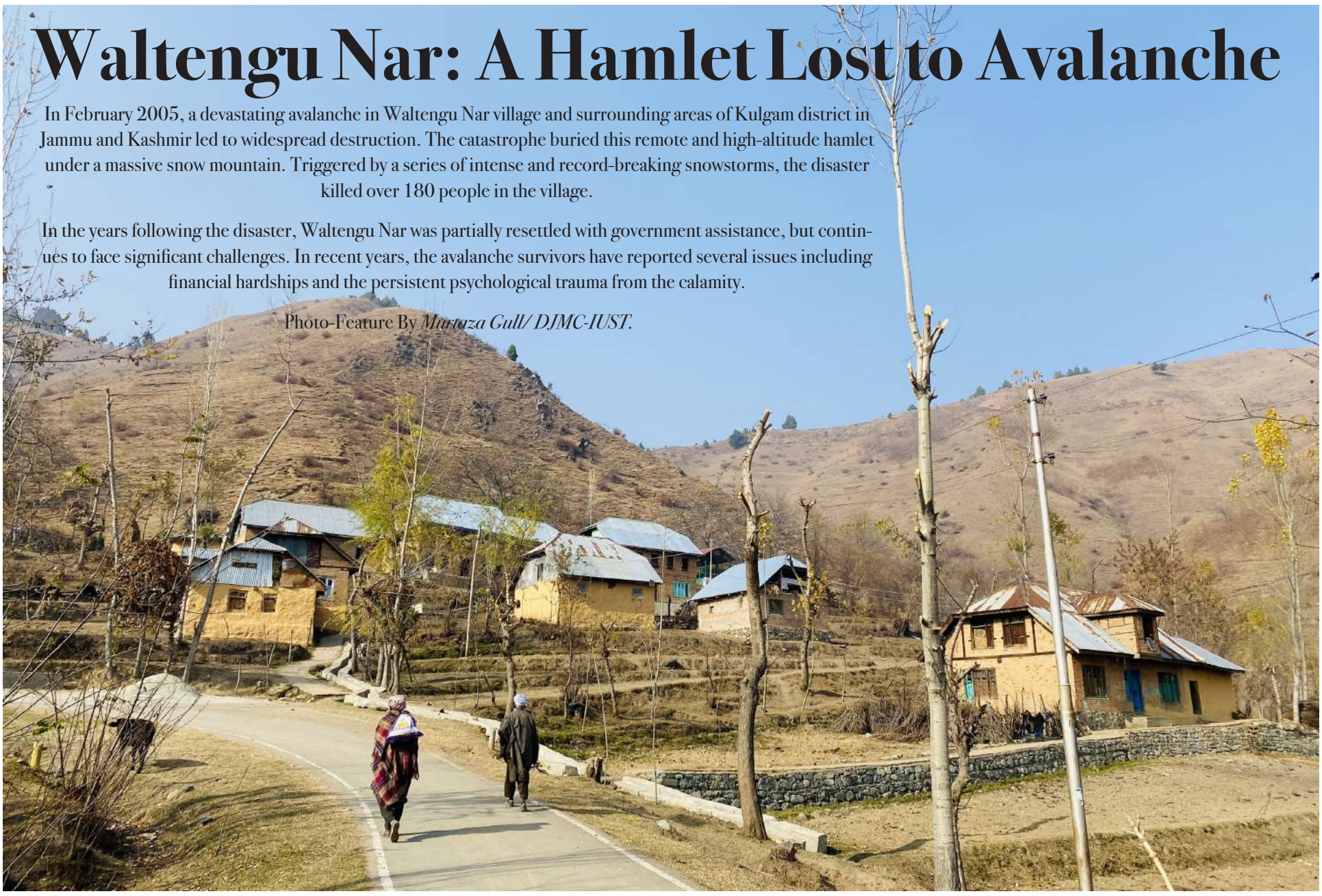
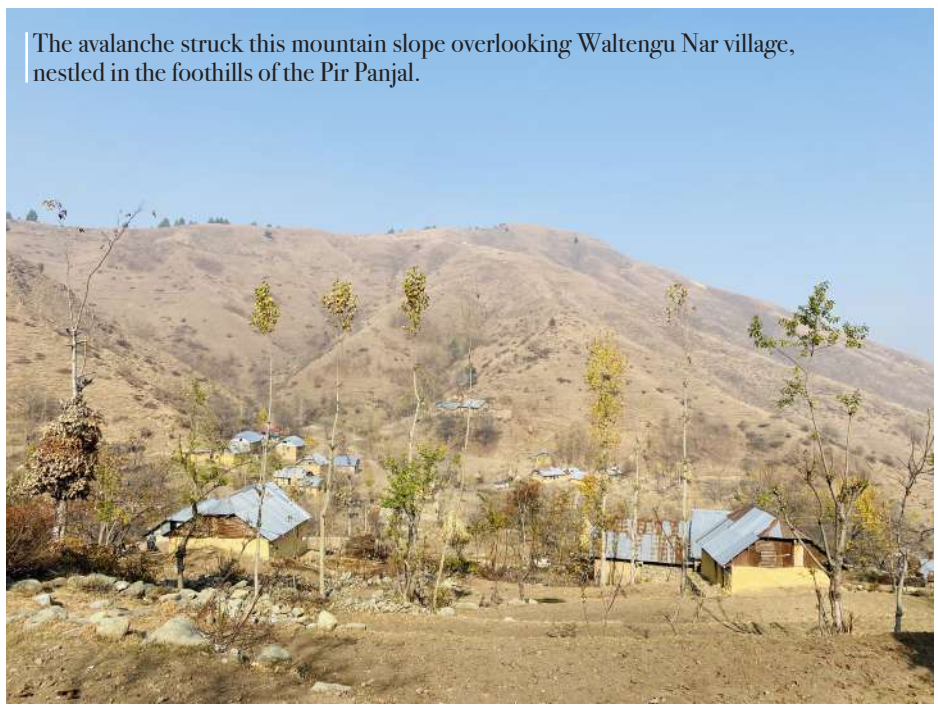
# Waltengu Nar: A Hamlet Lost to Avalanche

In February 2005, a devastating avalanche in Waltengu Nar village and surrounding areas of Kulgam district in Jammu and Kashmir led to widespread destruction. The catastrophe buried this remote and high-altitude hamlet under a massive snow mountain. Triggered by a series of intense and record-breaking snowstorms, the disaster killed over 180 people in the village.

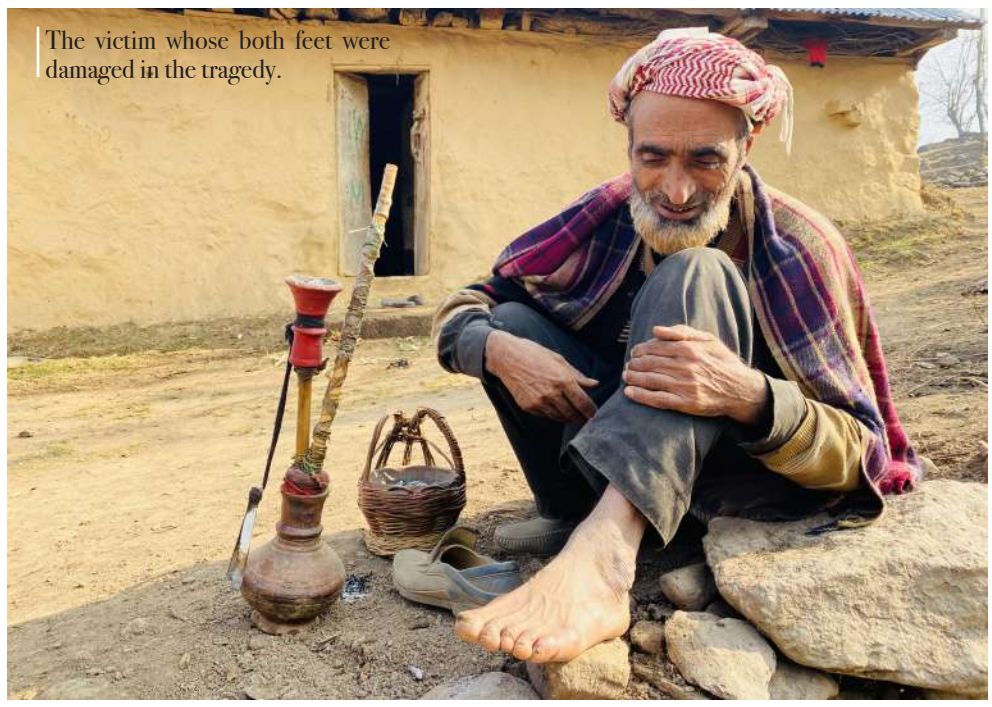
In the years following the disaster, Waltengu Nar was partially resettled with government assistance, but continues to face significant challenges. In recent years, the avalanche survivors have reported several issues including financial hardships and the persistent psychological trauma from the calamity.

Photo-Feature By *Murtaza Gull/ DJMC-IUST.*



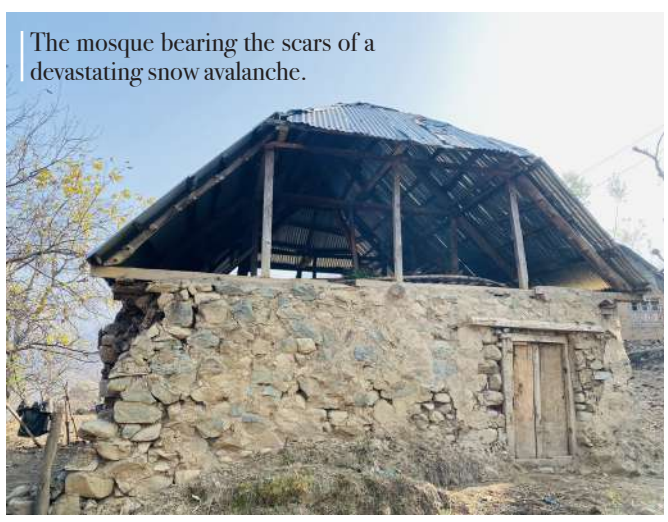


The avalanche struck this mountain slope overlooking Waltengu Nar village, nestled in the foothills of the Pir Panjal.

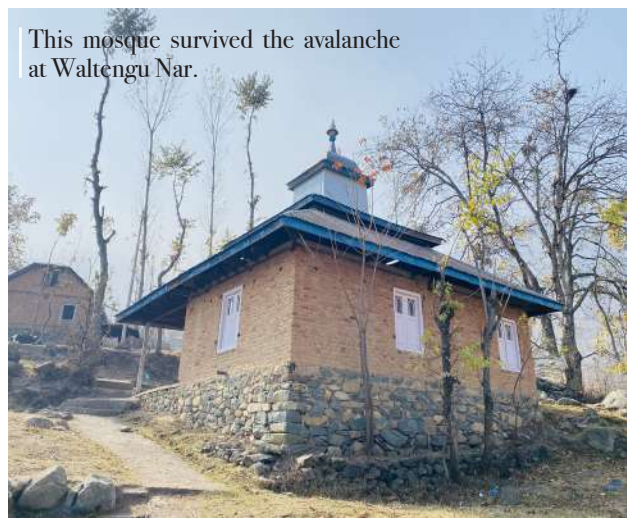


The victim whose both feet were damaged in the tragedy.

This house has been rebuilt by a victim post avalanche.



The mosque bearing the scars of a devastating snow avalanche.



This mosque survived the avalanche at Waltengu Nar.

**PROPRIETOR:** Islamic University of Science and Technology | **PATRON:** Prof. Shakil A. Romshoo | **EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:** Dr. Rabia Noor
**DESIGNER:** Dr. Sayar Ahmad Mir | **ADDRESS:** 1-University Avenue, Awantipora, Pulwama, J& K- 192122
**TELEPHONE:** 01933-247954/247955 | **EMAIL:** editor.timesecho@iust.ac.in
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