Nepal Floods: India's Aid Diplomacy

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On 26 August 2026, after a glacial collapse of 3900 feet at the Nepal-Tibet border, an ice avalanche pushed water, mud, and debris downstream through central Nepal, causing extensive flooding across the country. It has destroyed settlements, vehicles, roads, and bridges, as well as the Gyirong checkpoint at the Nepal-China border. The water and debris traveled 100 kms from the Trishuli and Bhote Koshi rivers, largely affecting tourists and pilgrims in northern Nepal.

Among these were around 400 Indian nationals who had traveled to Nepal as part of the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, a pilgrimage with religious significance for Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. On the day itself, 157 people were confirmed dead, while more than 400, including 133 Indians, were missing. The death toll has risen to 1,250, and more than 4,000 people are still missing. Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah said the floods are due to climate change and environmental degradation. On 28 August, the Nepal government refused rescue and relief operations from other nations, citing Nepal's

experience during the 2015 earthquake, which created management difficulties due to the large number of foreign relief teams.

Nonetheless, Nepal had to reverse its decision under pressure from other nations whose citizens were stranded in flood-affected areas. India was the first to physically send aid to Nepal. So far, New Delhi has delivered 68 tonnes of relief supplies across four military flights, along with an 11-member team of medical and rescue experts, after a request from Kathmandu. Other nations—including China (undisclosed amount), the UAE ($10M), and the UK ($6.8M), among others—and international organizations (World Bank, European Union, etc.) have also contributed. On 29 August, Nepal Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle called PM Modi "exceptionally generous" for providing help in these difficult times. The ongoing operations by India are providing relief and helping with evacuation, with 149 Indians rescued, according to the MEA, but the overall disruption continues, as approximately 320 Indians remain unreachable as of 30 August.

This disaster is widely regarded as Nepal's worst calamity in recent years and has received significant international coverage. India reinforces its "first responder" label as part of its long history of providing humanitarian relief to disaster-struck countries. Regardless, these endeavors by the Indian government come with political and strategic complexities that influence India-Nepal ties.

While Operation Maitri—India's humanitarian operation following the 2015 Nepal earthquake—was largely seen as successful, the insensitive and boastful Indian media coverage, perceived in Nepal as condescending, generated negative perceptions and created a certain distance between the two nations. After the earthquake, Nepal accused India of imposing an unofficial blockade that negatively impacted Nepal's economy. Moreover, many report that multiple agencies during Op Maitri led to a lack of coordination and overlapping

responsibilities.

While the details of the current operation's functioning and whether India's relief coordination has improved can only be deliberated on later, India has become relatively more circumspect in its narratives, particularly in terms of taking exaggerated credit and respecting Nepal's agency. However, others argue that some Indian media coverage might still come across as out of touch.

One example is an Indian news channel interviewing former Nepal Finance Minister Barshaman Pun, in which he detailed the situation on the ground, while the channel's headline linked his remarks to the claim: "Barshaman Pun says situation improving, thanks India for relief aid". Another instance is when a Mohali Sikh NGO was stopped at the Sonauli border from providing supplies to Nepali victims due to Nepal's strict one-door policy, which requires all international relief to be redirected through official state channels to reduce logistical issues. Various Indian platforms started calling it the "arrogance of Nepal" without investigating the reasoning behind the policy. With mainstream media highlighting their own inconveniences or discussing claims of pilgrims 'seeing Lord Shiva during the floods', all of this has caused discontent in Indian and Nepali online spaces.

Another factor is sustained apprehension in Nepal about India's asymmetric power and Nepal's dependence on it. At a recent Kathmandu summit on India-Nepal ties, speakers stressed the need for greater mutual trust and respect for Nepal's autonomy, suggesting a perceived Indian entitlement toward Nepal. Nepal Foreign Minister Khanal said the focus must be on environmental degradation hampering the region and that collaborative steps must be taken to address it. MP Shashi Tharoor, a guest at the summit, in reference to the recent floods, said, "It's always important for India to talk less and listen more," calling the 2015 blockade a "Himalayan blunder".

While India's support for democratic movements has been appreciated, instances such as its role in the 2006 Jana Andolan—which led to the overthrow of the monarchy—were perceived by many as interference and India as utilizing Nepal as a strategic buffer state against China.

Beijing has also provided emergency funds, leading many to see this as a form of soft-power competition, although it would be too simplistic to suggest that either country is providing assistance merely for geopolitical purposes. Nevertheless, this claim has some substance, as some Indian media platforms have used the disaster to compare India's humanitarian aid with China's 'debt diplomacy'. The effectiveness of India's assistance will depend not simply on the scale of what it provides, but on whether Kathmandu and Nepali society perceive it as an expression of solidarity rather than an instrument of influence.

Nepal has formally requested a rapid response from the UN-backed Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD). Given that the FRLD has yet to transfer funds in response to any disaster and remains at the pledges-made stage with other countries, receiving funds and assistance in the near future seems unlikely, though the outcome could differ given the exceptional nature of the disaster.

India's assistance is valuable due to its substantial logistical capacity and ability to mobilize quickly, but aid does not automatically translate into pro-India sentiment. FM Khanal, in an interview, has now stated that Nepal is unfairly facing the consequences of China, the US, and India's climate change contributions and that they must be held accountable accordingly.

Indian analysts are discussing a potential connection between China's dam construction and the floods and have raised concerns about China's Yarlung Tsangpo dam, but they have adopted a more logically sound and less accusatory approach

than before.

India has now offered to help rebuild damaged critical infrastructure and hydropower projects. 98% of Nepal's electricity comes from hydropower, and the repeated devastation of these projects in multiple disaster events, due to a lack of risk assessment and implementation of warning systems, has worsened Nepal's debt burden. If India contributes to reconstruction efforts, it could significantly improve ties between the nations. Ultimately, Nepal's growing emphasis on autonomy and climate justice means that India-Nepal relations may increasingly depend on whether New Delhi can translate short-term relief into long-term cooperation without the perceptions of political or environmental overreach.