

# LINES BETWEEN NATURAL AND MAN-MADE DISASTERS BLURRED: UTTARAKHAND DISASTER MANAGEMENT SECRETARY

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Secretary, Disaster Management, Uttarakhand, Ranjit Kumar Sinha. File | Photo Credit: PTI

A senior Uttarakhand government official said on March 11 that after the Mishra Committee report in 1976, “major investigation, master plan or mitigation measures” were missing in [Joshimath, the Himalayan town affected by land subsidence](#) since January this year. The crisis has left hundreds of [residents displaced from their homes](#).

Ranjit Kumar Sinha, Secretary, Disaster Management, Uttarakhand, said roads were built and widened without any consideration for water channels, while huge colonies and Army bases were allowed to come up in the region. He said the lines between man-made and natural disasters had blurred and before [thinking about development](#), the dynamics of mountains and hills should be considered.

Mr. Sinha was speaking before a panel of experts on the topic ‘Disaster Mitigation and Resilience’ on the second day of the National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction Conference (NPDRR) in Delhi.

The Mahesh Chandra Mishra committee in 1976 had said that Joshimath was built on the debris of ancient landslides and prohibited heavy construction work. It recommended proper drainage, reforestation, and reinforcements near river banks to prevent erosion.

Mr. Sinha said hills and mountains are “living entities” which have their own dynamics and are bound by laws of physics, chemistry and biology. He stated that earlier, people built small eco-friendly houses and they never touched slopes or disturbed water channels or vegetation but what is being witnessed today is “luxurious interference instead of peaceful coexistence.”

Tapovan Vishnugad Hydropower Plant of NTPC, in Joshimath, on January 17, 2023. | Photo Credit: PTI

“What happened in Joshimath? Land subsidence, first reported by the Mishra committee report in 1976. What have we done after that? Any major investigation, master plan or mitigation measure? We were missing many points. We have built and widened roads without any

consideration for slope or water channels, we have allowed heavy vehicles to ply, allowed people to construct multi-storeyed houses and huge colonies, allowed Army and ITBP [Indo Tibetan Border Police] to construct big base. These are necessary but we should have done something for Joshimath as a whole. There was no investigation but now the investigation is being done,” Mr. Sinha said.

He said mountains are essential not only for the hilly people but for people in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and other States too as Ganga and Yamuna, the two main rivers that originate in Uttarakhand, make the soil fertile.

He said the gaps in regulations and guidelines should be plugged so that people are made responsible for their acts.

“Mandatory building codes should be in place and any compensation should be linked to building codes. People should be helped with cost-effective construction technology. People are building houses in haphazard manner. Demarcation between man-made and natural disaster is blurred. We cannot say that some activity going on a few kilometres away from a habitation will not have any impact on the habitation. What should take precedence, the activity or nature? One-size fits-all policy is not working,” Mr. Sinha said.

Locals have blamed the construction of a tunnel by the National Power Thermal Corporation (NTPC) a kilometre away from Joshimath town for the sinking of the area.

He said that the issues of mountain States are different and suggested that there are areas which should be left to the States.

“Kerala has done very well in early warning system, there should be a platform for exchange of information at State level. There is no institutional framework for exchange of ideas... landslide mitigation requires serious attention,” he stated, adding that landslides are a major concern in hilly areas. “The Ministry of Mines had submitted a proposal for a landslide management centre but the proposal has been rejected. Uttarakhand is coming up with a landslide management centre,” he concluded.

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