

Opinion

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A call for disaster drills for Indians



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WHEREVER WE live in India, we now face some form of extreme weather. The danger may be a heatwave, cyclone, cloudburst, flash flood or landslide. The hazards differ, but no part of the country can assume it is safe. Yet most of us have never taken part in a disaster drill.

Every summer, people collapse. Every monsoon, children and adults are swept away. During the recent Assam floods, 13-year-old Hridip Panika entered the floodwaters to save his puppy. He saved the animal, but lost his life in the current. Many of these deaths unfold within minutes, before trained help can arrive. Survival depends on a few immediate decisions.

In a recent assessment, we found that hot days have increased by about five to ten days per decade since the 1950s, while extreme rain events causing floods over India tripled. Meanwhile, India has improved its ability to forecast heatwaves, cyclones and heavy rain. Alerts now reach millions through television, mobile phones and social media. However, a warning only tells us that danger is approaching. It does not teach us what to do. That knowledge has to be learnt and practised before the emergency.

A World Health Organization regional report cites 36,362 drowning deaths in India in 2021. Just 15 centimetres of fast-moving water can knock an adult down, while about 30 cm can carry away many cars. Yet people routinely walk, ride or drive into floodwater without knowing its depth, speed or what lies beneath.

India needs a national culture of disaster drills. Every school, college, government office and workplace should conduct two mandatory seasonal drills each year, one before the heatwave season and another before the monsoon.

A heat drill should simulate a student or worker developing severe weakness, dizziness or confusion. Participants should know who calls for medical help, where rapid cooling will begin and who checks on those at greater risk. Every institution should identify a shaded or cooled room, maintain drinking water and know when outdoor work, sports and assemblies must stop.

A monsoon drill should be equally practical. Students and staff should walk the evacuation route to higher ground, practise head counts and test an alternative route in case the main exit is flooded. They should learn never to enter or drive through moving water, and to stay away from submerged drains and electrical wires. Children should be taught to throw a rope or flotation aid from a safe position and call trained rescuers, instead of jumping into the water. Survival swimming and basic water-rescue skills should become part of education in flood-prone districts.

Disaster management must become a practical part of education from the primary level. Children should learn local hazards, warning colours, safe routes, signs of heat illness and basic first aid. Older students can learn emergency communication, evacuation and community volunteering. These abilities should be demonstrated, not memorised. A child who learns them at school will also carry them home.

India is not starting from zero. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) already provides for school disaster plans, mock drills and village-level drill calendars based on local hazards. Yet a six-state survey found that most schools had not held the drills, many lacked evacuation plans and only about a quarter had trained staff and students.

Japan shows what sustained preparedness can achieve. During the 2011 tsunami, around 3,000 schoolchildren in Kamaishi reached safety after years of disaster education taught them to move quickly to higher ground. In June 2026, Taiwan tested how multiple agencies would respond to three consecutive days at 40°C. Bangladesh has built a standing network of about 76,000 coastal volunteers trained to carry warnings to communities, organise evacuations, manage shelters and provide first aid.

Every panchayat and urban ward should designate at least one local safety point. It should be accessible to people with disabilities and have water, cooling, first aid, toilets, backup lighting and communication. Its location and routes should be displayed publicly. District disaster management authorities should coordinate drills with schools, health departments, fire services, local governments and trained volunteers. Strong infrastructure, health services and emergency response remain essential.

Half an hour of practice twice a year is a small demand. In an emergency, the decisions made during those first few minutes can determine who reaches safety.

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