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# A massive rock and ice avalanche caused the 2021 disaster at Chamoli, Indian Himalaya

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81 **Abstract:** On 7 Feb 2021, a catastrophic mass flow descended the Ronti Gad, Rishiganga, and  
82 Dhauliganga valleys in Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India, causing widespread devastation and  
83 severely damaging two hydropower projects. Over 200 people were killed or are missing. Our  
84 analysis of satellite imagery, seismic records, numerical model results, and eyewitness videos  
85 reveals that  $\sim 27 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3$  of rock and glacier ice collapsed from the steep north face of Ronti  
86 Peak. The rock and ice avalanche rapidly transformed into an extraordinarily large and mobile  
87 debris flow that transported boulders  $>20 \text{ m}$  in diameter, and scoured the valley walls up to 220  
88 m above the valley floor. The intersection of the hazard cascade with downvalley infrastructure  
89 resulted in a disaster, which highlights key questions about adequate monitoring and sustainable  
90 development in the Himalaya as well as other remote, high-mountain environments.

91  
92 **One-Sentence Summary:** The Chamoli disaster was triggered by an extraordinary rock and ice  
93 avalanche and debris flow, that destroyed infrastructure and left 204 people dead or missing.  
94

95 **Main Text:** Steep slopes, high topographic relief, and seismic activity make mountain regions  
96 prone to extremely destructive mass movements (e.g. 1). The sensitivity of glaciers and  
97 permafrost to climate changes is exacerbating these hazards (e.g. 2–7). Hazard cascades, where  
98 an initial event causes a downstream chain reaction (e.g. 8), can be particularly far-reaching,  
99 especially when they involve large amounts of water (7, 9, 10). An example is the 1970  
100 Huascarán avalanche, Peru, that was one of the largest, farthest-reaching, and deadliest ( $\sim 6000$   
101 lives lost) mass flows (11). Similarly, in 2013, over 4,000 people died at Kedarnath,  
102 Uttarakhand, India, when a moraine-dammed lake breached following heavy rainfall and  
103 snowmelt (12–14). Between 1894 and 2021, the Uttarakhand Himalaya has witnessed at least 16  
104 major disasters from flash floods, landslides, and earthquakes (14, 15).

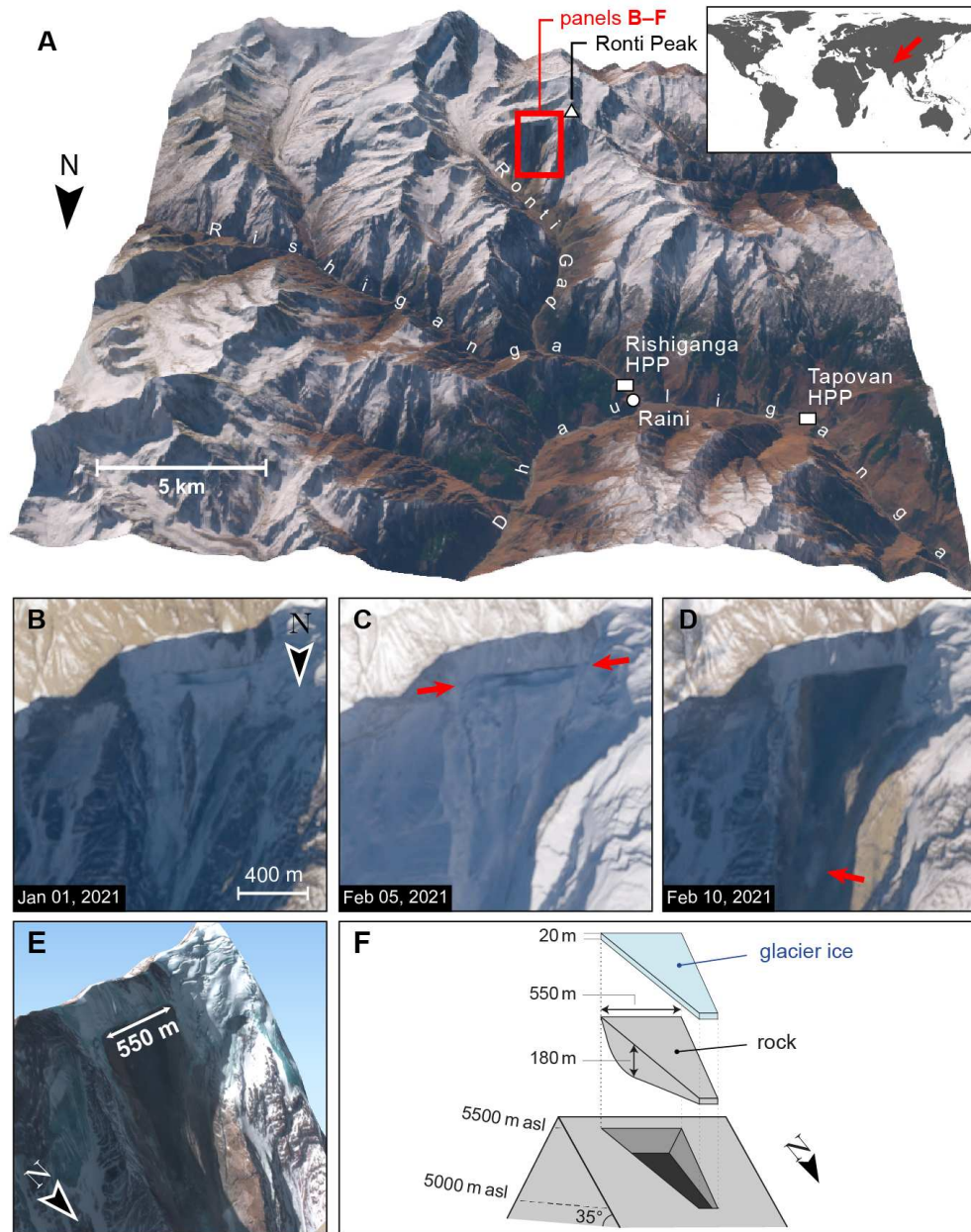
105 Human activities that intersect with the mountain cryosphere can increase risk (16) and are  
106 common in Himalayan valleys where hydropower development is proliferating due to growing  
107 energy demands, the need for economic development, and efforts to transition into a low-carbon  
108 society (17, 18). Hydropower projects in Uttarakhand and elsewhere in the region have been  
109 opposed over their environmental effects, public safety, and issues associated with justice and  
110 rehabilitation (19, 20).

111 On 7 Feb 2021, a massive rock and ice avalanche from the 6063 m-high Ronti Peak generated a  
112 cascade of events that caused more than 200 deaths or missing persons, as well as damage or  
113 destruction of infrastructure that most notably included two hydropower projects in the  
114 Rishiganga and Dhauliganga valleys (Fig. 1, table S1) (21). Here, we present a rapid and  
115 comprehensive reconstruction of the hazard cascade. We leveraged multiple types of remote  
116 sensing data, eyewitness videos, numerical modeling, seismic data, and reconnaissance field  
117 observations in a collaborative, global effort to understand this event. We also describe the  
118 antecedent conditions and the immediate societal response, allowing us to consider some wider  
119 implications for sustainable development in high-mountain environments.

## 120 **February 7 2021 hazard cascade**

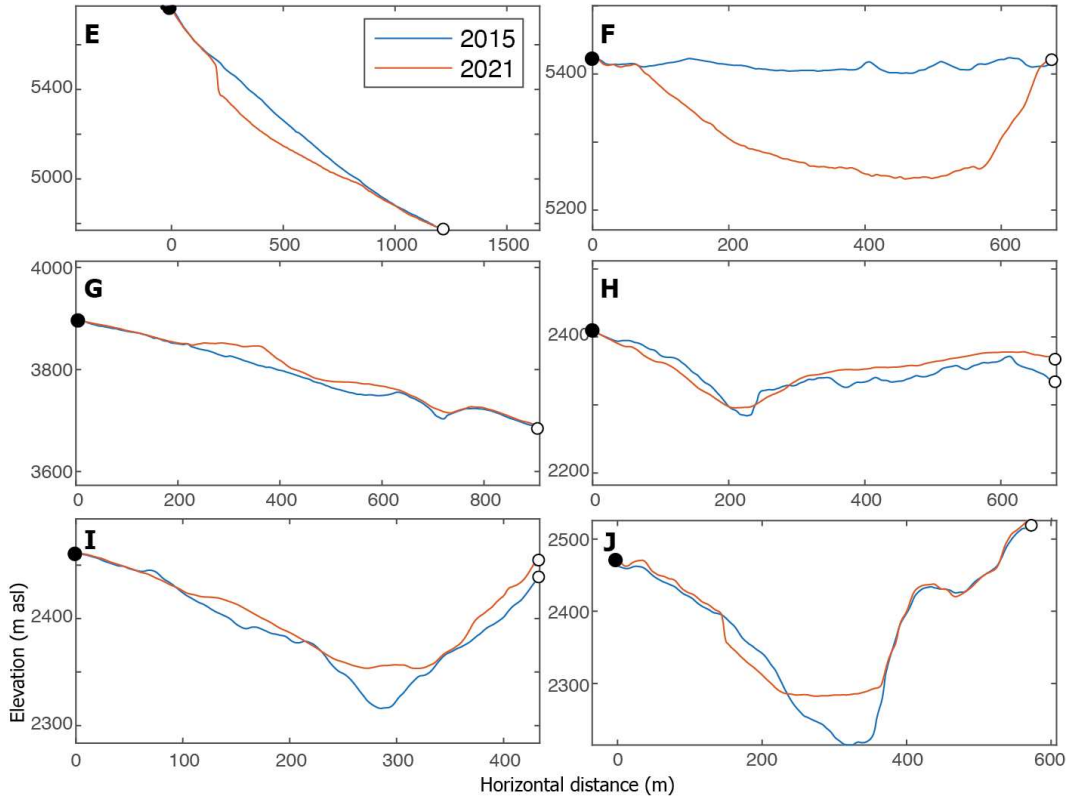
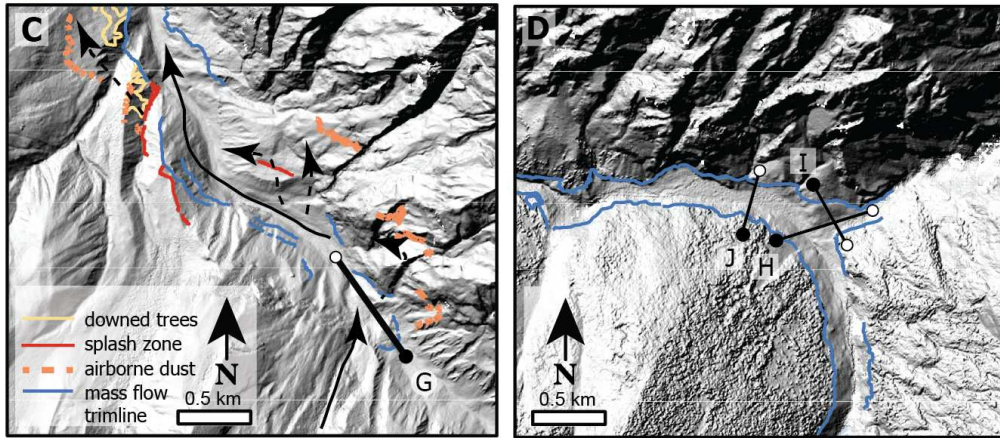
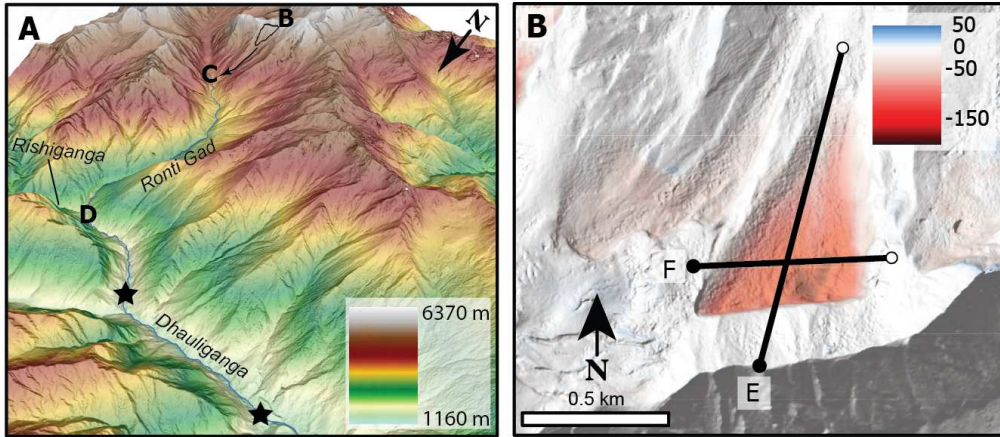
121 At 4:51 UTC (10:21 Indian Standard Time [IST]), about  $26.9 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3$  (95% confidence interval:  
122  $26.5\text{--}27.3 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3$ ) of rock and ice (Fig. 1, 2) detached from the steep north face of Ronti Peak at  
123 an elevation of about 5,500 m asl, and impacted the Ronti Gad ('gad' means rivulet) valley floor

124 about 1,800 m below. We estimated the onset of this avalanche and its velocity by analyzing  
 125 seismic data from two distant stations, 160 and 174 km southeast of the source (Fig. S6) (22,  
 126 §5.1). The initial failure happened between 4:51:13 and 4:51:21 UTC, based on a source-sensor  
 127 wave travel-time correction. We attributed a high-frequency signal 55 to 58 seconds later to the  
 128 impact of the avalanche on the valley bottom, indicating a mean speed of the rock and ice  
 129 avalanche of between  $57$  and  $60 \text{ ms}^{-1}$  ( $205$  to  $216 \text{ km h}^{-1}$ ) down the  $\sim 35^\circ$  steep mountain face.  
 130  
 131



132  
 133 **Fig. 1. Overview of the Chamoli disaster, Uttarakhand, India.** (A) 3D rendering of the local  
 134 geography, with labels for main place names mentioned in the text. HPP stands for hydropower  
 135 project. (B-D) Pre- and post-event satellite imagery of the site of the collapsed rock and glacier  
 136 block, and the resulting scar. Note snow cover in the region just before the event (C). The red  
 137 arrows in (C) mark the fracture that became the headscarp of the landslide (22, §3.2 and fig. S4).

138 The arrow in D points to a remaining part of the lower eastern glacier. (E) 3D rendering of the  
139 scar. (F) Schematic of failed mass of rock and ice. Satellite imagery in (A–D) and (E) is from  
140 Sentinel-2 (Copernicus Sentinel Data 02-10-2021) and Pléiades-HR (© CNES 02-10-2021,  
141 Distribution AIRBUS DS), respectively.



143

144 **Fig. 2. Satellite-derived elevation data of the Chamoli hazard cascade.** (A) Perspective  
145 view of the area, from the landslide source at Ronti Peak to the Rishiganga and Tapovan  
146 Vishnugad hydropower projects (black stars). (B) Elevation change over the landslide scar  
147 based on DEM-differencing between September 2015 and February 10-11, 2021. (C) The  
148 proximal valley floor, with geomorphic interpretations of the flow path. (D) Confluence of  
149 Ronti Gad and Rishiganga River. (E-J) Topographic profiles showing elevation change due to  
150 rock/icefall and sediment deposition for locations shown in (B-D). Elevation loss on the inner  
151 bank in (J) is primarily due to the destruction of forest.

152

153 Differencing of high-resolution digital elevation models (DEMs) revealed a failure scar that  
154 has a vertical difference of up to 180 m and a slope-normal thickness of ~80 m on average,  
155 and a slab width up to ~550 m, including both bedrock and overlying glacier ice (Fig. 2). The  
156 lowermost part of the larger eastern glacier is still in place and was not eroded by the rock and  
157 ice avalanche moving over it (Fig. 1D), suggesting that the avalanche may have become  
158 airborne for a short period during its initial descent. Optical feature tracking detected  
159 movement of the failed rock block as early as 2016, with the largest displacement in the  
160 summer months of 2017 and 2018 (fig. S4). This movement opened a fracture up to 80 m  
161 wide in the glacier and into the underlying bedrock (Fig. 1, fig. S5). Geodetic analysis and  
162 glacier thickness inversions indicate that the collapsed mass comprised ~80% rock and ~20%  
163 glacier ice by volume (22, §5.2, fig. S10). Melt of this ice was essential to the downstream  
164 evolution of the flow, as water transformed the rock and ice avalanche into a highly mobile  
165 debris flow (cf. 23, 24). Media reports (25) suggest that some ice blocks (diameter <1 m) were  
166 found in tunnels at the Tapovan Vishnugad hydropower site (hereafter referred to as the  
167 Tapovan project), and some videos of the debris flow (22, §5.3) show floating blocks that we  
168 interpret as ice, indicating that some of the ice survived at considerable distance downstream.  
169 Notably, and in contrast to most previously documented rock avalanches, very little debris is  
170 preserved at the base of the failed slope. This is likely due to the large volumes of water (22,  
171 §5.5) that resulted in a high mobility of the flow.

172

173 Geomorphic mapping based on very high-resolution satellite images (Table S2) acquired  
174 during and immediately after the event, provides evidence of the flow evolution. We detected  
175 four components of the catastrophic mass flow, beginning with the main rock and ice  
176 avalanche from Ronti Peak described above (component one).

177

178 The second component is “splash deposits” (cf. 26–28), which are relatively fine-grained, wet  
179 sediments that became airborne as the mass flow ran up adjacent slopes. For example, the  
180 rock and ice avalanche traveled up a steep slope on the east side of the valley opposite the  
181 source zone, and some material became airborne, being deposited at a height of about 120 m  
182 above the valley floor. These deposits include boulders up to ~8 m (a-axis length). The bulk of  
183 the flow then traveled back to the proximal (west) side of the valley and rode up a ridge ~220  
184 m above the valley floor, before becoming airborne and splashing into a smaller valley to the  
185 west (Fig. 2C, figs. S15, S18). Boulders up to 13 m (a-axis length) were deposited near the top  
186 of the ridge. Vegetation remained intact on the lee side of some ridges that were overrun by  
187 the splashing mass.

188

189 A third component of the mass flow is reflected in airborne dust deposition. A dust cloud is  
190 visible in PlanetScope imagery from 5:01 UTC and 5:28 UTC February 7 (10:31 and 10:58  
191 IST). A smooth layer of debris, estimated from satellite imagery to be only a few cm in  
192 thickness, was deposited higher than the splash deposits, up to ~500 m above the valley floor,  
193 although the boundary between the airborne dust deposition and other mass flow deposits is  
194 indistinct in places. Signs of the largely airborne splash and dust components can be observed  
195 over ~3.5 km downstream of the valley impact site. The avalanche also generated a powerful  
196 air blast (cf. 1) that flattened about 0.2 km<sup>2</sup> of forest on the west side of the Ronti Gad valley  
197 (Fig. 2C).

198  
199 After the rock and ice avalanche impacted the valley floor, most of it moved downvalley in a  
200 northwesterly direction. Frictional heating of the ice in the avalanche generated liquid water  
201 that allowed the transition in flow characteristics, becoming more fluid downvalley, creating a  
202 flow consisting of sediment, water, and blocks of ice. The uppermost part of the valley floor  
203 deposits is around 0.75 x10<sup>6</sup> m<sup>3</sup>, with remarkably few large boulders that typically form the  
204 upper surface of rock avalanches (e.g. 29, 30) (Fig. 2G, fig. S16). The mass flow traveled  
205 downvalley and superelevated (runup elevation) up to ~130 m above the valley floor around  
206 bends (fig. S17). Clear trimlines, at some places at multiple levels, are evident along much of  
207 the flow path (e.g. Fig. 2C, D).

208  
209 At the confluence of the Ronti Gad and Rishiganga River, a ~40 m thick deposit of debris  
210 blocked the Rishiganga valley (Fig. 2H, I). Deposition in this area probably resulted from  
211 deceleration of the mass flow at a sharp turn to the west. During the days following the event,  
212 a lake ~700 m long formed behind these deposits in the Rishiganga valley upstream of its  
213 confluence with Ronti Gad. The lake was still present two months later and had grown since  
214 the initial formation. Substantial deposition occurred about 1 km downstream of the  
215 confluence, where material up to ~100 m thick was deposited on the valley floor (Fig. 2J).  
216 DEM differencing shows that the total deposit volume at the Ronti Gad-Rishiganga River  
217 confluence and just downstream was ~8x10<sup>6</sup> m<sup>3</sup>. These large sediment deposits likely indicate  
218 the location where the flow transitioned to a debris flow (31) - the fourth component.

219  
220 A field reconnaissance by co-authors from the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology  
221 indicates that the impact of debris flow material (sediment, water, ice, woody debris) at the  
222 confluence of Rishiganga River with Dhauliganga River created a bottleneck and forced some  
223 material 150-200 m up the Dhauliganga (fig. S15). The release of the water a few minutes  
224 later led to the destruction of a temple on the north bank of the Dhauliganga.

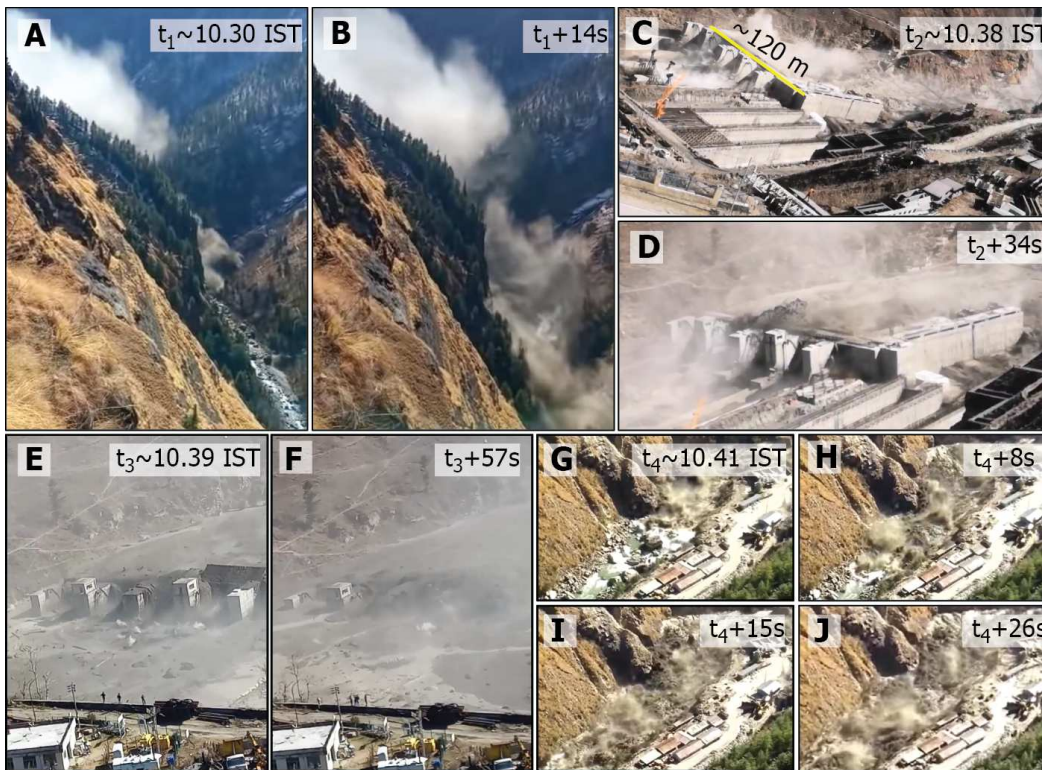
225  
226 A substantial fraction of the fine-grained material involved in the event was transported far  
227 downstream. This more dilute flow could be considered a fifth component. Approximately 24  
228 hours after the initial landslide, the sediment plume was visible in PlanetScope and Sentinel-2  
229 imagery in the hydropower project's reservoir on the Alaknanda River at Srinagar, about 150  
230 km downstream from the source. About 2½ weeks later, increased turbidity was observed at  
231 Kanpur on the Ganges River, ~900 km from the source. An official of the Delhi water quality  
232 board reported that 8 days after the Chamoli disaster, a chief water source for the city - a canal  
233 drawing directly from the Ganga River - had an unprecedented spike in suspended sediment  
234 (turbidity) 80 times the permissible level (32). The amount of corresponding sedimentation in

235 hydropower reservoirs and rivers is unknown, but possibly substantial, and may contribute to  
236 increased erosion on turbine blades, and infilling of reservoirs in the years to come.

237

238 Analysis of eyewitness videos permitted estimation of the propagation of the flow front below  
239 the Ronti Gad-Rishiganga River confluence (Fig. 3, 22, §5.3). The maximum frontal velocity  
240 reconstructed from these videos is  $\sim 25 \text{ m s}^{-1}$  near the Rishiganga hydropower project (fig.  
241 S11, table S5), which is about 15 km downstream of the rock and ice avalanche source. Just  
242 upstream of the Tapovan project (another  $\sim 10 \text{ km}$  downriver), the velocity decreased to  $\sim 16 \text{ m}$   
243  $\text{s}^{-1}$ , and just downstream of Tapovan (26 km from source), the velocity was  $\sim 12 \text{ m s}^{-1}$ . The  
244 large reduction in frontal velocity is likely related to impoundment behind the Tapovan  
245 project dam. Analysis of PlanetScope images (at 5:01 UTC and 5:28 UTC) suggests that the  
246 average frontal velocity between Raini (at Rishiganga hydropower project) and Joshimath (16  
247 km downstream) was  $\sim 10 \text{ m s}^{-1}$ . We also estimated mean discharge from the videos to be  
248 between  $\sim 8,200$  and  $\sim 14,200 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$  at the Rishiganga hydropower project and between  $\sim 2,900$   
249 and  $\sim 4,900 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$  downstream of the Tapovan project. Estimates for the debris flow duration  
250 are complicated by uncertain volumes, water contents, discharge amounts, and shapes of  
251 discharge curves at specific locations. For Rishiganga, for example, we estimate a duration  
252 of 10-20 minutes, a number that appears realistic from the information available.

253



Parts a-b: Electricity Market in India: Dhauliganga 4\*70 MW Cofferdam collapse in Uttarakhand Chamoli... Prayers for Uttarakhand, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96nopxNn-Qp4&t=1s>; accessed: 28th February 2021  
Parts c-d: Kamlesh Maikhuri (<https://www.facebook.com/100005762340793/videos/1678161685719227/> (since removed)); Permission: verbal permission of the author given to Kavita Upadhyay  
Parts e-f: Manvar Rawat (<https://www.facebook.com/100007108448247/videos/2796749477238640/>); Permission: verbal permission of the author given to Kavita Upadhyay  
Parts g-j: RW • Rishikeshwritings: Uttarakhand Flood 2021|| Rishikesh, Srinagar, Devprayag, Haridwar, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE0iPLq8gbY>; accessed: 28th February

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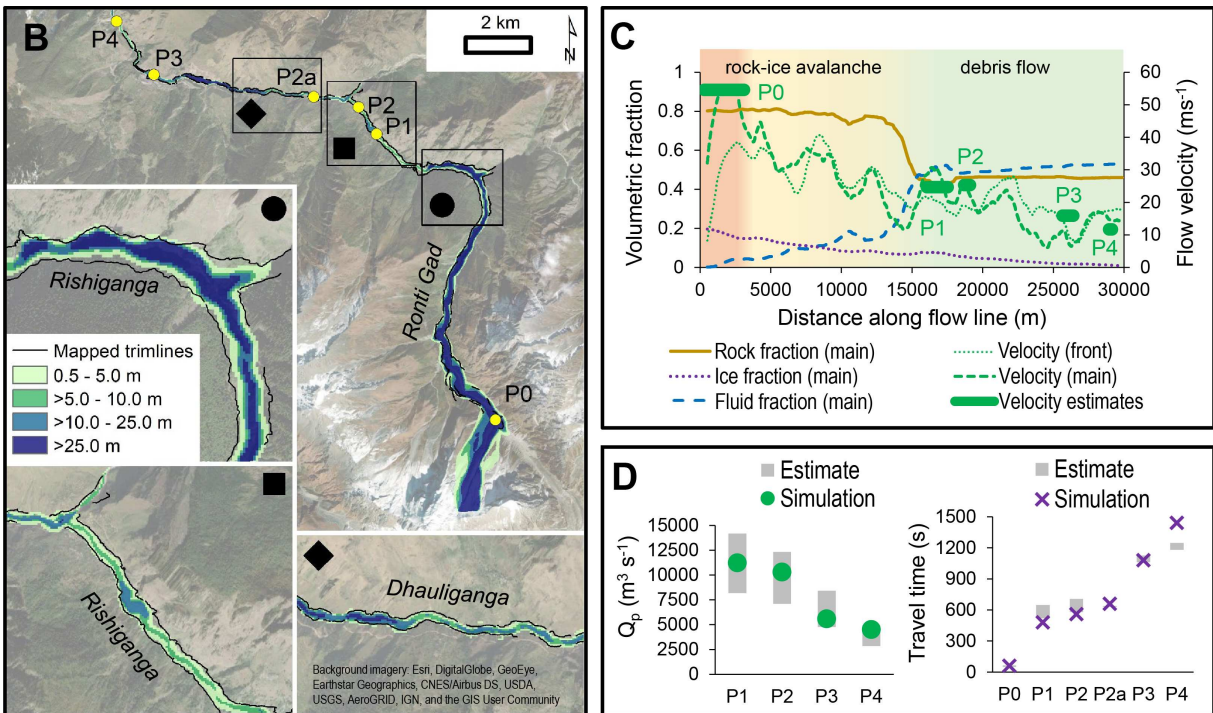
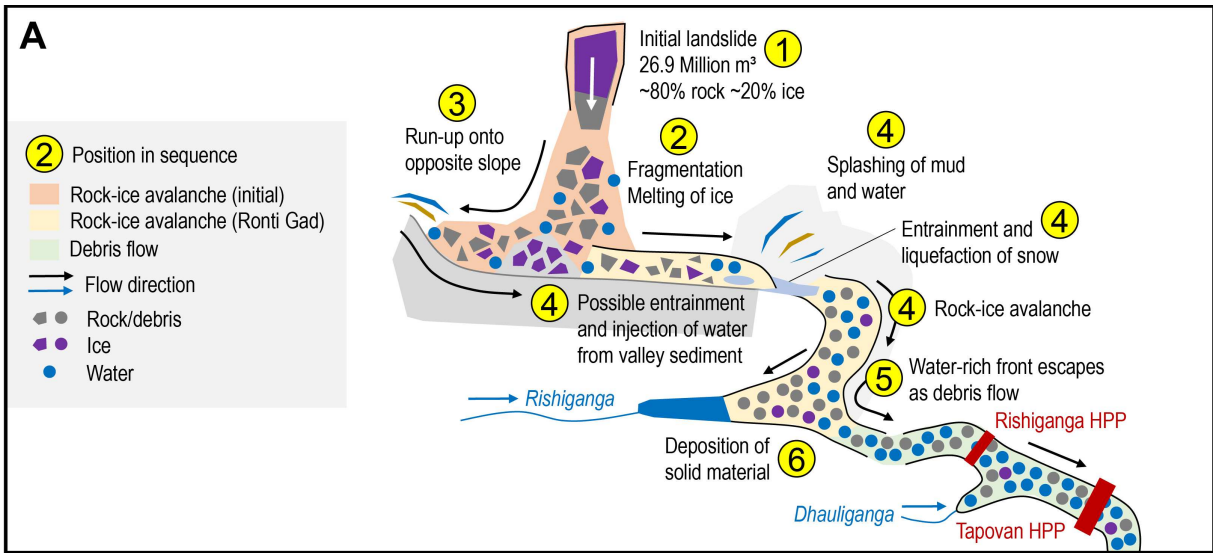
**Fig. 3. Sample video frames used to analyse flood velocity and discharge. (A,B)** Flow front arrives and rushes through the valley upstream of the Rishiganga project (location P1 in Fig. 4). **(C)** Flow front arrives at Tapovan project's dam (location P3). **(D)** The reservoir is being filled quickly; spillways are damaged. **(E)** The dam is overtopped. **(F)** Collapse of

259 remaining structures. (G-J) Flow front proceeds down the valley below the Tapovan dam  
260 (location P4); spreading into the village in (J).

261

262 We conducted numerical simulations with r.avaflow (22, §5.4), which indicate that the rock  
263 and ice avalanche could not have transitioned to the debris flow seen farther downstream  
264 without an accompanying reduction in the debris volume. If such a direct transition had  
265 occurred, the modeling suggests that the flow discharge would be approximately one order of  
266 magnitude higher than the estimates derived from video recordings (22, §5.4). The deposition  
267 patterns we observed in satellite imagery support the hypothesis that the vicinity of the Ronti  
268 Gad-Rishiganga River confluence played a key role in flow transition. Our numerical  
269 simulations are consistent with the escape of a fluid-rich front from the rock and ice avalanche  
270 mass near this confluence (Fig. 4A), reproducing mapped trimlines and estimated flow  
271 velocities and discharges down to Tapovan (Fig. 4B, C). Our simulated discharge estimates at  
272 P1–P4 are within the ranges derived from the video analysis (Fig. 4D, 22, §5.3), and  
273 simulated travel times between P0–P3 (Fig. 4D) show excellent agreement (<5% difference)  
274 with travel times inferred from seismic data, videos, and satellite imagery. We found less  
275 agreement between the numerical model results and the reconstructions from videos farther  
276 downstream due to the complex effects of the Tapovan project in slowing the flow, which are  
277 at a finer scale than is represented by our model.

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**Fig. 4. Flow evolution scenarios and simulation.** (A) Schematic of the evolution of the flow from the source to Tapovan. (B) Maximum flow height simulated with r.avaflow, showing the observed trim lines for comparison. P0 is the location of the velocity estimate derived from seismic data, P1-P4 are locations of velocity estimates based on videos and satellite images. (C) Along-profile evolution of flow velocity and fractions of rock/debris, ice, and water simulated with r.avaflow. (D) Simulated and estimated peak discharges and travel times at above locations. In the legend labels, (front) refers to the flow front whereas (main) refers to the point of maximum flow momentum.

288 **Causes and implications**

289 The February 7 rock and ice avalanche was a very large event with an extraordinarily high fall  
290 height that resulted in a disaster due to its extreme mobility and the presence of downstream  
291 infrastructure. The ~3700 m vertical drop to the Tapovan HPP is surpassed clearly by only  
292 two known events in the historic record, namely the 1962 and 1970 Huascarán avalanches  
293 (11), while its mobility ( $H/L = 0.16$  at Tapovan, where  $H$  is fall height and  $L$  is flow length) is  
294 exceeded only by a few recent glacier detachments (10). The location of the failure was due to  
295 the extremely steep and high relief of Ronti Peak. The sheared nature of the source rocks and  
296 contrasting interbedded rock types likely conditioned the failure (22, §1). The large and  
297 expanding fracture (Fig 1B, C) at the head scarp may have allowed liquid water to penetrate  
298 into the bedrock, increasing pore-water pressures or enhancing freeze-thaw weathering.

299  
300 Nearly all (190) of the 204 people either killed or missing in the disaster (22, §2, Table S1)  
301 were workers at the Rishiganga (13.2 MW) and Tapovan (520 MW) project sites (33). Direct  
302 economic losses from damage to the two hydropower structures alone are over 223 million  
303 USD (34, 35). The high loss of human life and infrastructure damage was due to the debris  
304 flow, and not the initial rock and ice avalanche. However, not all large, high-mountain rock  
305 and ice avalanches transform into highly mobile debris flows that cause destruction far from  
306 their source (9).

307  
308 Our energy balance estimates indicate that most of the  $\sim 5\text{-}6 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3$  volume of glacier ice first  
309 warmed (along with a portion of the rock mass) from approximately  $-8^\circ\text{C}$  to  $0^\circ\text{C}$  and then  
310 melted through frictional heating during the avalanche as it descended to the Rishiganga  
311 valley, involving a drop of approximately 3400 m (22, §5.5). Potential other sources of water  
312 were considered, including glacier lake outburst floods, catastrophic drainage of water from  
313 reservoirs such as surface lakes, ice deposited by earlier avalanches, and englacial reservoirs.  
314 No evidence for such sources was observed in available remote sensing data. A slow-moving  
315 storm system moved through the area in the days before Feb 7. We estimate that a  $\sim 220,000\text{--}$   
316  $360,000 \text{ m}^3$  contribution from precipitation over the Ronti Gad basin was a minor component  
317 of the flow, representing only 4-7% of the water equivalent contained in the initial glacier ice  
318 detachment. Similarly, while water already present in the river, water ejected from  
319 groundwater, melting snow, wet sediment, and water released from the run-of-the-river  
320 hydroelectric project may have all contributed to the debris flow, even when taken together  
321 (with generous error margins), these sum to a small amount compared to the probable range of  
322 water volumes in the mass movement. The major effect of ice melt on the mobility of rock  
323 and ice avalanches is documented (9, 10), but it appears that the combination of the specific  
324 rock/ice fraction ( $\sim 80/20\%$  by volume) and large fall height of the rock and ice avalanche led  
325 to a rare, severe event during which nearly all of the ice melted.

326  
327 Soon after the disaster, media reports and expert opinions started to circulate, postulating links  
328 of the event to climate change. Recent attribution studies demonstrated that glacier mass  
329 loss on global, regional and local scales is to a large extent attributable to anthropogenic  
330 greenhouse gas forcing (36, 37). High-mountain slope failures in rock and ice, however,  
331 pose additional challenges to attribution due to multiple factors and processes involved in  
332 such events. While long-term trends of increasing slope failure occurrence in some regions

333 could be attributed to climate change (16, 38, 39), attribution of single events such as the  
334 Chamoli event remains largely elusive. Nevertheless, certain elements of the Chamoli event  
335 have potential links to climate, and weather, as described below. Furthermore, the Chamoli  
336 event may be seen in the context of a change in geomorphological sensitivity (40) and  
337 might therefore be seen as a precursor for an increase in such events as climate warming  
338 proceeds.

339

340 The stability of glacierized and perennially frozen high-mountain slopes is indeed particularly  
341 sensitive to climate change (16). Our analysis suggests regional climate and related  
342 cryospheric change could have interacted in a complex way with the geologic and topographic  
343 setting to produce this massive slope failure. Air and surface temperatures have been  
344 increasing across the Himalayan region, with greater rates of warming during the second half  
345 of the 20th Century and at higher elevations (41, 42). Most glaciers in the Himalaya are  
346 shrinking and mass loss rates are accelerating across the region (22, §1, 43–46). Glacier  
347 shrinkage uncovers and destabilizes mountain flanks and strongly alters the hydrological and  
348 thermal regimes of the underlying rock.

349

350 The detachment zone at Ronti Peak is about 1 km higher than the regional lower limit of  
351 permafrost at around 4,000 to 4,500 m asl., as indicated by rock glaciers in the region and  
352 global permafrost maps (47, 48). Exposed rock on the north face of Ronti Peak likely contains  
353 cold permafrost with rock temperatures several degrees below 0°C. In connection with  
354 glaciers, however, ground temperatures can be locally higher. The ice-free south face of Ronti  
355 Peak is certainly substantially warmer with rock temperatures perhaps around or above 0°C,  
356 causing strong south-to-north lateral heat fluxes (49). Permafrost temperatures are increasing  
357 worldwide, in particular in cold permafrost (16, 50, 51), leading to long-term and deep-seated  
358 thermal anomalies, and even permafrost degradation (49). Increasing ground temperatures at  
359 the failure site of the Chamoli avalanche could have resulted in reduced strength of the frozen  
360 rock mass by altering the rock hydrology and the mechanical properties of discontinuities and  
361 the failed rock mass (52).

362

363 The geology of the failed rocks includes several observed or inferred critical attributes (22,  
364 §1): (i) The rocks are cut by multiple directions of planar weaknesses; the failed mass  
365 detached along four of these. (ii) The rock mass is close to a major thrust fault, with many  
366 local shear fractures, which - along with other discontinuities - would have facilitated aqueous  
367 chemical weathering. (iii) The rock types (schist and gneiss), even when nominally  
368 unweathered, contain abundant soft, platy, oriented, and geomechanically anisotropic minerals  
369 (phyllosilicates and kyanite especially); Weathering will further weaken these rocks, and they  
370 will be more likely to disintegrate into fine material upon impact, which would influence the  
371 rheology and likely enhance the mobility of the mass flow.

372

373 Importantly, the 7 Feb failure considerably changed the stress regime and thermal conditions  
374 in the area of the detachment zone. Only detailed investigations and monitoring will  
375 determine whether rock or ice adjacent to the failed block (including a large hanging rock  
376 block above the scarp) were destabilized due to these changes and present an ongoing hazard.  
377 Similarly, the impoundment at the Ronti Gad-Rishiganga River confluence requires careful  
378 monitoring as embedded ice in the dam deposits may melt with warmer temperatures,

379 increasing the risk of an outburst flood by reducing lake freeboard of the dam, and/or reducing  
380 structural coherence of the dam.

381

382 Videos of the event, including the ones broadcast on social media in real time (22, §5.3),  
383 showed that the people directly at risk had little to no warning. This leads us to question what  
384 could have happened if a warning system had been installed. We estimate that a suitably  
385 designed early warning system might have allowed for 6 to 10 minutes of warning before the  
386 arrival of the debris flow at the Tapovan project (perhaps up to 20 minutes if situated near the  
387 landslide source, or if a dense seismic network was leveraged (53)), which may have provided  
388 enough time to evacuate at least some workers from the power project. After the event, a new  
389 flood warning system was installed near Raini (22, §2.1, fig. S15D). Studies show that early  
390 warning system design and installation is technically feasible but rapid communication of  
391 reliable warnings and appropriate responses by individuals to alerts, are complex (54).  
392 Previous research indicates that effective early warning requires public education, including  
393 drills, which would increase awareness of potential hazards and improve ability to take action  
394 when disaster strikes (55, 56). Considering the repeated failures from the same slope in the  
395 past two decades (22, §1), public education and drills in the Chamoli region would be very  
396 beneficial.

## 397 **Conclusions**

398 On the morning of 7 Feb 2021, a large rock and ice avalanche descended the Ronti Gad  
399 valley, rapidly transforming into a highly mobile debris flow that destroyed two hydropower  
400 plants and left more than 200 people dead or missing. We identified three primary drivers for  
401 the severity of the Chamoli disaster: (1) the extraordinary fall height, providing ample  
402 gravitational potential energy; (2) the worst-case rock:ice ratio, which resulted in almost  
403 complete melting of the glacier ice, enhancing the mobility of the debris flow; and (3) the  
404 unfortunate location of multiple hydropower plants in the direct path of the flow.

405 The debris flow disaster started as a wedge failure sourced in bedrock near the crest of Ronti  
406 Peak, and included an overlying hanging glacier. The rock almost completely disintegrated in  
407 the ~1 minute that the wedge took to fall (~5500 – 3,700 m asl), and the rock:ice ratio of the  
408 detached mass was almost exactly the critical value required for near-complete melting of the  
409 ice. As well as having a previous history of large mass movements, the mountain is riven with  
410 planes and points of structural weakness, and further bedrock failures as well as large ice and  
411 snow avalanches are inevitable.

412 Videos of the disaster were rapidly distributed through social media, attracting widespread  
413 international media coverage and catalyzing an immediate response from the international  
414 scientific community. This response effort quickly leveraged images from modern  
415 commercial and civilian government satellite constellations that offer exceptional resolution,  
416 "always-on" cadence, rapid tasking, and global coverage. This event demonstrated that if  
417 appropriate human resources and technologies are in place, post-disaster analysis can be  
418 reduced to days or hours. Nevertheless, ground-based evidence remains crucial for clarifying  
419 the nature of such disasters.

420 Although we cannot attribute this individual disaster specifically to climate change, the  
421 possibly increasing frequency of high-mountain slope instabilities can likely be related to  
422 observed atmospheric warming and corresponding long-term changes in cryospheric  
423 conditions (glaciers, permafrost). Multiple factors beyond those listed above contributed to the  
424 Chamoli rock and ice avalanche, including the geologic structure and steep topography,  
425 possible long-term thermal disturbances in permafrost bedrock induced by atmospheric  
426 warming, stress changes due to the decline and collapse of adjacent and overlying glaciers,  
427 and enhanced melt water infiltration during warm periods.

428 The Chamoli event also raises important questions about clean energy development, climate  
429 change adaptation, disaster governance, conservation, environmental justice, and sustainable  
430 development in the Himalaya and other high-mountain environments. This stresses the  
431 importance of a better understanding of the cause and impact of mountain hazards, leading to  
432 disasters. While the scientific aspects of this event are the focus of our study, we cannot  
433 ignore the human suffering and emerging socio-economic impacts that it caused. It was the  
434 human tragedy that motivated the authors to examine available data and explore how these  
435 data, analyses, and interpretations can be used to help inform decision-making at the ground  
436 level.

437 The disaster tragically revealed the risks associated with the rapid expansion of hydropower  
438 infrastructure into increasingly unstable territory. Enhancing inclusive dialogues among  
439 governments, local stakeholders and communities, private sector, and the scientific  
440 community could help assess, minimize, and prepare for existing risks. The disaster indicates  
441 that the long-term sustainability of planned hydroelectric power projects must account for  
442 both current and future social and environmental conditions, while mitigating risks to  
443 infrastructure, personnel, and downstream communities. Conservation values carry elevated  
444 weight in development policies and infrastructure investments where the needs for social and  
445 economic development interfere with areas prone to natural hazards, putting communities at  
446 risk.

447

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921

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925

## 926 **Supplementary Materials**

927 Supplementary Text

928 Materials and Methods

929 Figs. S1 to S17

930 Tables S1 to S5

931 References (62-124)

932