

Climate, Topographical and Meteorological Investigations of the 16-
17 June 2013 Kedarnath (India) Natural Disaster Event

Rajesh Singh¹, Devendraa Siingh², S. A. Gokani¹, M.G. Sreeush², P.S. Buchunde², Ajeet K.
Maurya¹, R. P. Singh³, A. K. Singh³

[1]{KSK Geomagnetic Research Laboratory, Indian Institute of Geomagnetism, Allahabad,
India}

[2]{Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, India}

[3]{Department of Physics, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India}

Correspondence to: R. Singh (rajeshsing03@gmail.com)

Abstract

The devastating episode (June 17-18, 2013) at Kedarnath (Uttarakhand, India), caused huge loss of lives and physical/material wealth. To understand this catastrophic event, rainfall/convective data and associated climate meteorological parameters are investigated. Low pressure zone with very high cloud cover (60 - 90%), and relative humidity (70 - 100%) associated with low (< 4 m/s) wind velocity over Kedarnath region during June 15-17 are observed. The cause of disaster seems to be the heavy and continuous rainfall associated with snow melting and over flooding/collapse of the Chorabari Lake located upstream. Monsoon advancement was much faster due to the presence of convectively active phase of the Madden Julian Oscillation.

Keywords: Rainfall; Precipitation; Indian Summer Monsoon

1 Introduction

Southwest (SW) monsoon of 2013 over the Indian region (figure 1) has been very unique in terms of its timely onset, and rapid advancement (IMD, 2013). The present study investigates the climate conditions and meteorological aspects of heavy rainfall leading to the Kedarnath floods in the Uttarakhand state (India) of Himalayan region during 17-18 June 2013. The flash floods were later also named as Himalayan tsunami which caused a catastrophe resulting into numerous losses of human lives, live stocks and destruction to property in the Himalayan region. Uttarakhand region in Himalayas normally experiences heavy rainfall during July and August months of the Indian summer monsoon season, and is normally associated with landslides and related dangers. Heavy rains in the month of June such as that occurred during 16-17 June 2013 were not reported since many decades (Dobhal et al., 2013; Srinivasan, 2013; IMD, 2013). Heavy rainfall was also experienced over parts of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh parts of India and Nepal Himalayas. In the current decade extreme rainfall events leading to flash floods with loss of numerous lives and property have become very frequent in the Indian sub-continent (Hong et al., 2011).

May and June months climatically suits for pilgrimage and tours to Uttarakhand and hence maximum pilgrims and travellers are usually present in the state, most of them preferring the Kedarnath valley and surrounding area. To provide amenities/facilities to the surplus population, residents from other region of Uttarakhand also migrate to the valley. As a result, the level of population along with supporting animals is enhanced to a much greater extent than usual. The population is over flooded beyond the capacity of the valley. In order to have accommodation, buildings and temporary shelters are built along the banks of river, sometimes making encroachments in the river bed leading to blockage in the flow of river. In fact buildings, roads and developmental activities have disrupted the smooth flow of rivers in Uttarakhand.

The Chorabari lake (known as Gandhi Sarovar Lake) located about 2 km upstream of Kedarnath town is approximately 400 m long, 200 m wide and 15-20 m deep). The sources of water in the lake are snow melting from the surrounding mountain and local rain water. Usually the maximum snow melting is in the month of June and precipitation is maximum in the months of July and August. Continuous heavy rain during 10-17 June 2013 in addition to

enhanced ice melting over flooded the Chorabari Lake. Water gushed out from Lake Burst and flooded Saraswati and Mandakini rivers. Both the banks of Mandakini River were washed off causing massive devastation to the Kedarnath town and downstream areas. Flooded water and debris from Saraswati River added to this devastation. Many houses along with other civil structures in Kedarnath town, Rambara and Gaurikund were completely washed out. This occurred in the early morning of 17 June, 2013. As a result hundreds of people and animals lost their lives in addition to huge damage of property.

Dobhal et al., (2013) and Joseph et al. (2013) reported that the rapid advance of SW monsoon 2013 and the concurrent occurrence of the extreme rainfall event in Uttarakhand. Joseph et al. (2013) suggested that during 14-17 June 2013 tropospheric cold temperature anomalies emanated from the Arctic region penetrated down the latitudes and moved towards the Indian region. However, India Meteorological Department (IMD-2013) suggested that heavy to very heavy rainfall during this period due to the convergence of the Southwest Monsoon trough and westerly disturbances led to the formation of dense cloud over the Uttarakhand. In this communication, we have investigated the meteorological parameters like, wind velocity, atmospheric pressure, total cloud cover, surface temperature, relative humidity, surface precipitation, surface convective precipitation, cloud top temperature (day/night) for the selected region of Uttarakhand (lat. $28^{\circ} - 33^{\circ}$ N; long., $76^{\circ} - 81^{\circ}$ E) with Kedarnath ($30^{\circ} 44' 6.7''$ N; $79^{\circ} 04' 01''$ E) in the middle of selected area to understand the plausible causes of early and intense rain leading to flash flood which caused devastation in the valley.

2 Site Description and Data sources

Kedarnath ($30^{\circ} 44' 6.7''$ N; $79^{\circ} 04' 01''$ E; 3583 m above mean sea level), a pilgrimage temple town, is located in the state of Uttarakhand (India) in the central Himalaya. The Kedarnath valley has a total catchment area of $\sim 67 \text{ km}^2$ with Chorabari lake up the valley ($\sim 2 \text{ km}$ upstream of Kedarnath town) and with the Mandakini and Saraswati Rivers flowing through the valley. Twenty three percent of area is covered by glaciers (Mehta et al., 2012). Rest of the hilly area is covered by trees and bare land. The Himalayan range contains moraine and is susceptible to landslide and breakage of river coast.

The Chorabari lake (known as Gandhi Sarovar Lake), located about 2 km upstream of Kedarnath town is approximately 400 m long, 200 m wide and 15-20 m deep. The sources of water in the lake are snow melting from the surrounding mountain and local rain water. Usually the maximum snow melting is in the month of June and precipitation is maximum in the months of July and August. As a result, water from the lake drains out safely without creating any havoc.

The daily meteorological parameters such as wind velocity, wind pattern, pressure, total cloud cover, surface temperature, relative humidity, surface precipitation rate, surface convective precipitation rate with 0.5 degree grid resolution were obtained from Climate Forecast System Reanalysis (CFSR) data developed by NOAA's National Centre for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) for the selected region (lat. 28°-33° N; long., 76°-81° E) from the source: <http://nomadl.ncep.noaa.gov/ncep-data/index.html>. The daily cloud top temperature (day/night) was obtained from MODIS (<http://gdata1.sci.gsfc.nasa.gov/ncep-data/>) and the daily rainfall from TRMM (http://gdata1.sci.gsfc.nasa.gov/daac-bin/G3/gui.cgi?instance_id=TRMM_3B42).

3 Observations and discussion

The watch and ward staff of the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG) stationed at the Chorabari Glacier camp recorded 210 mm rainfall in 12 hours from 17:00 hrs IST (Indian Standard Time), 15 June 2013 to 05:00 hrs IST, 16 June 2013, and 115 mm rainfall from 05:00 to 17:00 IST on 16 June 2013 (Dobhal et al., 2013) leading to 325 mm rainfall in 24 hours. IST=UT+5:30 hrs. Another observatory at Ghuttu (about 38 km from Kedarnath) measured 58 mm rain on 15 June, 121 mm on 16 June and 93 mm on 17 June 2013.

The continuous precipitation in the area from 10 - 17 June, 2013 in addition to snow melting filled the lake at a much faster rate. The situation became like a 'cloud burst' type event and the lake was rapidly over flooded. In the absence of automatic rain gauge (or hourly measurement of rain) in the area, it could not be ascertained whether cloud burst occurred or not (A cloud burst usually occurs when the amount of precipitation exceeds 100 mm h⁻¹). The bursting of over flooded lake led to its complete drainage within 5-10 minutes (Dhobal et al., 2013) leading to sudden and complete destruction in its path. The rain water from the

surrounding of Mandakini and Saraswati Rivers along with debris of landslides and collapse of river banks flooded the entire area from Kedarnath down to Gaurikund town. Gaurikund town is located 16 km downstream and is the commencement point of trek to the sacred shrine of Kedarnath. The resting point of Rambara is located halfway between Kedarnath and Gaurikund. The additional huge flux of water from the outburst of Chorabari Lake completely washed the whole valley from Kedarnath to Gaurikund. This devastation occurred so fast that nothing could be saved.

In Figure 2a, ground based rainfall data (Dobhal et al., 2013; Joseph et al., 2013), satellite measured total rainfall, surface precipitation, convective precipitation rate and cloud top temperature both for day and night hours during 10-20 June 2013 are shown. There was considerable rainfall during 15-17 June, with a maximum on 16 June. The heating of the Earth surface and adjacent boundary layer by the incident solar radiation causes thermodynamic instability of boundary layer and helps formation of thunderstorm and rain. The surface temperature and its vertical gradient control development and intensity of convection, which affects precipitation. In general, studies showed that weak and moderate convection is required for the precipitation (Siingh et al., 2015 with references therein). Comparing the precipitation rates, it is evident that the convective process is operative during 15-17 June 2013 with a prominence on 16 and 17 June. The variations of cloud top temperature during the day and night hours are indicative of altitude location of clouds. On 15 June, clouds were at relatively high altitude during the night hours as compared to daytime. On 16 June clouds were almost at the same altitude ($\sim -40^{\circ}\text{C}$) during night and day hours and led to heavy rain. Cloud altitude slowly decreased (cloud top temperature reached to $\sim -4^{\circ}\text{C}$) during the night of June 17.

Cloud development and rainfall depends on meteorological parameters (Williams, 1995, 2004; Siingh et al., 2013, 2014). Figure 2b shows six hourly variations of wind velocity, pressure, cloud cover (%), surface temperature and relative humidity for the period 10-20 June 2013. Daily mean variation is also shown in each plot. Wind velocity is seen to remain quite low (less than 4 ms^{-1}) during 15-16 June 2013. Wind velocity increased to 8.5 ms^{-1} on the evening of 16 June, and then decreased to $< 3\text{ ms}^{-1}$ on 17 June. Pressure measurements clearly showed low pressure zone during 16-17 June. Cloud cover was almost 90% on June

16. Large amount of cloud cover associated with low pressure zone supports the convergence of South-west Monsoon through westerly disturbance over the region.

The cloud image taken from Kalpana-1 satellite (www.imd.gov.in/section/satmet/dynamic/insat.htm; Dobhal et al., 2013) on 17 June showed the presence of dense cloud over the Himalayas in Uttarakhand, Himachal states of India and Nepal leading to heavy rain. Relative humidity during 15-17 June was quite high, reaching up to 100 % on June 16. High value of relative humidity, large cloud coverage and low value of wind velocity altogether resulted in huge rainfall for long duration. The daily mean surface temperature decreased and remained almost constant during the period and after the event. Before the event, slow local heating is observed. The orographic conditions (such as high altitude hilly region covered with tree/vegetation) also add to the convective activity. The upslope ascents of the air parcels, sensitive heat flux, and passage of convective cloud system may contribute dominantly to the thermodynamic instability.

The data survey of the last several decades shows that the greatest amount of precipitation in Kedarnath area usually occurs during July and August, and sometimes also in September due to the convergence of Southwest Monsoon. Barros et al. (2004) studied the relationship of cloud morphology with land form and orography of the Himalayan region and showed that in this region (from 20° N to 35°N) smaller but long-lived convective cloud clusters and disorganized short-lived convective systems advance and retreat as the monsoon propagates away from the Bay of Bengal in June and July, and then recedes in August and September. The Himalayan mountain range acts as a physical barrier to the monsoon current and the nearby Tibetan Plateau acts as a major heat source in the summer and heat sink in winter (Das, 1968; Rao, 1976; Qie et al., 2003).

The monsoon activity reached Uttarakhand state of North India in middle June, which is almost about fifteen to twenty days before the usual time. The southwest monsoon reached Kerala (south India) on its typical date (1st June 2013) and spread over south-east Bay of Bengal on the same day. Till 5-6 June the monsoon progressed over India as expected. During the next 10 days the monsoon advancement became much faster. As reported by the Indian Meteorological Department-2013 southwest monsoon end of season report, the pace of advancement had been the fastest in the last 73 years (1941 - 2013). The formation of

cyclonic storm Mahasen (10 - 16 May 2013) over southeast Bay of Bengal strengthened the low level cross equatorial monsoon flow over south Andaman sea and adjoining south Bay of Bengal which aided to the advancement of southwest monsoon. The convectively active phase of the Madden-Julian Oscillation and the associated systematic northward propagation of east-west shear zone at the mid tropospheric levels during this period also helped in faster advancement of monsoon and increased rainfall activity.

Joseph et al. (2013) discussed that tropospheric cold temperature anomalies emanating from the Arctic region penetrated to low latitudes over Indian region and interacted with low pressure system which developed over the Bay of Bengal and moved inland. The intrusion of cold air in the presence of moist/humid air along with orographic uplift could have triggered intense convection, low convergence resulting in heavy rainfall over the Uttarakhand. In a similar case of extreme rainfall (July-early August, 2010), associated with devastating flood in Pakistan (Hong et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011; Lau and Kim, 2012), Hong et al. (2011) advocated that southward penetration of cold dry air associated with trough east of the blocking induced anomalous low level convergence and upward motion and provided favourable environment for northward propagation of monsoon surges. Houze et al. (2011) attributed this event to an association with the anomalous propagation of a depression formed over Bay of Bengal.

4 Conclusion

Meteorological parameters such as wind velocity, pressure, cloud cover, surface temperature, relative humidity and cloud-top temperature were analyzed to understand the heavy rainfall during 15-17 June 2013, which caused unprecedented loss of human life, animals and properties in the Kedarnath region of Uttarakhand, India. Analysis show that cloud cover reached almost 90% (on 16 June 2013) and wind speed was low ($< 4\text{ms}^{-1}$). In addition to this, relative humidity reached $\sim 100\%$. These factors support convective heavy rainfall which was observed during 15-17 June 2013. The convergence of southwest monsoon trough and westerly disturbances over the region was observed. The monsoon advanced by almost a month and coincided with the peak period of pilgrimage and tourism in June 2013. Due to heavy rain and ice melting in the nearby mountains, consequently much more loss of human life, animals and property occurred.

Author Contribution

The concept of the paper was initiated by RS and DS. The analysis for the paper is collaboratively done by RS, DS, SAG, MGS and PSB, AKM, RPS and AKS contributed towards data interpretation, discussion and manuscript preparation. The final manuscript was prepared by RS and DS and with the contribution from all co-authors.

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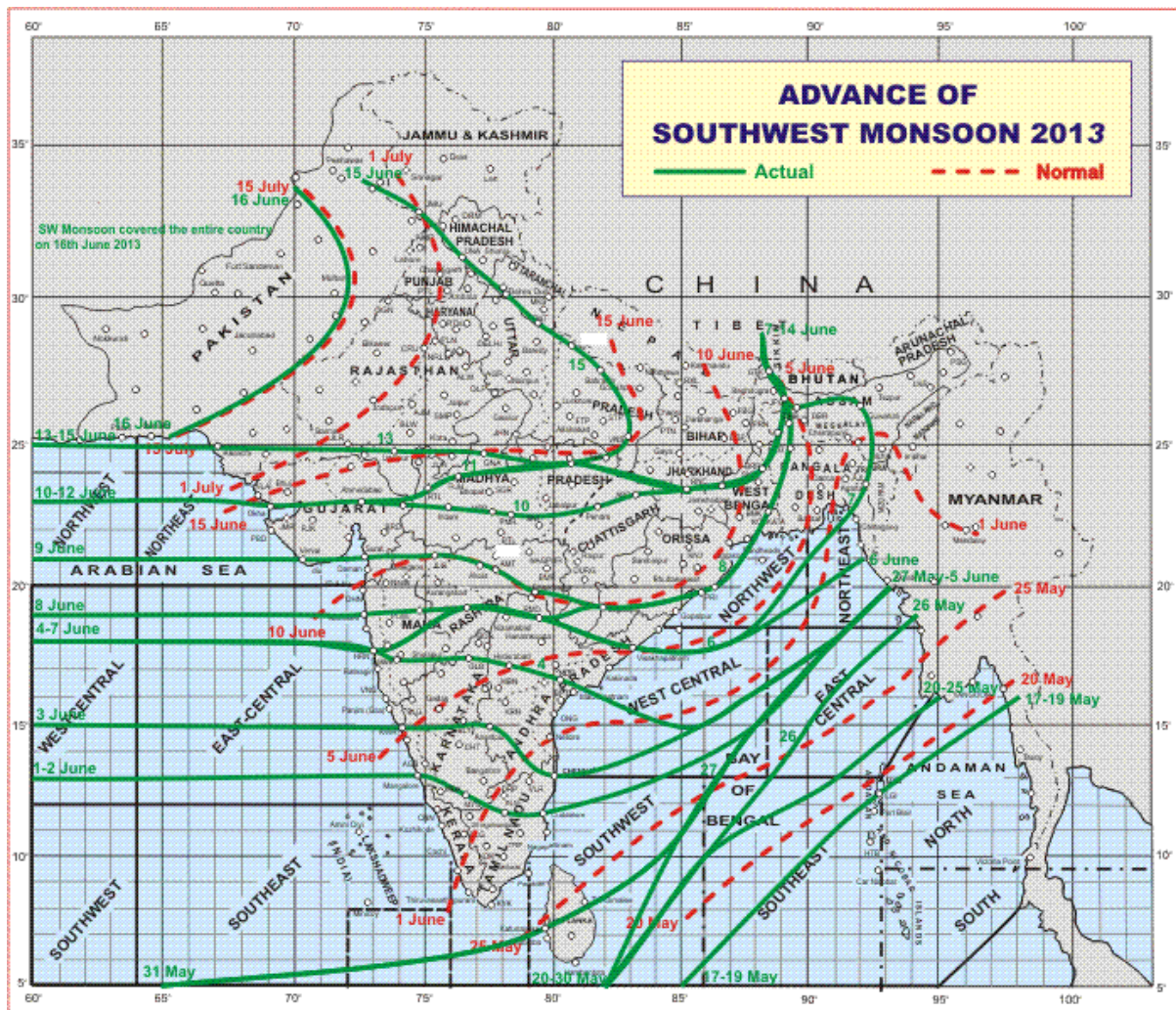
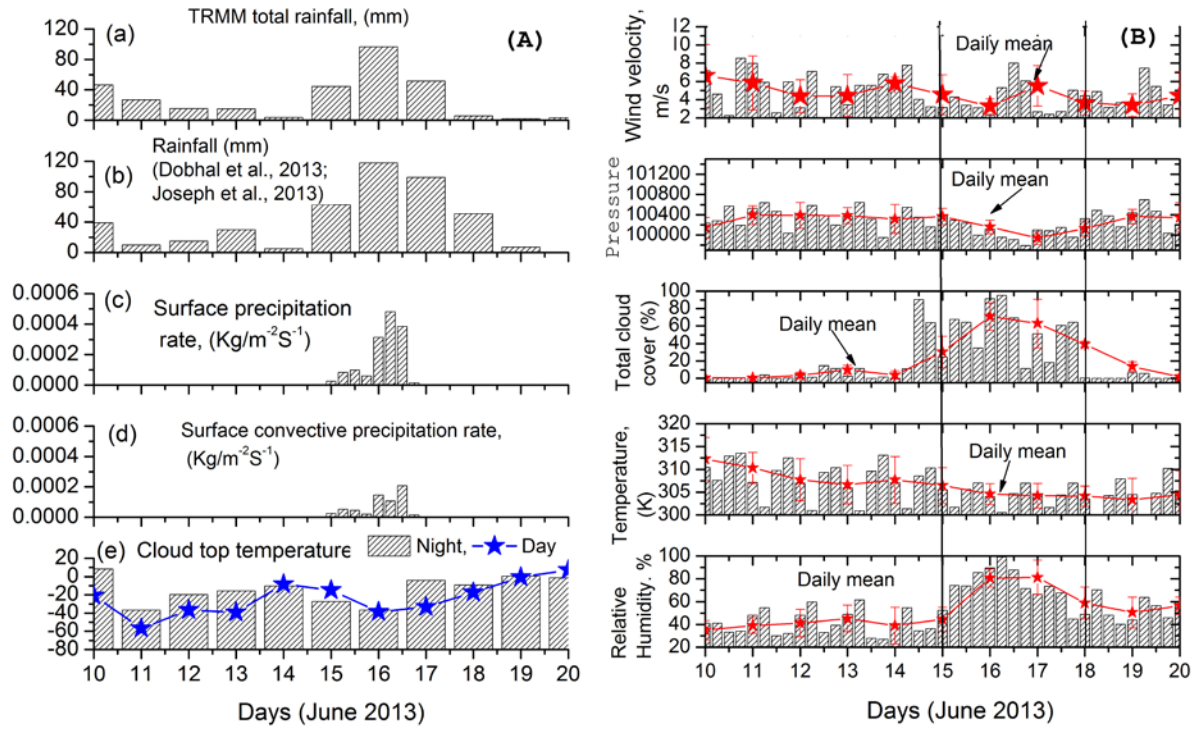


Figure 1. Progress of Indian Southwest monsoon 2013 (Source: http://www.imdpune.gov.in/mons_monitor/mm_index.html).

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Figure 2. (A) Variation of daily mean (a) TRMM total rainfall (b) rainfall (Dobhal et al., 2013), (c) surface precipitation rate, (d) surface convective precipitation rate, and (e) cloud top temperature (day/night) for the period June 10-20, 2013. (B) Variation of six hourly mean (black line) and daily mean (star and red colour) of meteorological parameters such as wind velocity, atmospheric pressure, total cloud cover percent, surface temperature and relative humidity for the period June 10-20, 2013 for the selected region.

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