



PROJECTED RETURN OF EL NIÑO IN 2026 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL CLIMATE EXTREMES

- Prof. S K Dhaka

Rajdhani College, University of Delhi

For much of the world, weather often feels increasingly unpredictable, with one season bringing devastating floods, another unbearable drought, and yet another record breaking heat. Behind some of these dramatic shifts lies a powerful climate phenomenon with a deceptively gentle name: El Niño. Scientists are now warning that El Niño may return in 2026, raising concerns about what this could mean for food, water, economies, and daily life across the globe.

El Niño is not a storm, nor is it a single weather event. It is a naturally occurring climate pattern that develops in the Pacific Ocean when sea surface temperatures in its central and eastern regions become unusually warm. Although it begins thousands of kilometers away from many countries it affects, its influence stretches across continents, reshaping rainfall, temperatures, and even storm activity. In simple terms, when the Pacific Ocean catches a fever, the atmosphere responds in ways that can disrupt normal weather worldwide.

The name El Niño, meaning “the little boy” in Spanish, was originally coined by South American fishermen who noticed warmer waters appearing around Christmas. But what once

seemed like a regional curiosity is now understood as one of Earth's most influential climate drivers. A strong El Niño can alter jet streams, weaken monsoons, intensify droughts, trigger floods, and push global temperatures higher.

The prospect of El Niño returning in 2026 comes at a time when the planet is already under pressure from human driven climate change. The past decade has been the warmest on record, glaciers continue to melt, oceans are absorbing immense amounts of heat, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe. In such a heated global backdrop, the arrival of El Niño could act like adding fuel to an already raging fire.

One of the biggest concerns is rising temperatures. El Niño years are often associated with global heat records because the warm Pacific releases extra heat into the atmosphere. This does not mean El Niño causes climate change, but it can amplify its impacts. Imagine climate change as a steadily rising staircase, while El Niño is a sudden jump upward. Together, they can create alarming temperature spikes.

For countries like India, the stakes are

particularly high. India's economy, food production, and water resources remain deeply linked to the southwest monsoon.

El Niño has historically been associated with weaker monsoon rainfall, though the relationship is not always straightforward. Reduced rainfall can lead to drought conditions, lower crop yields, rising food prices, and stress on reservoirs and groundwater supplies. Farmers, especially those dependent on rain fed agriculture, often bear the brunt of these disruptions.

Urban populations are not immune either. Heatwaves in cities can become deadlier when temperatures soar and humidity traps heat overnight. Energy demand spikes as air conditioner use increases, placing pressure on electricity systems. Water shortages can worsen, and vulnerable populations, including outdoor workers, the elderly, and low income communities, face heightened health risks.

Elsewhere in the world, El Niño's impacts can be equally dramatic but different in nature. Parts of South America may experience heavy rainfall and flooding, while Australia and Southeast Asia can face drought and wildfire risk. Some regions of Africa may see altered rainfall patterns affecting agriculture and food security. Marine ecosystems also feel the strain, as warmer waters can damage fisheries and coral reefs.

Yet El Niño is not entirely a villain. In some places, it can bring beneficial rainfall or milder conditions. Climate systems are complex, and impacts vary depending on geography, timing, and intensity. The challenge lies in uncertainty, while scientists can forecast the likelihood of El Niño months in advance, its exact strength and regional consequences are harder to pin down. Modern forecasting tools, however, have improved significantly. Satellites, ocean buoys, atmospheric models, and international climate monitoring systems now allow scientists to detect early warning signs with greater confidence. These forecasts are invaluable because preparation can save lives and reduce economic damage. Governments can strengthen water management, farmers can adjust cropping strategies, health systems can

prepare for heat related illnesses, and disaster agencies can plan for extreme events. The bigger question is how El Niño interacts with a warming world. Researchers are actively studying whether climate change is making El Niño events stronger, more frequent, or more unpredictable. While scientific debate continues, one thing is clear: when natural climate variability combines with human induced warming, societies face greater risks.

This also highlights the need for climate resilience rather than reactive crisis management. Better urban planning, drought resistant crops, efficient irrigation, improved weather communication, stronger public health systems, and ecosystem restoration can all help reduce vulnerability. Adaptation is no longer optional, it is becoming essential.

Public awareness matters too. Climate discussions often feel distant, technical, or overwhelming, but El Niño affects ordinary life in tangible ways, from grocery bills and water availability to travel disruptions and health risks. Understanding these connections helps communities prepare rather than panic.

If El Niño does indeed return in 2026, it will serve as another reminder that Earth's climate is interconnected in astonishing ways. A warming patch of ocean far away can influence whether a farmer in Maharashtra gets rain, whether a child in Delhi faces dangerous heat, or whether communities across continents confront floods or drought.

Nature has always had its rhythms, but humanity has changed the baseline against which those rhythms now play out. El Niño may be natural, but its consequences in a hotter world can feel anything but normal. The real question is not whether climate surprises will continue, they will. The question is whether we are ready for them.