



Fragility of Indian Himalayan Region

For Prelims: [Indian Himalayan Region \(IHR\)](#), [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#), [Teesta River](#), [Environmental Clearance \(EC\)](#), [EIA 2006 Notification](#), [Draft EIA 2020 Notification](#).

For Mains: The dangers mismanagement of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) poses to India's environment and ecology.

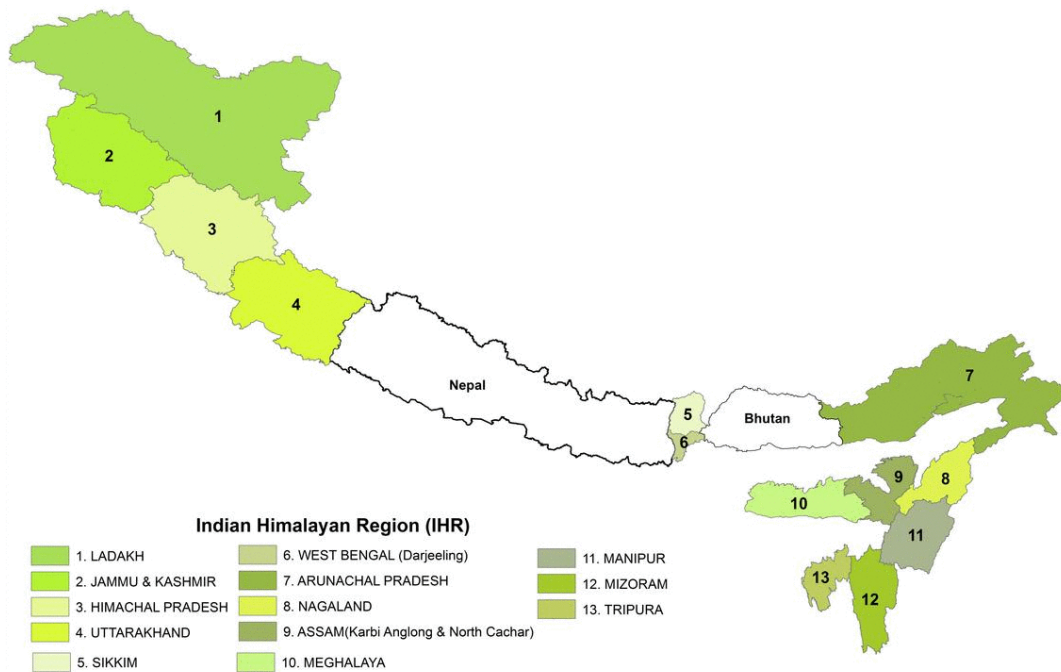
Source: [TH](#)

Why in News?

The [Teesta dam](#) breach in Sikkim led to [floods](#) and also the recent [landslides](#) in Himachal Pradesh are stark reminders of the toll our development model is taking on the environment and ecology, especially in the mountainous Indian Himalayan Region.

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR):

- It refers to the **mountainous area in India** that encompasses the entire Himalayan range within the country. It stretches from the **northwestern part of India in Jammu and Kashmir to the northeastern states along the border with countries like Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet (China)**.
- It **covers 11 states** (Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, all northeast states, and West Bengal) **and 2 UTs** (Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh).



What are the Issues in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)?

- **Flaws in Graded Approach:**
 - Specified flaws in the graded approach of the Indian regulatory system, such as Ministries and Departments emphasise that the **IHR is not given special consideration, despite its ecological significance.**
 - The Himalayas are **prone to extreme weather conditions, seismic activity, and the effects of climate change**, yet there are no differentiated environmental standards for projects in this region.
- **Issues in Implementation of Different EIA Stages:**
 - There is a profound lack in addressing the IHR's needs at all stages of the **Environment Impact Assessment (EIA)** process, **from screening to appraisal**, by aligning project requirements with the region's ecological needs.
 - The inclusion of clauses in the **EIA notification to account for specific characteristics of projects in mountainous areas** so as to elevate their liability is also lacking.
- **Lack of National Level Regulator:**
 - One significant issue in the EIA process is **the absence of a national-level regulator, which was suggested by the Supreme Court in 2011 in Lafarge Umiam Mining (P) Ltd. and T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs Union of India, 1995**
 - Currently, EIA processes tend to favor project proponents, and there is a lack of comprehensive consideration of cumulative impacts, especially in mountainous areas like the IHR.
- **Issue of Uniformity in EIA 2006 Notification:**
 - The EIA 2006 notification **categorizes projects based on sectors like mining, power generation, and infrastructure**, but the threshold limits for requiring an EIA remain the same across the country.
 - This **uniform approach fails to consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)**, despite its ecological importance and fragility.
- **Issues in Draft EIA 2020 Notification:**
 - The EIA process has evolved with several amendments over the years, with a **draft EIA in 2020 raising concerns about being perceived as pro-industry and neglecting ecological considerations.** The EIA, when used diligently, can be a potent tool for environmental governance and sustainable development.

What are the Steps Required to Safeguard the Ecological Fragility of IHR?

- **Differentiated Environmental Standards:**
 - Differentiated environmental standards should be established, taking into account the region's fragility and vulnerability.
 - These standards should be **incorporated into the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) process, ensuring that projects in the IHR are subject to more stringent regulations** and scrutiny.
- **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA):**
 - Policymakers should consider implementing SEA, which assesses the cumulative impact of development in an area.
 - **Integrating SEA into the clearance process can provide a comprehensive view of the potential consequences** of development activities.
- **Local Community Involvement:**
 - These communities often **have a deep understanding of the region's ecology and can provide valuable insights** into the potential impacts of development.
 - Ensuring their participation can lead to more ecologically sound and socially responsible projects.
- **Ecosystem-Based Approaches:**
 - Implement ecosystem-based approaches to development. Recognize that the IHR is not just a source of resources but also plays a critical role in maintaining regional and national ecological balance.
 - **Policies should prioritize the protection and restoration of ecosystems, including forests, rivers, and biodiversity.**
- **Rethinking Infrastructure Development:**
 - Infrastructure projects in the IHR should be planned carefully. **Projects like dams, roads, and hydropower plants should undergo rigorous assessments to minimize their impact on the environment.**
 - Consider alternative technologies and routes that are less disruptive.
- **Cross-Border Cooperation:**
 - The Himalayan region **extends across several countries**, and ecological challenges are not confined by political boundaries. **India should engage in regional cooperation to address shared environmental issues.**
 - Collaborative efforts can help in mitigating transboundary challenges such as air and water pollution.
- **Public Awareness and Education:**
 - Raise public awareness about the ecological significance of the IHR.
 - **Education and advocacy** can lead to more responsible behavior and choices among individuals, corporations, and policymakers.
- **Nature-Based Tourism:**
 - Develop **sustainable and responsible tourism practices** that generate income for local communities while minimizing negative impacts on the environment.
 - This could involve promoting [eco-tourism](#), enforcing carrying capacity limits, and raising awareness among tourists.

What is Draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020?

- **About:**
 - The [Draft EIA Notification 2020](#), when it was introduced, aimed to replace the previous **EIA Notification of 2006**.
- **Post-facto Clearance:**
 - The draft notification **introduced the concept of post-facto clearance**, which would allow certain projects to seek [environmental clearance](#) even after they had begun operations without clearance.
- **Reduced Public Participation:**
 - Critics argued that the draft notification **weakened the public consultation process**, making it more challenging for concerned citizens and communities to voice their opinions and objections regarding proposed projects.
- **Exemptions for Certain Projects:**

- The draft notification **proposed exemptions for certain categories of projects, allowing them to bypass the EIA process.**
- **Extension of Project Validity:**
 - It **suggested extending the validity period of environmental clearances** for various projects, potentially reducing the need for frequent re-evaluations of environmental impacts.
- **Dilution of Compliance Reports:**
 - There were concerns about the dilution of compliance reports, which are meant to ensure that projects adhere to environmental conditions and standards.
 - The draft notification generated dubious standards, **with environmental activists, experts, and concerned citizens voicing their objections.**

EIA in India

- **About:**
 - The Indian experience with **Environmental Impact Assessment** began over 20 years back. It started in 1976-77 when the **Planning Commission** asked the Department of Science and Technology to examine the river-valley projects from an environmental angle.
- **EIA 1994 Notification:**
 - In 1994, the then Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, **under the Environmental (Protection) Act 1986**, promulgated an **EIA notification making Environmental Clearance (EC) mandatory for expansion or modernisation** of any activity or for setting up new projects listed in **Schedule 1** of the notification.
- **EIA 2006 Notification:**
 - The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) notified new **EIA legislation in September 2006.**
 - The notification **makes it mandatory for various projects such as mining, thermal power plants, river valley, infrastructure** (road, highway, ports, harbors and airports) and industries including very small electroplating or foundry units to get environment clearance.
 - However, **unlike the EIA Notification of 1994, the new legislation has put the onus of clearing projects on the state government** depending on the size/capacity of the project.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQ)

Prelims

Q 1. When you travel in Himalayas, you will see the following: (2012)

1. Deep gorges
2. U-turn river courses
3. Parallel mountain ranges
4. Steep gradients causing land sliding

Which of the above can be said to be the evidence for Himalayas being young fold mountains?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 1, 2 and 4 only
- (c) 3 and 4 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q 2. Bring out the causes for more frequent landslides in the Himalayas than in Western Ghats. **(2013)**

Q 3. Describe the various causes and the effects of landslides. Mention the important components of the National Landslide Risk Management Strategy. **(2021)**

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