EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

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The Indian Himalayan Region needs its own EIA

Syllabus: GS3/ Conservation, Disaster Management

In News

- Himalayan region needs a different set of environmental standards in the form of Environment Impact Assessment (EIA).

Environment Impact Assessment (EIA)

- **About:** Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) is one of the processes defined by the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** as a tool to identify the environmental, social, and economic **impacts of a project before** it is **implemented**.
- **Features of EIA:**
    - This tool **compares various alternatives** for the proposed project, **predicts and analyses** all possible environmental repercussions in various scenarios.
        - The EIA also helps decide **appropriate mitigation** strategies.
    - The EIA process would **need comprehensive, reliable data** and would deliver results only if it is designed to seek the most appropriate, relevant and reliable information regarding the project.
        - Hence, **the baseline data** on the basis of which future likely impacts are being predicted are very crucial.
- **EIA in India:**
    - In January 1994, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 (EPA), promulgated the **first EIA notification** making **Environmental Clearance (EC) mandatory** for setting up some specified new projects and also for expansion or modernisation of some specific activities.
        - This was later **replaced by the EIA 2006** notification.
    - The Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change floated a **draft EIA in 2020** for public comments which faced

criticisms as it was **perceived to be pro industry** and **compromising the ecological concerns**.

The Indian Himalayan Region & need of separate EIA

- The **Teesta dam breach in Sikkim** in early October and the **recent floods and landslides in Himachal Pradesh** are a stark reminder of the havoc our development model is wreaking on our environment and ecology especially in the mountains.
- **It is imperative to assess the worthiness of any significant development** in terms of its impact on the environment.
- Despite all levels of government being **acutely aware of the special needs of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)**, the region's vulnerabilities and fragility have **not been considered separately**.

Challenges

- **"One size fits all" approach:**
    - Despite its special needs and as an area of immense ecological importance to the entire country (it serves as a water tower and the provider of ecosystem services), this region is treated like any other part of the country.
- **Unsuitability of a graded approach:**
    - The Indian regulatory system uses a graded approach, a differentiated risk management approach depending on whether a project is coming up within a **protected forest, a reserved forest, a national park,** or a **critical tiger habitat**.
    - This graded approach for differentiated risk management does not suit or consider the special ecological features existing in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR).
    - While categorising projects it is important that the impacts of all such projects and activities are seen in the IHR in the context of this **region's fragility and vulnerability** vis-à-vis **ecology and environment**.
- **Unplanned Urbanisation:**
    - The **unplanned and unauthorised construction** has led to the blocking of the natural flow of water, which eventually results in **frequent landslides**.
    - **Himalayan slopes** have become extremely unstable in the last few decades due to **increased construction, hydroelectric projects**, and the widening of the **National Highway**.
- **Construction of Dams:**
    - The creation of numerous dams **without due environmental impact assessment** could lead to the **submergence of arable lands** and **biodiversity hotspots.**

    - Not only would valley habitats be inundated by the creation of reservoirs, but villagers would be displaced.
    - The effect of dams on **fisheries and fish ecology** is also a matter of concern.
- **Ecology under stress:**
    - Due to **population growth, industrial and commercial activity**, the fragile ecology is under great stress.
    - The common threats are **deforestation, soil erosion and pressure on restricted land**.
- **Vulnerability to extreme conditions:**
    - We have enough systemic understanding that the Himalayas are inherently vulnerable to **extreme weather conditions** such as **heavy rains, flash floods, and landslides** and are seismically active.
    - **Climate change** has added another layer of vulnerability to this ecosystem.

Suggestions

- The needs of these mountains could be addressed at **all four stages of the EIA**
    - **Screening, scoping, public consultation,** and **appraisal**.
- The **yardstick for projects and activities** requiring Environmental Clearance in mountainous regions should be made commensurate with the ecological needs of this region.
- General conditions mandated for all projects at the end of the notification could also have had a clause about the IHR or **mountains above a certain altitude**, or with some **specified characteristics** that could increase the liability of the project proponent.
- Used diligently, the EIA could be the most potent regulatory tool in the arsenal of environmental governance in the IHR to further the vision of sustainable development in the country.

Way ahead

- Denying development to populations living in remote mountain areas would be grave injustice, but the real issue has always been about p**ursuing development in keeping with environmental sustainability**.
- There is an urgent need to **undertake a detailed survey** of such settlements by **multidisciplinary expert teams**.

Daily Mains Question

[Q] What are the ecological threats faced by the Indian Himalayan Region? Examine the need of Himalayan Region to have a different set of environmental standards than the rest of the country.