

Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)

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Introduction:

- The **recent floods** and landslides in **Himachal Pradesh**, along with the **Teesta dam failure** in **Sikkim** serve as a reminder of the devastation **India's development model** is causing to environment and ecology especially in the mountains.
- Hence, it is essential to **assess the worthiness** of any significant human endeavour in terms of its impact on the environment.
- Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) is one such process.

What is Environment Impact Assessment (EIA)?

- The EIA is 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.

What are the functions of EIA?

- The EIA **compares various alternatives** for the proposed project and predicts and analyses all possible **environmental repercussions** in various scenarios.

- It also helps decide **appropriate mitigation strategies**.
- If used diligently, it could be the most **potent regulatory tool** in the arsenal of **environmental governance** to further the **vision of sustainable development** in the country.

Data required:

- 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 **base line data** on the basis of which **future likely impacts are being predicted** are very crucial.

History of Environment Assessment in India:

- In 1976-77, the **Planning Commission** directed the assessment of river valley projects from an environmental perspective.
- In January, 1994, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change introduced the **first EIA notification**.
 - This made **Environmental Clearance (EC) mandatory** for specific projects.
 - The 1994 notification underwent **12 amendments** in 11 years before being replaced by the EIA 2006 notification.
- The **2006 notification** decentralized the EC process, allowing state governments to issue EC in certain scenarios.
- Draft EIA was proposed in **2020**, which faced criticism for being perceived as pro-industry.

Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) and EIA:

- Despite the known vulnerabilities of the **IHR**, its specific needs have **not been addressed separately in the EIA process**.
- The threshold limits for projects requiring EIA are the same across the country, not considering the unique challenges of the IHR.
- The **draft 2020 notification** also did not differentiate between the IHR and the rest of the country.

Graded Approach and IHR:

- The current regulatory system uses a **graded approach** based on the location of a project (e.g., within a protected forest, or national park).
 - However, the IHR, despite its ecological importance, is treated like **any other region**.
- The Himalayas are vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, **flash floods, landslides, and seismic activities**.
 - Climate change adds **another layer of vulnerability**.
- There is a need for different **environmental standards** for projects in the IHR.

What are the Limitations of EIA?

- There is no regulator at the national level to carry out an **independent, objective and transparent appraisal and approval** of the projects for ECs and **to monitor the implementation** of the

conditions laid down in the EC.

- The EIA process reacts to **development proposals** rather than **anticipate them**.
- They are financed by the project proponent hence, there is a **bias** in favour of the project.
- The process now does not adequately consider cumulative impacts as far as impacts caused by several projects in the area are concerned.
- In many cases, the EIA is done in a '**box ticking approach**' manner, as a **mere formality** that needs to be done for EC before a project can be started.
- The **consequences of all these limitations** are amplified in the IHR as on top of the inherent limitations of the process.

What should be done?

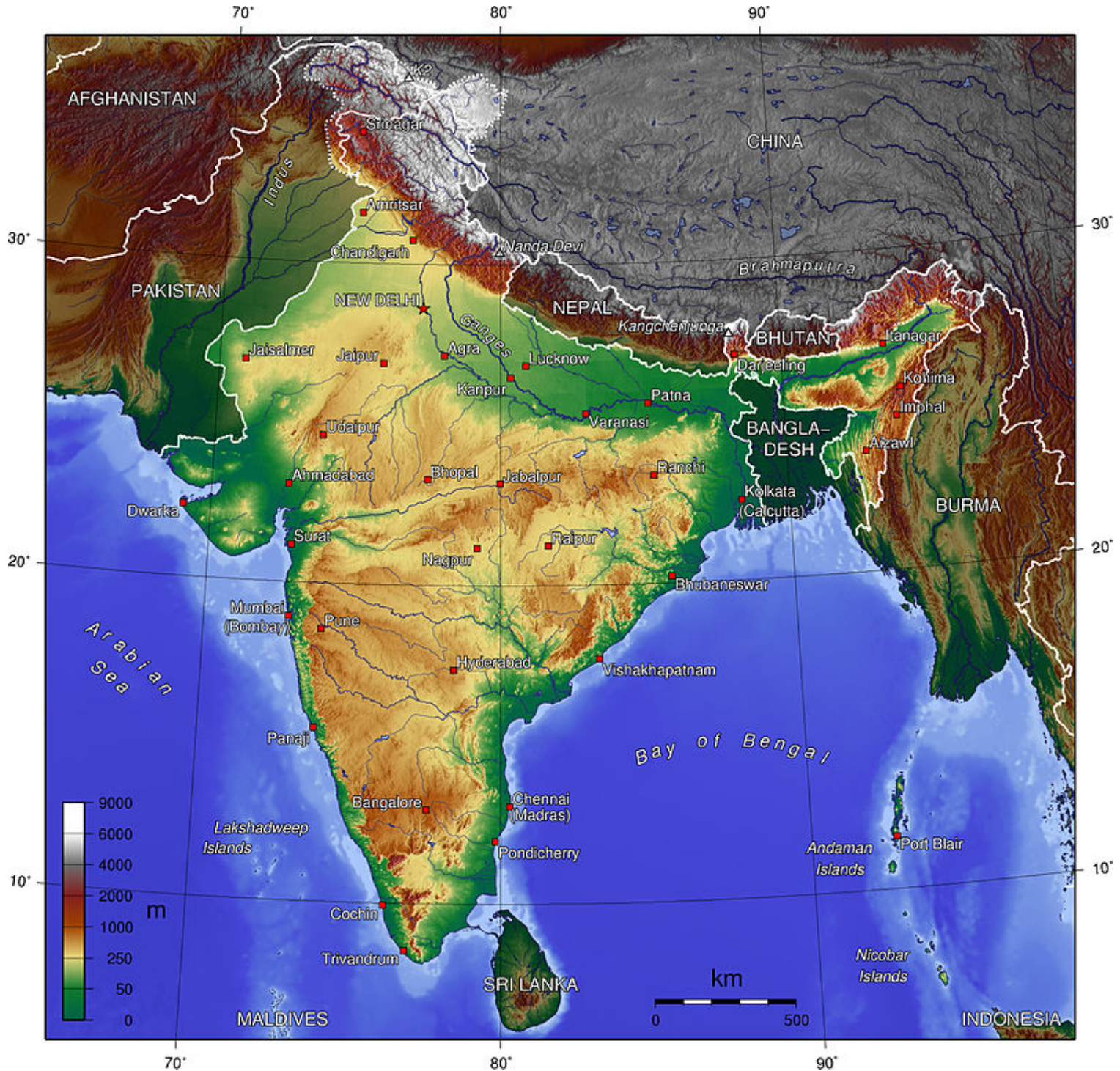
- While **categorising projects** it is important that the **impacts of all such projects** and **activities** are seen in the IHR in the context of this **region's fragility** and **vulnerability about ecology** and **environment**.
- If projects and activities needing EC in mountainous areas are **measured according** to the **ecological demands** of this area, the needs of these mountains might be taken into consideration at all four levels of the EIA.
 - Screening
 - Scoping
 - Public consultation
 - Appraisal
- **General conditions mandated for all projects** at the end of the notification could also have 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**.

Conclusion:

The EIA process is not at all cognisant of the **special needs of the IHR** and hence the **policymakers** should explore other tools such as the **strategic environmental assessment** which takes into account the **cumulative impact of development** in an area to address the needs of the IHR as a **fundamental policy**.

IT's Input:

About Indian Himalayan Region (IHR):



- **IHR encompasses the Himalayan area within India**, extending across **13 Indian states and union territories**: Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, West Bengal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh.
- The region is responsible for **providing water** to a large part of the **Indian subcontinent** and contains various flora and fauna.