



## Troubled mountains

A significant slice of the glacier, dislodged by a landslide, according to some satellite images, produced roaring torrents in the Rishiganga and Dhauliganga rivers in Chamoli district, trapping unsuspecting workers at two hydropower project sites.

### Development led frailty

1. The Centre and the Uttarakhand government cannot ignore the larger context of the State's increasing frailty in the face of environmental shocks.
2. Once the crucible of environmentalism, epitomised by Sunderlal Bahuguna, Gaura Devi and the Chipko movement, the State's deep gorges and canyons have attracted many hydroelectric projects and dams, with little concern for earthquake risk.
3. Red flags have been raised repeatedly, particularly after the moderate quake in 1991 in the region where the Tehri dam was built and the 2013 floods that devastated Kedarnath, pointing to the threat from seismicity, dam-induced microseismicity, landslides and floods from a variety of causes, including unstable glacial lakes and climate change.

### Dams in Himalayan Region

1. India is heavily invested in dam development and growth of hydropower, largely in the Himalaya region — especially to cut carbon emissions.
2. **Risks:** potential earthquake impacts, monsoonal aberrations that could repeat a Kedarnath-like flood, severe biodiversity loss and, importantly, extreme danger to communities downstream.
3. There is also some evidence that the life of dams is often exaggerated, and siltation, which reduces it, is grossly underestimated: in the Bhakra dam in Himachal Pradesh, for instance, siltation was higher by 140% than calculated.
4. The need is to rigorously study the impact of policy on the Himalayas and confine hydro projects to those with the least impact while relying more on low impact run-of-the-river power projects that need no destructive large dams and reservoirs.



## A Budget not for the environment

1. The truth is that governments have not put in the substantial new financial resources raised through rapid growth into environmental protection.
2. Budgetary allocations for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) have consistently fallen as a percentage of total allocations.
3. Even when there are increased allocations, such as for cleaning up the Ganga, their usage is riddled with such design flaws, inefficiencies and corruption that the environment is no better off than before.
4. Steadily increasing levels of pollution, biodiversity loss, the decline in forest health and destruction of wetlands is testimony to the dismal gap between government rhetoric and the environment, regardless of the party in power.

### Environment focused Institutions

1. The MoEFCC has stopped or reduced funding to the Wildlife Institute of India and the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education. This follows an earlier recommendation by the Ministry of Finance that the government should disengage with many such institutions.
2. One consequence of this is that these institutions are having to raise funds through the private corporate sector, which inevitably compromises their ability to speak the truth when this sector indulges in ecologically damaging activities.

### The facade of Renewable Energy (RE)

1. India's major push for renewable energy (RE) has earned it global appreciation. Back home, it is not so rosy. For one, there is no intention to phase out fossil fuels; on the contrary, coal mining and thermal power are being promoted under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package.
2. And large hydropower is being promoted as RE, though its massive ecological and social impacts are well documented.
3. Finally, even much of the solar and wind energy is coming in the form of massive energy parks that take up huge areas of land, displacing people and wildlife.



## Alternative RE Paradigm

1. The government must push for RE that is predominantly decentralised, community-managed, and with full environmental impact assessments (currently not required for RE projects).
2. The government must have something on curtailing wasteful and luxury consumption of energy or other products and services by the rich. Without controlling demand, even a complete shift to RE will be unsustainable; after all, silica has to be mined somewhere.

## Drinking water plan and problems

1. In principle any scheme for urban drinking water is positive. But with the continuation of a highly centralised approach to all such schemes, there is a 'one size fits all' approach, heavily focused on expensive infrastructures like big reservoirs and pipelines.
2. Instead, a decentralised approach that uses a mix of local rooftop and backyard harvesting, restoration and conservation of urban wetlands, and regenerating groundwater could achieve much better results.
3. And as in energy, there is no focus on incentivising responsible consumption, restraining luxury uses, and redistributing water more equitably, without which no amount of infrastructure will be enough.

## Deep Ocean

1. The 'Deep Ocean' allocation is intriguing. It is being projected as a programme for the conservation of biodiversity in the depths of our marine areas.
2. But the institutions that are given responsibility under this are the Ministry of Earth Sciences, the Indian Space Research Organisation, the Defence Research and Development Organisation etc, none with expertise in or even significant focus on marine conservation. Instead, this could become a project for deep-sea mining, for which already explorations are going on.

## Public Transport

1. Potentially, an allocation of ₹18,000 crores for public transport could have significant benefits for people and the environment if it helps to reduce private vehicle density in cities.



2. But if much of this is allocated to the metro rather than to buses and other such earthy alternatives (including last-mile connectivity, incentives for walking and cycling), the picture becomes murky.
3. Experience with the metro so far in India's cities is one of significant environmental impact, as also eventual lack of affordability for the poor.

### **Some worrying allocations**

1. There is then the very worrying issue of allocations to non-environmental sectors that have a negative impact on the environment. For instance, the Budget proposes 11,000 km more of national highway corridors.
2. In the last few years, massive road and dam construction has fragmented fragile ecosystems and disrupted local community life in the Himalaya, Western Ghats, north-east India and elsewhere.
3. It is not only the road itself but what it brings with it that results in opening up previously intact ecosystems. We can not afford to destroy our 'natural capital' without it rebounding on us in forms like COVID-19.

### **Neoliberal 'development' planning, Natural capital and Budget Failure**

1. Given that this could have been the occasion to climb into a green, nature-and-land based livelihoods recovery that could create tens of millions of jobs and also regenerate India's depleted environment, this Budget is disappointing.
2. It is in the logic of neoliberal 'development' planning, with a blind trust in growth as the panacea for all ills, to treat nature as a commodity for exploitation, or a 'sink' into which to dump waste.
3. With global alarm about the ecological catastrophe we are rushing headlong into, COVID-19 recovery packages announced by the Indian government since mid-2020 ought to have put environmental regeneration and conservation, and self-reliance built on this, at the core of the Budget. That has unfortunately not happened.



## First steps in the journey to universal health care

### Public health infrastructure: Funds and institutional Capacity

About 20 years ago, Thailand rolled out universal health coverage for its population at a per capita GDP similar to today's India. What made this possible was a three-decade-long tradition of investing gradually but steadily in public health infrastructure and manpower. This meant that alongside the availability of funds, there also existed robust institutional capacity to assimilate those funds.

For India, the lesson of COVID-19 entails setting forth on a steady and incremental path to universal health coverage; not attempting a sudden and giant leap. This is important because enough evidence exists on weak fund-absorbing capacities particularly in the backward States — at times, such unused funds have been to the tune of over half of the State's public health expenditure.

### The PM Atma Nirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana (PMANSBY)

1. A corpus of ₹64,180 crores over six years has been set aside under the PM Atma Nirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana, (PMANSBY) for strengthening health institutions.
2. This could make the first steps of a journey that steadily builds towards sustainable universal health coverage through the incremental strengthening of grass-root-level institutions and processes.

### Universal Health Coverage:

Two important and prominent arms of universal health coverage in India merit discussion here: Comprehensive primary care and Universal insurance.

### Universal insurance

1. Large expenditure projections and time constraints involved in the input-based strengthening of public health care have inspired the shift to the insurance route for achieving universal health coverage.

### Low budgetary allocations

1. However, insurance does not provide a magic formula for expanding health care with measly levels of public spending. Available estimates have pegged the costs to be between ₹62,000 crores and ₹1,08,000 crore for 2021 if PM-JAY is to meet its stated commitments.



2. Given these circumstances, making do with such paltry spending year after year would mean that the scheme benefits are being spread out too narrowly or too thin, implying the inability to afford enough protection against catastrophic health expenses to the poor.

### **Implementation deficit**

1. Beyond low allocations, poor budget reliability merits attention. Another related issue is the persistent and large discrepancies between official coverage figures and survey figures (for e.g. the National Sample Surveys, or NSS, and National Family Health Survey) across the Indian States, indicating that official public health insurance coverage fails to translate into actual coverage on the ground.
2. Robust research into the implementational issues responsible for such discrepancies and addressing them is warranted. Without the same, the PM-JAY's quest for universal health coverage is likely to be precarious.

### **Insurance coverage does not ensure effective financial protection:**

1. Finally, even high actual coverage should not be equated with effective financial protection. For example, Andhra Pradesh has among the highest public health insurance coverage scores (71.36%, NSS 75), but still has an out-of-pocket spending share much above the national average (72.2% of total health expenditure).
2. In contrast, Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) with a much lower public health insurance coverage (3.87%, NSS 75) has a lower out-of-pocket (46.4%).
3. Among other factors, this could be attributable to the much higher per capita public health spending in H.P., more than twice that of Andhra Pradesh, which highlights the importance of government investment.

### **Comprehensive primary care**

1. Health and Wellness Centres — 1,50,202 of them — offering a comprehensive range of primary health-care services are to be operationalised until December 2022. Of these, 1,19,628 would be upgraded sub-health centres and the remaining would be primary health centres and urban primary health centres.



2. This offers huge cost projections — as per early (conservative) estimates, turning a sub-health centre into a health and wellness centre would require around ₹17.5 lakh, and around ₹8 lakh annually to run it thereafter.
3. The current allocation of ₹1,900 crores, an increase of ₹300 crores from the previous year, is a paltry sum in comparison. Since 2018-19, when the health and wellness centre initiative began, allocations have not kept pace with the rising targets each year.
4. Additional funding under the PMANSBY and Finance Commission grants is reassuring, but a greater focus on rural health and wellness centres would be warranted.

### Conclusion:

1. Continuing the expansion of health and wellness centres without enough funding would mean that the full range of promised services will not be available, thus rendering the mission to be more of a rebranding exercise.
2. Second, under-funding would squander an opportunity for the health and wellness centre initiative to at least partially redress the traditional rural-urban dichotomy by bolstering curative primary care in rural areas.
3. This opportunity arises on account of the expanded array of services that health and wellness centres are supposed to provide, and the fact that an overwhelming majority of them will be in rural areas.
4. Since curative care implies larger costs, they could be largely confined to delivering merely preventive, wellness, and referral services without adequate funding.