



Another warning

Landslips in Himachal Pradesh point to the need for a new development paradigm.

Landslides in Himachal:

1. A landslide has struck again in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh killing at least 14 people and burying several others, just over a fortnight after a similar disaster killed a group of tourists. This time, the catastrophe has been even more severe, with mud, rocks and debris raining down on vehicles including a State transport corporation bus on National Highway 5.
2. Himachal Pradesh, a picturesque western Himalayan State that has made progress on social developmental indices, faces rising instability from environmental factors such as climate change and heavy monsoon rainfall. Landslips have become a familiar feature, and seismic events threaten to increase their frequency and aggravate the impact.
3. There is considerable scientific literature now arguing that Himachal's mountain slopes are experiencing not just seismicity and rain-induced stresses but also man-made pressures to exploit hydropower and build more roads, and are being rendered even more fragile.

The Landslide Hazard Zonation Map of India

1. Much of Himachal Pradesh is in the high-risk zone for landslips, calling for great caution in pursuing disruptive projects, particularly hydropower. The Landslide Hazard Zonation Map of India marks over 70% of the State as 'high risk' and 14% as 'severe' to 'very high risk'.
2. The threat of earthquakes remains potent, as the mountains here are young in geological terms and therefore active, and about 32% of the State is categorised as a high damage risk zone for seismicity.
3. A developmental model that prioritises heavily engineered structures such as dams and hydropower that involve rock blasting, tree felling and inundating large spaces clearly jeopardises the integrity of mountain slopes; roads developed along the slopes face the brunt of the impact, as the Kinnaur landslips show.



4. In some cases, the roads themselves have been destroyed. A decade ago, the action plan on climate change published by the State identified some key hazards and wanted to take long-term remedial measures.
5. It is time for an update, going beyond disaster management, and the recurring disasters only add to the urgency. There is wide support among local communities for sustainable tourism and an expansion of the farm-based economy, particularly apple growing. But these can progress only when environmental losses are halted.
6. With greater rainfall and cloudburst activity, Himachal Pradesh is bound to face greater uncertainty. Maintaining the status quo can only make the ghastly episodes of falling boulders and lost lives a more frequent feature.

Parliament is abdicating its oversight role

The monsoon session of Parliament which ended recently was a disappointment in several ways.

1. This was the fourth straight session that ended ahead of the original schedule. This meant that many important issues had not been discussed such as the COVID-19 response and strategy, the Chinese incursion into Ladakh, the economic situation etc.
2. The Lok Sabha worked for just 19% of its originally scheduled time, and the Rajya Sabha for 26%.
3. The Government pushed through 20 Bills, mostly without any discussion. Of the 18 Bills passed by the Lok Sabha, only one saw a discussion over 15 minutes. While the Rajya Sabha crossed this low bar for most Bills, only two Bills were discussed for over an hour.
4. Every Bill introduced during the session was passed within the session. This means that there was no time for any scrutiny by members. While we have seen such behaviour in State Assemblies (in 2020, 91% of all Bills in 19 Assemblies were passed within five days of introduction), this is a new development for Parliament.
5. In the period of the Fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009-14), 18% of the Bills were passed within the same session. This rose to 33% in the Sixteenth Lok Sabha and is at 70% halfway through the current Parliament.

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No scrutiny

1. None of the Bills was referred to a parliamentary committee for examination. These committees provide a forum for parliamentarians to engage with experts, stakeholders and government officials to understand the implications of Bills.
2. There has been a sharp downward trend in Bills being referred to them — from 71% in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha to 27% in the Sixteenth, and 12% in the current one till date.

Course correction needed

1. To sum up, Parliament appears to be quite ineffective in all its functions. The reason for having a legislature separate from the executive is to have a check on executive power.
2. In this session, the Government got every Bill that it introduced passed as an Act, without any debate, and without any scrutiny by committees.
3. Question Hour hardly worked. There was just one debate in the Rajya Sabha and none in the Lok Sabha on policy issues.
4. A large supplementary Budget was passed in less than 10 minutes without even one member speaking on it.