



A fine line

Infrastructure development and eco-conservation should go hand-in-hand.

Infrastructure development in the Himalayan region

1. The need for infrastructure development in the Himalayan region rubs up against the environmental and ecological challenges that they pose.
2. The Uttarakhand government has for decades envisaged hydroelectric projects as the way forward to power the State, premised on the region's undulating topography.
3. However, the rising frequency of intense rains has been contributing to landslips, avalanches, and the loss of lives and property. All of this has a bearing on hydroelectric projects being situated in terrain prone to environmental shocks.
4. In the aftermath of the devastating Kedarnath floods of 2013, the Supreme Court ordered a halt to hydro projects in the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi river basins pending a review on whether they exacerbated the damage.
5. The last few years have seen considerable friction on this issue, especially because the future of hydro projects is closely linked to the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) programme. For the health of the river, it must be allowed to flow unimpeded, and hydropower projects are an obstacle.
6. A committee of experts recommended to the Court that almost all hydropower projects, cleared by the Government for construction, be scrapped.
7. Proponents of six of these projects approached the Court on the grounds that they had obtained prior clearances and scrapping projects would entail significant losses.
8. Since then, the Centre has been trying to walk a fine line between salvaging some of them while acknowledging, at least on paper, the environmental costs.

The avalanche in Chamoli in February 2021, that destroyed two power projects and killed at least 200, was only the latest reminder of the fraught risks that committees and their tussles inadequately account for. The Centre has been saying that it is not too keen on new hydropower projects and is only permitting those that are at least 50% complete to go ahead given the sunk costs. Along with better dialogue, power companies and the Centre must inspire greater trust in the residents of the region: infrastructure development will have to necessarily account for the region's constraints.