

Wounded mountains

Tourist tragedy in Himachal Pradesh points to the importance of preserving ecology

The tragic death of nine tourists in a landslide in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh is another pointer to the fragility of the ecology of the Himalayan States. Extraordinarily heavy rain pummelled the State recently, leaving the hill slopes unstable and causing floods in built-up areas including Dharamshala. The descending boulders from destabilised terrain, which crushed a bridge like a matchstick, are a source of worry even for cautious local residents, and for unwary visitors, such as the tourists travelling in a van, they can turn into sudden disaster. Himachal is famed for its scenic vistas and welcoming summer climate, and drew a few hundred thousand tourists in June this year as States began relaxing the controls for COVID-19. There was justified alarm at the prospect of a fresh surge in infections, prompting Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur to appeal for COVID-appropriate behaviour. Unfortunately, there was not enough vigil against travel to risky areas, in the wake of a disastrous year for tourism, resulting in the mishap in Kinnaur's Basteri area. What should worry Himachal, and neighbouring Uttarakhand, is that the States may be entering a phase of irreversible decline because of losses to their ecology; frequent landslides may become inevitable. Bootstrapping an incompatible model of development in the hills, represented by big hydroelectric projects and large-scale construction activity involving destruction of forests and damming of rivers, is an invitation to harm.

Mega hydropower, which Himachal Pradesh is working to tap as a significant source of "green" power that substitutes energy from fossil fuels, could alter several aspects of ecology, rendering it vulnerable to the effects of extreme events such as cloudbursts, flash floods, landslides and earthquakes. The parliamentary Standing Committee on Energy during 2018-19 noted that the State could more than double its existing harnessed hydropower potential of 10,547 MW. Kinnaur is a focus point for such development, centred around the potential of the glacially-fed Sutlej valley, but one scientific estimate warns that avaricious tapping of the river through all planned projects would impound nearly a quarter of its waters in dams, and divert a staggering 72% through tunnels. Other researchers, studying the 2015 Nepal earthquake, point to high seismicity causing fatal landslides and severe damage to hydropower structures in the Himalayas; the cost of power produced was underestimated, while the potential was overestimated. Evidently, it is impossible to assign a real value to the costs to people and communities, together with the loss of pristine forests that weak afforestation programmes cannot replace. As catastrophic weather events inflict frequent, heavy losses, Himachal Pradesh and other Himalayan States can only watch their ecological base erode. Changing course may yet preserve a lot of their natural riches.