

WHY SHIMLA IS CRUMBLING

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August 21, 2023 12:35 am | Updated 12:35 am IST

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A landslide-affected area in Shimla. | Photo Credit: PTI

Rains have recently [wreaked havoc in Himachal Pradesh](#), particularly Shimla. Heavy precipitation in the Summer Hill area of the State capital resulted in flash floods and the [collapse of a temple](#) which claimed over 15 lives. A landslide led to the destruction of many buildings in Krishnanagar area and left two dead. Landslides around Shimla have damaged roads and brought life to a standstill.

This is not unprecedented. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report states that the coastal areas and the Himalayas are poised to experience a rise in extreme climate events and a shift in rainfall patterns. Consequently, the developmental strategies for the Himalayan region should prioritise climate resilience instead of solely pursuing unguided infrastructure expansion.

Regrettably, in Shimla, infrastructure development has not been climate smart. An analysis of several incidents reveals a pattern. In Summer Hill, the temple was constructed within a gorge. This was also the location of a water supply system for Totu, a suburb of Shimla. In Krishnanagar, houses were erected atop water *bauris* (natural water springs). When structures come up in areas closely linked to a water source, they become susceptible to disasters. There are around 25 major springs and over 100 water *bauris* in Shimla.

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The shift in building strategies began after the 1990s, facilitated by the advent of reinforced cement concrete. A prime example of this transformation is the New Shimla region, which was known for paddy cultivation. This area spans numerous water bodies. Empowered by the strength of reinforced cement concrete, people believed that water flow could be controlled and directed, leading to deliberate human settlements in water spaces, including ravines. Two significant development projects have been established directly atop substantial water springs and *nallahs* (water channels): the Himachal Pradesh High Court Lawyers Chambers and the new Indira Gandhi Medical College and Hospital building. They have been constructed on waterways that remain perennial, but can become tumultuous during the monsoon season.

The recent heavy precipitation at Summer Hill raises concerns about the fate of such substantial infrastructure funded by public resources. Typically, matters related to land use should be

addressed within a comprehensive development plan, often referred to as the city's master plan. However, Shimla has been run with an interim development plan since 1979. Adding to this complexity, the planning for Shimla is not overseen by the elected city government. Instead, it falls under the jurisdiction of a parastatal, namely the town and country planning department, which operates without any democratic oversight and relies heavily on computer-simulated plans, often guided by inputs from large technological consultancy firms.

Currently, the Shimla Development Plan (SDP) is pending before the Supreme Court. One critical oversight of the current SDP is the absence of a climate action plan that should ideally precede it. The existing SDP appears to be primarily focused on creating urban spaces with designations like 'core' and 'open heritage'; yet it lacks the necessary emphasis on addressing climate-related challenges.

What the SDP does necessitate is a zonal and sub-zonal planning approach, which is important in Shimla, a region with unique geographical features. It is imperative that zones and sub-zones are meticulously defined based on comprehensive geological data and thorough studies. Subsequently, this information should guide the determination of the floor area ratio. The zoning strategy should dictate the regions where the city cannot support further settlements. Conversely, areas with robust rock foundations should be permitted to undergo vertical expansion, but all decisions should be rooted in solid geological and structural foundations. This approach aims to strike a balance between urban development and the preservation of the city's unique geological features.

The priority now should be to initiate comprehensive water contouring, which can be accomplished through a combination of satellite imagery and active participation from the community. Upon achieving this, the rallying cry of Shimla's citizens should resonate with the 'no means no' slogan, which is prevalent in the Sutlej valley.

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