Source : www.thehindu.com Date : 2023-09-28

DRAWING THE LINE: ON INFORMATION AND RISKS UNDERLYING INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT IN UTTARAKHAND

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

September 28, 2023 12:20 am | Updated 01:42 am IST

The year began on a calamitous note with reports that the temple town of Joshimath in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand was ‘sinking’ and that cracks had appeared on residential and commercial structures. This prompted a humanitarian crisis with people fleeing and taking refuge in tents and open spaces, fearing that their homes would crumble. A proximate reason for the acceleration in the fissures and cracks was attributed to tunnelling activities from the Tapovan Vishnugad power project being developed by the National Thermal Power Corporation. There were also concerns on whether groundwater depletion, or increased urbanisation that encouraged faulty construction, had reached a point from which disasters had become inevitable. To address all these, the Uttarakhand State Disaster Management Authority had commissioned eight reputed institutions to study the land-subsidence phenomenon from multiple angles. Surprisingly, it banned the public dissemination of information from scientists involved with the institutions on the grounds that satellite imagery pictures — from Indian and international sources — of the subsurface in Uttarakhand were aggravating “panic” and that information was to be shared only after it was “cleared” by the Centre. The net result of this is that despite reports of all institutions being available for months, it took a strong rebuke from the High Court of Uttarakhand last week for the State authorities to make this information public.

Though these reports are technical, they reiterate what has been known about the risks underlying infrastructure development in Uttarakhand. The Central Building Research Institute, Roorkee, for instance, pointed out that 99% of construction in the region did not comply with the mandatory building codes. The National Institute of Hydrology, Roorkee, in its report, said that the network of springs, drainage systems and areas of subsidence may influence land subsidence and there was a need to monitor them. Overall, the tenuous geology made city-like infrastructure projects risky and strict town-planning and construction measures were necessary to minimise the risk from accidents and a loss of lives. While there is a legitimate case for ensuring that citizens in the hill States are not denied basic amenities and the opportunities for material advancement, it is incumbent upon governments to take hard decisions that are sustainable as against those that are aimed to score in the next election. A necessary step is in ensuring that information on the risks is widely disseminated and communicated in a way that it becomes a part and parcel of public life. Independent scientific counsel must form the backbone of policymaking and clear lines must be drawn around the limits to development in the region.

SHARE

Uttarakhand / groundwater / environmental issues / power (infrastructure) / disaster management / judiciary (system of justice) / house building / geology / politics / election / government / science and technology / development

BACK TO TOP

Comments have to be in English, and in full sentences. They cannot be abusive or personal. Please abide by our community guidelines for posting your comments.

We have migrated to a new commenting platform. If you are already a registered user of The Hindu and logged in, you may continue to engage with our articles. If you do not have an account please register and login to post comments. Users can access their older comments by logging into their accounts on Vuukle.

END