Cross-border Environmentalism

What is the issue?

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- Emerging environmental concerns make cross-border environmentalism crucial for South Asia.
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- It is high time that India recognises this and takes the lead.
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What is the emerging threat?

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- Climate change is introducing massive disturbances to South Asia.
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- This is most notably from the rise of sea levels.
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- The entire Indian Ocean coastline will be affected.
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- But the hardest hit will be the densely populated deltas.
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- They include places where the Indus, Irrawaddy and Ganga-Brahmaputra meet the sea.
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- The distress is paramount in the northern half of the Indian subcontinent.
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- It covers areas from the Brahmaputra basin to the Indus-Ganga plain.
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What are the environmental concerns?

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- **Water** - The subcontinent is running out of water resource.
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- This is due to the demands of industrialisation and urbanisation.
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- It is also due to continuation of colonial model of irrigation based on flooding the fields.
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- **Rivers** - The economic and demographic forces are arrayed against the rivers and their right-of-way.
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- E.g. Ganga (Uttarakhand), Teesta (Sikkim) have been converted into dry boulder tracts by ‘cascades’ of run-of-river hydroelectric schemes.
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- The tributaries of the Indus were ‘done in’ decades ago through water diversion.
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- **Natural drainage** - Everywhere, natural drainage is destroyed.
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- Highways and railway tracks are elevated above the flood line, and bunds encircling towns and cities.
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- Reduced flows and urban/industrial effluents have converted great rivers into sewers.
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- Rivers are made to carry hundreds of tonnes of plastics daily into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.
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- **Climate refugees** - The climate change discourse has not evolved enough to address this.
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- Tens of millions of ‘climate refugees’ could en masse move inland.
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- They may be forced to cross national boundaries in the search for survival.
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- E.g. the Farakka Barrage affected the livelihoods in downstream Bangladesh, causing the flood of ‘undocumented aliens’ in India.
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- **Glaciers** - The retreat of the Himalayan glaciers is jeopardising the perennial nature of our rivers.
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- The '***atmospheric brown cloud***' is said to be the reason for excessive melting of snows in the central Himalaya.
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- The icefalls of the Himalaya could soon transform into waterfalls.

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What are the policy shortfalls?

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- **Participation** - The subcontinental environmental realities demand civic participation.
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- But despite being a vast democracy, the Indian state neglects this factor.
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- Efforts at preserving the forests and landscapes are mostly taken up by the indigenous communities.
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- The urban middle class is not visible in environmentalism, other than in ‘beautification projects’.
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- **Governance** - The Environment Ministry is invariably the least empowered in the major countries of South Asia.
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- It falls short of coordinating the ecological response.
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Why is India's role crucial?

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- Wildlife, disease vectors, aerosols and river flows do not respect national boundaries.
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- The environmental trends must be discussed at the regional inter-country level.
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- But South Asian societies are apart, when they should actually be joining hands on common ground.
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- India is the largest nation-state of the region, and the biggest polluter.
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- Also, its population is the most vulnerable.
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- Given these, India should take the lead role in cross border environmentalism.

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Source: The Hindu

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Quick Fact

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Atmospheric brown cloud

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- This cloud is made up of ‘black carbon’ containing soot and smog.
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- It is the result of stubble burning, wood fires, smokestacks and fossil fuel exhaust.
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- Dust kicked up by winter agriculture, vehicles and wind are sources as well.
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- This high altitude haze covers the Indo-Gangetic plains for much of the dry season.
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- It penetrates deep into the high valleys.
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- It rises up over the plains and some of it settles on Himalayan snow and ice.
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- They absorb the heat and melt much faster.
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