Ignoring green commitments: Weak political will, lack of a monitoring system.

What is the issue?

Though flagship projects were either rejected or questioned over their viability by various expert panels of the Government their clearance are rationalised with substantial compensatory measures in the blanket of strategic interest.

What reflects the negligence in ensuring environmental regulation compliances?

- **Lack of trained manpower and resource limitations –**
- Between 2014 and 2019 alone, the Ministry granted over 11,500 environment and forest clearances.
- However there are less than 80 officials in the Environment Ministry for field verification under green laws.
- They are expected to visit thousands of project sites at least once a year.
- **Absence of an effective compliance mechanism -**
- What has gone wrong with mega projects sustainable development roadmap is the absence of an effective compliance mechanism.
- Self-certification has helped to bring down non-compliance, if at all, mostly on paper.
- This is evident from the rejection rate for forest clearance which is below 1%.
- **Absence of strong political will –** The Government incentivise states for faster environmental clearance but the environmental institutions face funding limitations.
- A 2006 report by OECD blamed the “absence of strong political will” for this in India. Little has changed since.
- This lack of political will gets reinforced by the lack of compliance even in mega projects.
- **The anomaly -** Instead of strengthening the monitoring mechanism and applying effective punitive tools, successive governments have relied on amnesty (post-facto clearance), incentives (subsidies).

What are some real life examples?

Ken-Betwa link project

- The project was considered unviable by several experts for its immense environmental cost and was rejected in 2011.
- But, it got revived with a techno-economic clearance in 2016.
- In 2017, its forest clearance was made on conditional basis.
- Diversion of 60.17 sq km forest land should be compensated by adding an equal extent of revenue land to Panna tiger reserve.
- Though it is not in the Environment ministry’s power to modify a condition put by its expert panels, the Ministry of Jal Shakti and Madhya Pradesh government have been seeking

relaxations repeatedly since 2018.

Hydel projects in Arunachal Pradesh

- **Subansiri project -** For 17 years, both the Environment ministry and the state have been ignoring the crucial condition imposed by the Supreme Court in 2004 for clearing the 2,000-MW Subansiri project.
- **Dibang multipurpose project -** Arunachal had not complied with the key precondition of declaring the catchment forests as a national park.
- Despite this a final forest clearance has been issued to the twice-rejected 3,000-MW Dibang multipurpose project.

Kulda coal mine and Tamnar thermal plant

- Multiple exceptions were made in granting clearances to these projects in "the national interest".
- The ministry and its expert panels are aware that the developers — Mahanadi Coalfields Limited and Jindal Power Limited continued to transport coal through village roads.

Compensatory afforestation in Goa

- Goa lags by 50% behind in compensatory afforestation. However an unusual 10-for-1 plantation target was allowed on paper for the proposed international airport.

What does this indicate?

- Justifiable or not, projects in strategic sectors and areas will have their environmental cost.
- Promising green remedies that neither the regulators or the developers are serious about goes against the Constitutional obligation towards the precautionary principles of sustainable development as well as public trust.
- This also sends the message that they have scant respect for legal commitments, including court orders.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/environment-ministry-clearance-violation-ken-betwa-kulda-coal-mine-tamnar-thermal-plant-7755822/

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