

Why Himalayan towns need a different kind of development | Explained

Do cities along the Indian Himalayan Range have adequate funds and resources to manage civic issues?

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People during a monsoon rain in Shillong. | Photo Credit: Ritu Raj Konwar

The story so far: The Indian Himalayan Range (IHR), comprising 11 States and two Union Territories, had a decadal urban growth rate of more than 40% from 2011 to 2021. Towns have expanded, and more urban settlements are developing. However, Himalayan towns require a different definition of urbanisation.

What is happening in IHR towns?

Almost all Himalayan towns, including State capitals, struggle with managing civic issues. For example, cities like Srinagar, Guwahati, Shillong, and Shimla, as well as smaller towns, face significant challenges in managing sanitation, solid and liquid

waste, and water. Planning institutions in these States often fail because they use models copied from the plains and have only limited capacities to implement these plans. City governments are short of human resources by almost 75%. For instance, in **the Kashmir Valley, excluding the Srinagar Municipal Corporation, there are only 15 executive officers across over 40 urban local bodies.**

Cities continue to expand into the peripheries, encroaching on the commons of villages. Srinagar and Guwahati are examples of such expansion, leading to the plundering of open spaces, forest land, and watersheds. In Srinagar, land use changes between 2000 and 2020 showed a 75.58% increase. Water bodies have eroded by almost 25%, from 19.36 square kilometres to 14.44 square kilometres. These areas have been taken over by built-up real estate, increasing from 34.53 square kilometres to 60.63 square kilometres, a rise from 13.35% to 23.44% of the total municipal area. Nearly 90% of the liquid waste enters water bodies without treatment.

Why is this happening?

The IHR faces increasing pressure from urbanisation and development, compounded by high-intensity tourism, unsustainable infrastructure, and resource use (land and water), further aggravated by climatic variations like changing precipitation patterns and rising temperatures. This has led to water scarcity, deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and increased pollution, including plastics. These pressures have the potential to disrupt lives and livelihoods, impacting the socio-ecological fabric of the Himalayas.

Over the past few decades, tourism in the IHR has continued to expand and diversify, with an anticipated average annual growth rate of 7.9% from 2013 to 2023. Current tourism in the IHR often replaces eco-friendly infrastructure with inappropriate, unsightly, and dangerous constructions, poorly designed roads, and inadequate solid waste management, which leads to loss of natural resources damaging biodiversity and ecosystem services. Ecotourism, emphasising environmentally friendly tourism, is crucial for long-term sustainability.

What needs to be done?

Planning institutions in IHR cities are still guided by land-use principles. Every town needs to be mapped, with layers identifying vulnerabilities from geological and hydrological perspectives. Climate-induced disasters annually erode infrastructures

built without such mapping. Therefore, the planning process should involve locals and follow a bottom-up approach.

Consultant-driven urban planning processes should be shelved for Himalayan towns, with the urban design based on climate resilience.

Additionally, none of the cities in the IHR can generate capital for their infrastructure needs. The Finance Commission must include a separate chapter on urban financing for the IHR. The high costs of urban services and the lack of industrial corridors place these towns in a unique financial situation. Current intergovernmental transfers from the centre to urban local bodies constitute a mere 0.5% of GDP; this should be increased to at least 1%. Himalayan towns must engage in wider conversations about sustainability, with the focus on urban futures being through robust, eco-centric planning processes involving public participation.

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