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Clearance Without Expertise: Restructuring India's Environmental Appraisal

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

19 July 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT**GS2****GS3**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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Clearance Without Expertise: Restructuring India's Environmental Appraisal

 Down to Earth

19 July 2026

GS2

GS3

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THE LIFT LINE

An environmental clearance is only as trustworthy as the expertise behind the signature, and a restructuring that reserves barely one of nine seats on the interim appraisal bodies for genuine domain knowledge quietly changes what that signature means; when speed is prized over scrutiny, a clearance stops being a scientific verdict and becomes a rubber stamp.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a rare theme that sits squarely across two GS papers at once, environmental governance in GS3 and the design and independence of statutory institutions in GS2. UPSC consistently tests the Environmental Impact Assessment process and the tension between development and ecological protection, and this restructuring gives you a concrete, current example of how institutional design decides regulatory credibility. It rewards candidates who can move beyond “development versus environment” to the sharper question of who decides, and with what competence and independence.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, and environmental impact assessment; and infrastructure and its clearance.

GS Paper 2: Statutory, regulatory and quasi-judicial bodies; the functioning of the executive; and the appointment and composition of appraisal and clearance authorities.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** process operates under the **EIA Notification, 2006**, issued under the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**; appraisal is done by **Expert Appraisal Committees (EACs)** at the Centre and by **State Environment Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAAs)** at the state level, under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**; projects are split into **Category A** (appraised at the Centre) and **Category B** (appraised by states); **public consultation** is a formal stage of the EIA process; and the **National Green Tribunal (NGT)**, established under the NGT Act, 2010, is the specialised forum for environmental disputes. Note the reported concern that only about **one of nine seats** on the interim appraisal bodies requires domain expertise.

For **Mains**, use this to argue that appraisal loses credibility without domain expertise and independence, and that faster clearance must not hollow out scientific scrutiny.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Before a large project, a mine, a dam, a highway, a factory, can be built, it must pass an **Environmental Impact Assessment**, a structured study of what the project will do to air, water, land, forests and communities, and how those harms will be avoided or mitigated. Under the **EIA Notification, 2006**, that study is scrutinised by expert bodies: **Expert Appraisal Committees (EACs)** for **Category A** projects at the Centre and **State Environment Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAAs)** for **Category B** projects, all under the **MoEFCC**. **Public consultation** gives affected people a voice, and the **National Green Tribunal** can review clearances after the fact.

The entire architecture rests on a single assumption: that the people appraising the project actually understand the science. An EAC judging whether a mine will drain an **aquifer** or a highway will fragment a tiger corridor needs hydrologists, ecologists, air-quality specialists and biodiversity experts around the table. Remove that expertise and the appraisal becomes a paperwork exercise.

The reported restructuring of these bodies is troubling precisely on this count. If only about **one seat in nine** on the interim appraisal bodies requires domain expertise, the committees that are supposed to be expert bodies may cease to be expert in any meaningful sense.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central claim is that environmental appraisal derives its legitimacy from expertise and independence, and that diluting either, in the name of speed, does not merely change who signs the file; it changes whether the clearance can be trusted at all.

Expertise is the source of credibility

An appraisal is a scientific judgement about complex, site-specific risks. When the body making it lacks hydrologists, ecologists and pollution specialists, its decisions become assertions rather than assessments. A clearance issued by a committee that cannot independently interrogate the developer's own EIA report is credibility on paper only.

Speed against scrutiny

DESIGN CHOICE	IF TILTED TO SPEED	IF TILTED TO SCRUTINY
Composition of appraisal body	Few domain experts, more generalists	Majority domain experts
Independence	Closely tied to clearance-granting executive	Insulated, arms-length
Public consultation	Compressed or diluted	Genuine and time-bound
Outcome	Faster approvals, weaker safeguards	Slower but defensible decisions
Risk	Clearances challenged and quashed later	Fewer reversals, durable projects

The table shows the trade is not free. Clearances rushed through thin, non-expert bodies are exactly the ones most likely to be challenged before the **NGT** and quashed, which means the pursuit of speed can end in delay.

Independence matters as much as competence

Even expert members lose value if the body is not insulated from the very ministry and developers whose projects it must judge. Credibility needs both competence and independence; a knowledgeable but captured committee is no safeguard, and neither is an independent but ignorant one.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

The transferable skill is judging any regulator by its **inputs, not just its outputs**. It is tempting to evaluate an appraisal system only by how fast it clears projects, but the right test is the quality of the deliberation, the expertise in the room, the independence of the members and the seriousness of public consultation. Apply the idea of **regulatory capture** and its cousin, **competence dilution**: a body can be captured by removing either its independence or its expertise. The same frame explains why courts insist on qualified members in tribunals and why financial and safety regulators are only as strong as the specialists who staff them.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Project proposed -> EIA study prepared by developer -> appraisal by EAC (Category A, Centre) or SEIAA (Category B, State) under MoEFCC -> if body has domain expertise + independence + real public consultation -> rigorous, defensible clearance -> durable project -> but if only ~1 in 9 seats is expert and body is executive-tied -> weak scrutiny -> rubber-stamp clearance -> challenge before NGT -> quashed or delayed -> credibility lost

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Restore domain expertise to appraisal bodies.** Ensure a clear majority of EAC and SEIAA members are qualified specialists, hydrologists, ecologists, air-quality and biodiversity experts, so appraisal is genuinely expert.
- ❷ **Guarantee independence.** Insulate appraisal committees from the clearance-granting executive and from developers through transparent, arms-length appointment and fixed tenures.
- ❸ **Protect, do not compress, public consultation.** Keep public hearings meaningful and time-bound so affected communities and local knowledge shape the decision.
- ❹ **Make speed come from capacity, not from cutting scrutiny.** Reduce delays through more staff, better data systems and digital tracking, not by thinning expertise, and strengthen the NGT as a backstop for review.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly tested this terrain, for example on the Environmental Impact Assessment and the role of the NGT (GS3), on the effectiveness and independence of regulatory bodies (GS2, 2018 and 2022), and on balancing development with environmental protection. The novel step this year is to focus on the composition and independence of the appraisal bodies themselves as the determinant of regulatory credibility.

Practice question (Mains, GS3, 250 words, 15 marks): “An environmental clearance is only as credible as the expertise and independence behind it.” In the light of recent restructuring of India’s environmental appraisal authorities, examine how the composition of these bodies shapes the integrity of the EIA process, and suggest reforms to reconcile timely clearances with scientific scrutiny.

Sources: Down To Earth, MoEFCC

Source: Clearance Without Expertise: Restructuring India's Environmental Appraisal — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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