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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

A Dam on the Siyom: Clean Power, Fragile Frontier and Strategic Waters

 DOWN TO EARTH

22 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

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GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

An expert panel has cleared the roughly **1,000 MW Naying Hydroelectric Project** on the **Siyom river** in **Shi-Yomi, Arunachal Pradesh**, a run-of-river scheme in one of the most seismically active and strategically sensitive corners of India. Every large Himalayan dam sits at the meeting point of three arguments: clean power the country needs, water security a frontier state must guard against upstream China, and the fragility of a young, shaking mountain range where displacement and disaster are never far. Naying is where those arguments collide again.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Hydropower, the environmental clearance process and the geography of the eastern Himalaya bridge GS1 and GS3, and the strategic dimension of **transboundary** rivers adds an international-relations edge. A specific, current clearance is exactly the kind of case UPSC uses to test whether a candidate can weigh energy, ecology and strategy together.

The wider significance is that it forces a genuine trade-off: rejecting Himalayan hydropower forfeits clean energy and strategic water use, while approving it carelessly courts seismic and ecological disaster.

GS Paper 1: Geography of India, distribution of natural resources, and the physical geography of the Himalayan region.

GS Paper 3: Infrastructure and energy; conservation and **environmental impact assessment**; disaster management in fragile ecosystems.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **Naying Hydroelectric Project** is a **run-of-river** scheme of about **1,000 MW** on the **Siyom (also called Yomgo) river** in **Shi-Yomi district, Arunachal Pradesh**, with **NEEPCO** as developer; Arunachal's rivers feed the **Brahmaputra** system, and the **Siang** is the Indian name for the **Yarlung Tsangpo**, which rises in Tibet; China plans a **mega-dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo near the Great Bend**, prompting Indian counter-planning; large projects require clearance through the **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** process; and the eastern Himalaya carries high **seismic and landslide risk**.

For **Mains**, the argument to carry is that Himalayan hydropower must balance clean energy and water-security imperatives against seismic risk, ecology and local rights, and that the answer lies in rigorous, credible appraisal rather than in blanket approval or blanket rejection. **Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India, and India must safeguard its water and border interests.**

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Arunachal Pradesh holds a large share of India's untapped hydropower potential because its steep gradients and heavy rainfall are ideal for generation. The **Naying project**, cleared by an expert appraisal panel, is a **run-of-river** scheme, meaning it diverts river flow through turbines with limited storage rather than impounding a vast reservoir, on the **Siyom (Yomgo)** river in **Shi-Yomi**, with **NEEPCO** as the developer. Run-of-river designs are generally less disruptive than large storage dams, but in a fragile mountain setting they still carry real risks.

The strategic backdrop is unavoidable. Arunachal's rivers drain into the **Brahmaputra**, and the **Siang**, the great river of the state, is the Indian name for the **Yarlung Tsangpo**, which flows through Tibet before entering India. **China has announced plans for a mega-dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo near the Great Bend**, raising Indian concerns about control over flow, the risk of sudden water releases and long-term water security. India's own planning in the Siang basin is partly a response, an assertion of use and presence on rivers it shares with an upstream neighbour. **Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India**, and safeguarding its rivers is inseparable from safeguarding the border.

Against these imperatives sit the costs. The eastern Himalaya is young, rising and highly **seismic**, prone to earthquakes and **landslides**. Large infrastructure here faces disaster risk, and construction can trigger slope failures. Local communities worry about **displacement**, submergence of land, and **downstream and ecological** effects on fisheries, sediment flow and river health. The **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** process is meant to weigh exactly these concerns, which is why the credibility of the appraisal matters as much as the clearance itself.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central argument is that Himalayan hydropower is neither an unqualified good nor an unqualified evil, and that projects like Naying must be judged by whether their appraisal rigorously balances clean energy and strategic water use against seismic risk, ecology and the rights of local people.

The Case For: Clean Energy and Strategic Water Use

Hydropower is low-carbon, dispatchable and supports the grid as renewables expand, and Arunachal's potential is vast. Beyond energy, building and using projects on the Siang asserts India's rights as a lower riparian on rivers China plans to dam upstream, turning water infrastructure into a matter of national water security.

The Case For Caution: Seismic and Ecological Fragility

The eastern Himalaya is one of the most earthquake-prone zones in the country, and dams here face landslide and disaster risk that flatter, older regions do not. Ecologically, even run-of-river schemes alter sediment flow, fish migration and downstream river health, so the environmental cost is real and must be counted honestly.

The Deciding Factor: Credible Appraisal and Local Consent

The difference between a defensible project and a reckless one is the quality of its assessment and the genuineness of local consultation. Rigorous seismic study, honest downstream impact modelling and real engagement with affected communities are what separate strategic infrastructure from a future disaster.

CONSIDERATION	ARGUMENT FOR THE PROJECT	ARGUMENT FOR CAUTION
Energy	Low-carbon, grid-supporting power	High cost and long gestation
Strategy	Asserts India's riparian water security	Should not override safety appraisal
Seismicity	Run-of-river limits reservoir size	Eastern Himalaya highly earthquake-prone
Ecology and people	Managed flows possible	Displacement, downstream and fisheries impact

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Refuse the false binary. The honest position is neither dam-everything nor dam-nothing, but project-by-project appraisal on the merits, because the Himalaya is too fragile for blanket approval and too strategically vital for blanket rejection. Apply the strategic-waters lens: on a river China plans to dam upstream, India's use of the Siang is a legitimate water-security interest, and Arunachal's rivers are Indian rivers. Balance that with the risk lens: a young, seismic mountain range magnifies the cost of failure, so engineering standards and disaster planning must be exceptional, not adequate. Add the rights lens: the people who lose land and rivers deserve genuine consent and fair [rehabilitation](#), not a formality. Finally, apply the credibility lens: the whole edifice rests on whether the EIA and appraisal are rigorous and trusted, because a rushed clearance in this terrain is a disaster deferred. Read this way, the question is not whether to build but how carefully.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

India needs clean power and must guard the Siang against China's upstream Yarlung Tsangpo mega-dam -> Naying, a roughly 1,000 MW run-of-river project on the Siyom in Shi-Yomi, is cleared -> but the eastern Himalaya is highly seismic and landslide-prone -> displacement, downstream and ecological concerns arise -> the EIA and appraisal must be rigorous and credible -> genuine local consent and disaster-grade engineering -> clean energy and strategic water security secured without courting catastrophe

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Demand rigorous, independent appraisal.** Subject every Himalayan project to exhaustive seismic, landslide and downstream-impact study through a credible, transparent EIA, so clearances rest on evidence rather than expedience.
- ❷ **Plan at the basin scale.** Assess cumulative effects of multiple dams on the Siang basin together, not one project at a time, so the river's total burden is understood.
- ❸ **Secure genuine local consent and rehabilitation.** Ensure affected communities give informed consent and receive fair, timely resettlement and benefit-sharing, treating their rights as central, not incidental.
- ❹ **Integrate strategy with safety.** Pursue India's legitimate water-security interests on the Siang while insisting that disaster-grade engineering and ecological safeguards are never traded away for speed.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC frequently examines Himalayan ecology, hydropower and transboundary rivers (2013 Mains on the location of hydroelectric projects in the Himalayan region and associated concerns; recurring questions on the Brahmaputra system and India-China water issues; questions on the EIA process). This editorial anchors those with the live Naying clearance and the energy-strategy-ecology balance.

Practice question: “Large hydropower projects in the eastern Himalaya must balance clean energy and strategic water security against seismic risk, ecology and local rights.” Discuss with reference to the Naying project and India's position as a lower riparian on the Siang. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Down To Earth, NEEPCO

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