NOW, OUTSOURCED ECO-IMPACT CHECKS

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The Union Environment Ministry proposes to allow research organisations and accredited agencies to monitor if companies are complying with environmental conditions.

"…the Central Government proposes to introduce the concept of randomised third-party compliance monitoring of the environment clearance conditions through national-level reputed and competent government institutions to be empanelled by the Ministry," said a draft notification issued by the Ministry, dated September 10 but made public on Thursday.

India's environmental laws require project developers to submit themselves to the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), under which an independent agency, commissioned by the project developer, ascertains the likely environmental impact of a proposed project. The preparation of an environment impact assessment report and an environment management plan ensures that the adverse environmental impact of projects and activities are assessed and studied and mitigation measures are taken in the implementation of the project to avoid or minimise the adverse environmental impact. Currently, depending on the size of projects, they are cleared or rejected — with accompanying caveats that must be adhered to — by the expert appraisal committees of the Central government and the States and the district environment impact assessment authorities.

The process obligates the project proponent to file a six-monthly compliance report, and regional offices of the Ministry are supposed to check whether industries are complying with these norms. "However, these offices are frequently understaffed; therefore, to ensure that the rules are complied with, we propose to have institutions like the IITs and accredited expert organisations conduct the compliance monitoring," C.K. Mishra, Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change, told *The Hindu*.

Independent observers describe the proposal as a "big shift" in how projects are appraised. " It is a big shift, but one that is outsourcing the monitoring to scientific institutions [some of them are already doing EIAs]. The core issue of the affected people being kept out of the monitoring and compliance paperwork is embedded in this proposal," said Kanchi Kohli, an environmental researcher with the Centre for Policy Research, in an e-mail to *The Hindu*.

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