Assessment of environmental costs, benefits of projects should not be done in haste.

A move by the Union Environment Ministry to implement a 'star-rating system' has sparked controversy after one of its official communiqués became public.

Under this scheme, State-level environment committees that appraise industrial projects on their potential environmental risk would be incentivised with points for "transparency, efficiency and accountability".

This idea followed a Union Cabinet meeting this month to facilitate the Government's broader commitment to 'Ease of Doing Business'. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is one of the cornerstones of ensuring that the ecological costs of infrastructure development are minimal. Prospective projects above a certain size and with a potential to significantly alter the natural environment must be first approved by the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) comprising State officers and independent experts.

Projects that are even bigger or involve forest land — category A — must be cleared by an expert committee formed by the Centre. SEIAA projects make up the bulk of projects for approval including building and construction, small mining, small industry projects, and are considered 'less polluting'.

The star rating system proposed is to "rank" and "incentivise" States on how quickly and "efficiently" they can accord environmental clearances. It spells out seven criteria to rate SEIAAs on "transparency, efficiency and accountability".

On a scale of 7, an SEIAA, for instance, gets more points for granting a clearance in less than 80 days than for within 105 days and no marks for more. A score of seven or more would be rated 'five star'. However, a reading of the order gives the impression that States, in the quest for more stars, would logically vie for speedily clearing projects rather than ensure a thorough appraisal. The Environment Ministry, has said, in response to criticism, that the intention is not to hasten clearances but accelerate the pace of decision making.

Rather than files being sent back for every query, all objections must be compiled and addressed at one go, it contends. While quicker decision-making benefits everyone, State committees are currently hampered by having too few independent experts and decision-making being left to bureaucrats than to environment specialists. Both industrialists and States gain from projects and, therefore, the tendency is always to elide environmental concerns.

In many instances, site visits are critical to understand the potential environmental challenges. Calculating the risks and the benefits of industrial projects vis-à-vis their environmental impact is understandably hard. The way forward is to take steps to increase trust in the system and ensure that all States have competent experts who can conduct appraisals without fear or favour. A list of empty rankings is the least advisable way to bring about this.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. **Recently which Ministry of GOI has launched Star Ranking System?**

(a) Min.of Environment

(b) Min.of I.T.

(c) Min.of Electronics

(d) Min.of Power

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. **While Discussing the salient features of the recently proposed star rating system for environmental clearance in the states, also show its shortcomings.** **(250 Words)**

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.