

Uttarakhand: A case against hydel power?

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The mountains of Uttarakhand are fragile and new. Hence, Uttarakhand is inherently vulnerable to various kinds of disasters, such as high intensity rainfall, cloud bursts, landslides, flash floods and earthquakes. Its geology is ridden with fault lines. Climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme events. Our developmental projects need to take this reality into account.

However, we have not done a credible environmental, or social, impact assessment (EIA) for a single project – a fact that even our former environment minister has accepted. We do not have a credible public consultation process; local people do not even get the EIA in their language.

The Expert Appraisal Committees that the MoEF appoints are effectively agents of project developers. They do not apply their mind to the inadequacies of the EIA or the public consultation process. We need a credible cumulative impact assessment that takes into account all kinds of interventions in river basins. The assessments are inadequate, and are done by agencies such as Water and Power Consultancy Services or IIT's (Roorkee) Alternate Hydro Energy Centre, raising questions of conflict of interest.

A large dam diverts the whole rivers into underground tunnels that could be up to 20-30 km long, and wide enough to carry three trains side by side. These tunnels are blasted by massive use of dynamite in fragile, landslide-prone mountains. This paves the way for townships, roads, deforestation and submergence. The State has over a hundred (a very conservative estimate) such projects. Each clearance is supposedly given after several conditions and environmental management plans are adhered to, but the Environment Ministry has confessed that it cannot ensure compliance with any of these aspects. Besides, the electricity output of these projects is not up to the mark.

Hydro projects have magnified the effects

of heavy rain in Uttarakhand. Mismanagement of operations of the Tehri dam has led to floods in downstream areas. The claim of Tehri Hydro Development Corporation that in the absence of Tehri dam, Rishikesh and Haridwar would have been washed away is completely unfounded. Floods on the Bhagirathi on which the Tehri dam is situated

occurred on June 16, while the peak flood downstream on the Alaknanda occurred on June 17. It is true that in the absence of the Tehri dam the floods would have occurred downstream a day earlier. But that does not

mean the peak level would have been higher. Areas downstream of the Tehri dam faced an avoidable floods disaster in September 2010. If the dam is not properly managed, we may be in for a repeat later this season.

We need to stop this blind rush for projects which are increasing our vulnerability. There are other options for electricity. We need to rethink development, taking local people and conditions into account.

(The author is with South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People.)



The end of the Vishnuprayag project barrage.

A. K. Bahadur

Hydroelectric power is the most efficient source of energy, compared to coal, gas or nuclear, and those based on the so-called 'environment friendly' and sustainable sources like solar and wind. If proper care is taken during the planning stage (it has become established practice now), there will virtually no production of greenhouse gases.

While in India, hydroelectricity accounts for about one-fifth of total power generation, it is much higher in developing countries such as Brazil and China. Their projects are bigger in size. Compare the sizes of our biggest projects under construction – Subansiri (2,000 MW), and Tehri (1,000 MW) – with already constructed projects like Itaipu (14,000 MW) and three Gorges (22,000 MW)!

Countries whose leaders and people had vision enough to develop their hydro resources before going for other options, enjoy the highest standard of living in the world (example, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland).

Hydro power not only provides protection from floods, it also assures a steady supply of water for irrigation and drinking. In India, the rivers carry more than two third of their annual flow in three monsoon months. Can we afford to waste the bulk of the water by letting it flow unutilised in the monsoon months?

Dams and reservoirs are designed to last over hundred years. Which other type of energy source has such a long life? They provide us inexpensive energy. Even in current times of inflation and high prices, the State of Uttarakhand is getting energy at an average rate of 72.0 paise/unit, from its old power stations.

The fact that hydro projects help mitigate the fury of floods can be gauged from the fact, that had Tehri Dam not withheld 90 per cent of the flood inflows, the Rishikesh and Haridwar would have been washed away. Had there been a dam of the size of Tehri on Alaknanda, the people downstream of the dam would have suffered no harm at all.

Our neighbours like Bhutan too has realised the importance of converting hydro power potential into catalyst for economic development and the results are here to see. They have higher per capita income than us.

Development of hydro is essential for hill States like Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Arunachal Pradesh.

The people here do not have any resource for industrial development. If hydro development is also scuttled, mass migrations from these States cannot be ruled out.

The local population strongly supports hydro projects such as the Alaknanda Hydel Project and Vishnugad Pipalkoti project. When some people tried to oppose the transfer of Dhari Devi temple at the project site, the locals showed them black flags. The development of hydro power is being opposed by vested interests who do not want to see India as self-reliant.

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YES

NO