

TEHRI DAM, UTTARANCHAL

Introduction: The Tehri Hydel Project has been creating controversy since the time it was envisaged. This largest dam in Asia has displaced thousands of people and is under scrutiny for its structural strength.

Fact File

- ❖ The 2400MW Tehri Hydel Project was announced in 1965. The dam will form a lake spreading over 42 sq.km.
- ❖ Executing body: Tehri Hydro Development Corporation (THDC)
- ❖ Protests and objections of several agencies, organisations and local groups have since delayed this Rs 8500 crore project. This dam is planned for a 260.5m height, is the largest in Asia, and among the largest in the world.
- ❖ Its construction started in 1978. However was stopped by the residents who were concerned about their lives and livelihoods and were to be displaced; environmentalists worried about the possible adverse affects of the dam.
- ❖ A committee was formed in 1980 to look into the environmental implications; however, their report came out 6 years later.
- ❖ The project got a go-ahead in 1990 by the Union Forest and Environment Ministry after debates on the safety of the dam.
- ❖ There were protests and hunger strikes held by eminent environmentalist Mr. Sunder Lal Bahuguna and the local people. Construction was at a snails pace.
- ❖ The demands of the local residents now shifted to proper rehabilitation, which resulted in the Hanumantha Rao Committee in 1996.
- ❖ Till September 2003, over Rs 600 crore had been spent in resident rehabilitation, with 100 families still left.
- ❖ The Supreme Court cleared the legal hurdles for the ongoing construction of this controversial project in September 2003 saying that there was no material on record to show that statutory environmental conditions had not been compiled with. The bench also said that tunnels number 1 and 2 should not

be closed and no further impounding of water should be carried out till the rehabilitation work is complete. Because once the tunnels are closed the water level will begin to rise and the 188-year-old Tehri will submerge. Also an expert committee should be set up to carry out all scientific tests, including a 3-D seismic survey.

- ❖ The Research Foundation for Science Technology and Ecology, an NGO, has however resented the Supreme Court's verdict. As over 1 lakh people uprooted from their ancestral homes and thus displaced have yet to be relocated. Also, the benefit of the Tehri Dam will go to Suez, the world's biggest water MNC.
- ❖ The project is nearing completion and is in the final stage now.

Controversial Aspects

- ❖ The soil on the upper slopes is unstable and grouting can only take care of surface problems. The volume of water envisaged (maximum of 15540 cusecs) would further weaken the slopes and affect the dam's life span. THDC has assumed the dam's life span to be 150 years, while independent experts say 50 years.
- ❖ The catchment area management by the forest department has been entrusted with planting trees to bind the soil. The department is alleged to have failed in doing its job despite huge amounts of money given to them. Shoor Vir Singh Sajwan, Minister of Irrigation agrees with this allegation. However the Principal Conservator of Forests, Uttaranchal, M M Harbola claims that though the catchment area is about 7 lakh hectares, the forest department was entrusted with the task of greening 52000 odd hectares of which 44000 hectares had already been covered.
- ❖ 39 villages of 3355 families will be totally submerged along with Tehri town while 72 villages with about 2074 families will be partially submerged.

According to an NGO Matu, the project affects around 125 villages of which 86 will be partially submerged. This number of fully and partially affected villages may increase since a fresh survey of the rim area has been commissioned. Many villages are located in the unstable rim area, including villages like Khola, Kangsali and Jawalgaon.

- ❖ Houses on either side of the road have been assigned different rates of compensation in an arbitrary fashion.
- ❖ People are angry over the unrealistic amount of compensation. As the rehabilitation package was made in 1976, the project is vastly delayed and the current market value of the compensation is nothing.
- ❖ Those lucky enough to get compensation are still awaiting their promised land. For example, Pipola hamlet is yet to get the land that has been allotted at Pashulok in Rishikesh.
- ❖ Besides, the cutoff date for compensation being 1976, the right to compensation rests to owners long dead and gone. The package does not factor in claimants who were minors then and are adults now.
- ❖ The construction of this big project in an active seismic zone had rendered the dam unsafe as no tests regarding the safety of the dam from earthquakes experienced frequently in the region, had been carried out so far. This project in the Garhwal hills is situated in one of the most quake-prone zones of the world.
- ❖ Also with musclexing, people have used their influences to get 4 to 5 times as much compensation, while the less fortunate ones have got nothing.

The project is nearing completion with its rehabilitation still incomplete. Furthermore, injustice and delay seems to be the inherent attitude towards the project affected persons.

WWF-India as an ENVIS Centre/Node has been keeping a tab on the media activity on environment related issues and carries out analysis on different issues in media.

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