

[Religion and Environment Conspire to Tear Down Tehri Dam](#)

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Rishikesh and Haridwar Threatened As Scientists Doubt Mammoth Dam Can Withstand a Major Earthquake

Consider this fictional news report:

New Delhi, October 15th, 2011

There has been no word of survivors from a hundred-kilometer stretch of the Ganga after a two-hundred meter wall of water topped Tehri Dam and raged down the narrow valley. All ashrams, temples and ghats along the river are either gone or buried in mud. There was no warning, and no chance to flee. The moderate 6.1 earthquake was initially thought to have not caused much damage. Aerial reconnaissance revealed half a mountain collapsed into the reservoir behind the dam, generating a giant wave of water which rushed downstream and over the top of the 260-meter dam. Casualty estimates begin in the lakhs. Repairs to the heavily damaged hydroelectric dam, if even possible, will run into hundreds of billions of rupees. Ashrams, mutts and sacred sites can never be replaced. Worse is the horrific loss of over 100,000 lives, among them some of India's holiest saints and sadus. Engineers who built the controversial dam could not be reached for comment.

Unlikely? In Italy on the night of April 9th, 1963, 350 million cubic meters of rock plunged off Mount Toc into the Vaiont Dam reservoir after a series of earth tremors. A 110-meter-wave overtopped the dam and two minutes later leveled the town of Longarone, one kilometer downstream. The death toll exceeded 2,600.

And what might happen in a major earthquake? A complete failure of the Tehri dam and release of its 3.5 billion cubic meters of water would cause a disaster surpassing that of the 1975 failure of the Banqiao and Shimantan dams in central China which killed 230,000 people. In that case freak typhoon rains exceeded the capacity of the reservoirs. The combination of an 8.5 earthquake with Tehri dam's collapse would be one of the greatest disasters of human history.

Development Without Disaster

The arguments for and against Tehri Dam are mostly the same as those for and against other large dams (the completed Tehri will be the fourth largest in the world), such as the Three Gorges Dam in China and the Pancheswar in Nepal. On one side is desperately needed electricity for industrial development (2,000 megawatts in Tehri's case) and water for drinking and agriculture. On the other is the environmental impact of the dam itself--farmland, forests, towns and sacred sites submerged, populations displaced (70,000 for Tehri) and whether the cost of the project (US\$2 billion) is actually worth the results.

By far the most compelling argument against Tehri is the earthquake threat. The dam sits precariously astride the so-called "Seismic Gap" of the Himalayas where no major earthquakes have occurred for hundreds of years and eminent seismologists predict a quake in the near future of 8.5 or above. Those responsible for the dam's design claim it can withstand such a shock. Nearly everyone else disagrees. According to a detailed report in Manushimagazine in 1995, "It is noteworthy that no recognized seismologists have been associated with the Tehri project. Dr. Vinod Gaur, the only seismologist of international eminence associated with the high-level committee appointed to evaluate the dam, expressed strong reservations about its safety. Professor James Brune, an acknowledged international authority, whose formula the Tehri project engineers claim to have used in their estimate of the safety of the dam, has gone on record to say that his formula has been misused and that if they construct this dam, it will be one of the most unsafe dams in the world."

Three long fasts by activist Sunderlal Bahuguna [below] won a government promise for an independent review. No such review happened, and Bahuguna has again begun a fast. There have also been demonstrations at the site in protest. Manushi's editor, Madhu Kishwar, is leading a campaign against the dam. Several international organizations are also strongly opposed to the dam's construction.

The river is in Hinduism given a status of supreme sacredness as the "Goddess Ganga." According to tradition, She came to Earth originally as the result of the penance of King Bhagirath--penance which he performed very near to Tehri. The Earth, unable to withstand the force of the mighty river,

called upon Lord Siva for help. The Great God captured the Ganga in His matted locks, where She flowed for years before being released benignly onto the Himalayas. Now mere men seek to trap and tame this Goddess again, for their own selfish ends, and with unknown consequences.

And what of the threat to Rishikesh and Haridwar? What other religion has seen two of its most sacred places put under such a threat of total destruction? The project is 12 years and US\$200 million along, and might take another 20 years to complete. What other faith would take such a terrifying risk with its holy sites and saints?

For further information on Tehri Dam, contact Manushi, C-202, Lajpat Nagar I, New Delhi, 110024, India, or the International Rivers Network, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California, 94703, USA.

Editors Note: One of largest dams to ever fail completely was the 90-meter-high Teton Dam, completed in 1975 in the Northwestern USA. It was a rock-fill dam like Tehri. The project's engineers, already far behind schedule, ignored unanticipated and ominously large cracks discovered in the surrounding rock during construction. The winter snows melted and rapidly filled the reservoir. By June 1st, 1976, signs of imminent failure were apparent, and the entire downstream population of 12,000 was evacuated. Five days later, the dam burst. A 50-meter wall of water obliterated three towns and killed a dozen stragglers. Should Tehri similarly fail, the consequences would be staggering

Sidebar: Yes or No?

Hinduism Today's Delhi correspondent Sri Mangala Mohanty visited Tehri Town where he interviewed residents, project managers and the activist Sunderlal Bahuguna (ten days into his indefinite fast to protest the dam). Mohanty also acquired the opinions of saints and sadhus in Rishikesh, Haridwar and Delhi. Those interviewed varied considerably in their knowledge of the project, especially regarding safety concerns.

Yes!

Swami Omanand Giri
Akhildham, Haridwar

"The dam is surrounded by hills, so it is much safer. People used to raise such apprehension about Bhakra dam, but nothing happened. The Bhakra brought prosperity to Punjab and helped India becoming self-sufficient in grains. Ganga is Param Pavitra["ever-pious"]. A little diversion will not affect it. Without power generation, no progress can be made. The meaning and concept of dharma changes according to place and time. It cannot be stopped now. There is no harm in such projects which bring prosperity to people and the country."

Swami Tribhuvan das
Mangalam Kutia, Rishikesh

"I think the dam will help people in irrigation and power supply. There is no meaning in opposing it. When the majority of people gain, some little sacrifice has to be made. People who are opposing the dam instead should help the poor people in resettlement. In our religion there is no ban in utilization of Ganga water for the welfare of the people. Government should consult scientists and take precautions against any possible damage arising out of earthquake. If geologists suggest to lower the height of the dam, then it should be done."

Veer Singh

Personnel Officer, Tehri Hydroelectric Development Corporation

"The Tehri dam will create wonders for the country's development. The fertile land in Eastern Uttar Pradesh has remained backward for lack of irrigation, whereas in the eastern part there is adequate irrigation and the farmers do very well. The Ganga valley can make India self-sufficient in power generation."

Radheshyam Baba

Kutia #1, Rishikesh

"The dam will help the country. Lots of money has already been spent. At this stage we should not stop it. Culture and tradition change according to the times. Science causes the development of the nation. At Maneri of Uttarkashi, there exists a small dam on river Ganga. Why did people not oppose it? The submergence of Rishikesh and Haridwar will not be a reality. Experts, engineers, scientists have taken care of it. The dam is not going to affect the religion and tradition."

Sri M.S. Gusain

Senior Manager, Dams, THDC

"As you see, the new Tehri township has been built complete with temples, gurudwara and church, court, collectorate, commercial complex and schools. A house, a plot of land and money have been given to the affected people. There are no major temples or places of cultural or historical importance coming under the submerged area. The dam has been designed as per 8.0 on Richter's scale. It can withstand any major earthquake up to this limit. The earthquake at Uttarkashi was of 6.2 scale. We have planted lot of trees. We have been

very cautious about the environment and heritage protection. Most of the local people are happy about the project."

Swami Gokulanand

Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, Delhi

"Hindus all over the world look to the Ganges as very sacred water. As to the question of the dam hurting the sentiments of Hindus, a counter issue may be raised, why have we Hindus polluted the Ganga? If the dam is created for the benefit of people, and above all it is the will of the divine providence, then it will materialize."

No!

Swami Rameshanand Bharati

Kutia #15, Ganga Line, Rishikesh

"I know about the problem, including earthquake and disaster. This project is against nature, our culture and our religion. But who cares! Let them do what they want. It all depends on the Raja, the king and ruler. When a cultureless king rules the world, such things do happen. When a good ruler comes, things will shape for the better. Earlier the rulers used to listen to the wise words of the saints. Nowadays everyone rules to uphold one's own interests."

Swami Pragyanand

Pragya Mission International, New Delhi

"I know the benefits of such projects. But the local people are unhappy, and there is a great threat to the ecology. In case of an earthquake, the whole of western UP including Delhi will be affected. Therefore, enlightened people like Bahuguna oppose this project which is destroying the fragile ecosystem. From

the religious angle it is emphasized we must not tamper with nature. Nature is not weak. It will react. The purity of the Ganga must be maintained."

Srimati Dasma

Member of the priest's family of the Old Tehri Town Sarveswar Shiv Temple which is about to be submerged.

"This Siva temple is very old, at least 100 years. I have heard about the construction of a dam here. Our king is the chief. When he orders then only something will happen. We will not listen to government. We have never discussed the matter, but we have sent a letter to the king, whose ancestors built this temple."

Srimati Ashutosh

Resident of Budhakedar village, 150 kms. away from Tehri

"We have heard that because of the dam, people have to leave their homes. Fortunately, we do not have to vacate our village. It is a matter of great sorrow to leave your house, village, temple, etc. Our forefathers used to stay here. I know Bahuguna is opposing the construction of the dam. But, why didn't he protest when the initial work started?"

Too late to stop

Swami Harinarayanand

All-India General Secretary, Bharat Sadhu Samaj, New Delhi

"We have discussed this issue in our Sadhu Samaj and with other saints. The dam should be built, but smaller in size to avoid problems. The scientists and engineers should take care of this aspect. Now the work at the site has progressed a lot. The government and the dam authority never seek the opinion

of saints or the local people. They simply do not bother. Think, if the basic concept of spiritual wisdom deteriorates, what will be the fate of humanity?"

Dr. Shyam Sundar Das

Haridwar General Secretary, Bharat Sadhu Samaj, and
President, Garil Dasi Mahasabha

"We, the saints, are of the opinion that the natural flow of rivers and the natural shape of forests and mountains must be maintained. The flow of a river is pure. The moment you arrest or store it, the purity decreases. Such a huge dam was not required; instead, two or three smaller dams could have been built. And now after spending such a huge amount, how can they supply power at a reasonable price? From the religious angle, we should have preserved the Himalaya like the original. There is erosion in our spirituality. Now that the money has been spent, the dam should be constructed soon."

Swami Devanand Giri

Srikrishna Ashram, Delhi

"I have been to Tehri and see the dam site. I think Tehri dam will be very useful for the country. But we have a doubt. We read that the dam is built using soil. In case it breaks, there will be massive destruction. They should not have started to build this dam. The mountains in the area are not made of solid rocks. Some of these hills might collapse into the reservoir creating a lot of problems. The area is earthquake-prone. Now we should not stop it fully, but lower the height and take all precautions to avoid a disaster."

Over my dead body

Sunderlal Bahuguna (environmental activist, currently on a hunger strike at the Tehri Dam site.

"King Bhagirath did penance at Gangotri to bring the Ganga down to the earth. Indian culture values very highly the renunciation done for the people's welfare, as Bhagirath did, by getting the Ganga to flow for the benefit of all. In the event of a dam-burst, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Bijnor, Meerut, Hapur, Bulandshahr and all areas in between will be washed away. Once before, in 1916, there was a proposed diversion of the river into a canal. Madan Mohan Malviya organized a powerful movement against it and forced the British to ensure the river's free flow. But on his deathbed, Malviya said, "I apprehend that after my death once again the free flow of Ganga will be obstructed." With Tehri Dam his apprehensions have proved true. The basic cause of the sad plight of the Ganga is our materialistic civilization. The dollar has become the God. This new God has trampled the values of culture. A paradox exists in that on one side are the masses of India intoxicated with the belief in the sanctity of Ganga, and on the other side the system intoxicated with development aiming at economic growth, who claim their right over the Ganga. The State has wealth and even an ideology to support its claim, whereas the masses have only the purpose of taking a holy dip in the river to protect their precious heritage. The simple hill people are exposed to easy money. What will our children inherit?"

Hinduism Today correspondent Mangala Mohanty is a poet, journalist, developmental activist and academic with a special interest in international affairs. He lives in Delhi with his wife and two children.