

THE TEHRI DAM PROJECT



The rivers Bhagirathi and Bhilangana rise in the Garhwal Himalayas in northwestern Uttar Pradesh and flow south to the plains as the Ganga. As part of a larger plan to trap the waters of the Upper Ganga basin, a three billion dollar clay core, rock fill dam is being constructed at the confluence of the Bhagirathi and Bhilangana, close to the Garhwal town of Tehri. The lake created by the dam will extend upto 45 kms in the Bhagirathi Valley and 25 kms in the Bhilangana Valley with a water-spread area of 42.5 sq. kms. It will submerge nearly 100 villages, including Tehri, a historical capital. As many as 85,600 families will be relocated as a result. 19 On the benefits side of the equation, the project is supposed to generate 2,400 MW of electricity, create irrigation facilities for 270,000 hectares of land, and create a supply of 500 cusecs of water to New Delhi.



The Tehri dam project has provoked controversy focused on three issues. The completed dam will displace many people and submerge several towns, among them the town of Tehri; the region is vulnerable to earthquakes and the dam may be structurally incapable of withstanding them or may perhaps even cause them; and the possible failure of the dam could kill hundreds of thousands of people and destroy downstream towns of immense religious significance. Of particular concern are the 170,000 inhabitants of the downstream Hindu holy towns of Hardwar and Rishikesh. Both the resettlement policies and the structural flaws of the dam have provoked civil protests, lawsuits and international attention that have repeatedly stalled the project, which was begun in 1978.

The Tehri project was unsuccessfully challenged in the Supreme Court in a writ petition filed by the Tehri Bandh Virodhi Sangarash Samiti (TBVSS) in 1985. In April 1987 the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), an 'intervenor' in this petition and a leading non-governmental organization in the field of conservation, sponsored an independent assessment of the economic feasibility of the dam. The principal finding of the multi-disciplinary team that conducted the appraisal was that the benefit to cost ratio of the Tehri dam, after calculating social and environmental costs and benefits, works out to 0.56:1, well short of the 1.5:1 ratio adopted by the Planning Commission to sanction such projects.

In -addition, in 1986, the Soviet Union agreed to help fund the project with loans at extremely concessional terms. As a part of the agreement with the Indian Government, Soviet experts conducted a review of the proposed project and made several ominous findings, the most frightening of which was that the high seismicity of the Tehri area had not been adequately taken into consideration by Indian planners. The INTACH team, under the leadership of Vijay Paranjpye, also found that while the Indian Government projected a useful life of 100 years, the actual siltation rate would render the dam useless in 62





years or less. Finally, while the authorities put the number of displaced people, or oustees at 46,000, the INTACH team found that 85,600 people would be displaced by the project.

The Supreme Court dismissed the petition in 1990 after a very limited enquiry. Although the Environmental Appraisal Committee had unanimously concluded that the Tehri project should not be approved, the Central Government relied instead on an opinion of the Department of Mines to convince itself and the court that the project was sound.

