

Attitudes toward Dam Construction in the Garhwal Region of the Himalayas

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Introduction

Although neither were against the development of modern technology or economic models, both Gandhi and Ambedkar cautioned that large-scale development and centralized control could lead to greed and exploitation instead of emancipation and democracy. Gandhi believed that machines should be made to serve human beings and help them meet their full potential, rather than enslaving them – “production by the masses, rather than mass production.” (Parasarathy 2002, p. 5). Gandhi also believed that, in order for there to be increased equality and justice, the village should be the site of production, exchange and consumption, using small-scale technologies using locally available renewable resources (Gandhi 1997). He argued that one should use their assets and skills to promote the welfare of others, including that of nature (Gandhi 1997). For Ambedkar, individual transformation should lead to social transformation. Dharma, interpreted as “moral duty,” should not only be about living one’s life with restraint and control, but also about looking after the collective and individual welfare of others (Parasarathy 2002, p. 9).

Social and political scientists, government officials, environmentalists, and engineers have all weighed in on the various outcomes of the proliferation of large dam construction projects on the lives of village residents in India. On the positive side, some argue that the projects produce jobs, which in turn enhances the local economies. The dams can also help provide the region with electricity. In an area of the world where electrical power is intermittent or nonexistent, the dams have the potential to be a significant energy source.

Others argue, in contrast, that the dams have caused major problems for the people of the surrounding areas, which can be grouped into four categories: environmental, health, economic, and religious. Studies show that the natural environment has been negatively affected by dam

construction. For example, it depletes surrounding areas of fertile land for planting. In some cases, problems with construction have caused flooding. Dust from dam projects construction has been related to health problems, as has sound pollution. Along with the environmental and health effects, dam projects have also threatened many of the sacred religious sites that are so significant in the lives of the Indian people.

There have also been various negative economic effects. Dam projects in some areas have forced residents to move to safer ground, thus abandoning their houses and farmland. As in the case of the Tehri dam project in Uttarakhand, entire villages have disappeared. In Orissa, more than 100,000 people in the submerged villages surrounding the Hirakud Dam were made homeless (Meher 2011, p. 423). Moreover, farmers downstream of the Mahanadi River suffered “acute water scarcity, thus affecting their livelihoods” (Meher 2001, p. 424).

This paper examines the attitudes of people who live in the Chauras region of Uttarakhand, India, in the Garhwal Himalayas, where a major dam construction project has been underway in earnest since 2007 (although it was cleared for construction in 1985). (Kala 2011) The site of the dam, on the Alaknanda River, a major tributary of the sacred Ganga, threatens to wipe out aquatic life and biodiversity, and deprive people of their land. Although mass protest against business and the state is not at all uncommon in the hill region, residents of the Chauras region have been relatively silent with regard to the dam project. In fact, little is known about the attitudes of the people in the region beyond assumptions made by policymakers and academics. This study sheds light on the conditions, experiences, and concerns of the villagers most affected by the dam project. The findings are important for informing public policy in areas where these kinds of major “development” projects interact with, and have the potential to deeply affect, the surrounding environment.

Data Collection and Methods

In November 2011, with the help of an able team of research assistants, mostly consisting of graduate students in the Department of Political Science at H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand, India, residents of two villages in the Chauras region were interviewed. Sixty-one residents, 40 men and 21 women, were administered an interview schedule consisting mostly of open-ended questions concerning their knowledge of the dam project, the compensation package offered by the dam company, and their views on various environmental, health, economic, and religious effects of the construction. They were also asked about their participation in political activity with regard to the project.

Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. It should be noted that conducting interviews with villagers who reside in the “hilly” region of the Garhwal Himalayas can be problematic. They are modest people, both economically and socially, and they work very hard day and night to provide for their families. They are also practical and local-minded people, and do not necessarily see benefit in talking with researchers. Thus, they have neither the time nor the inclination to provide lengthy interviews. Given these factors, we feel that the interviews were most generous and kind in giving us their time and attention, and for that we are grateful.

The Alaknanda Project

The large dam project underway on the banks of the Alaknanda River in Srinagar, Pauri Garhwal district, altered forever the landscape of this otherwise incredibly pristine, scenic, and peaceful valley tucked away in the foothills of the Himalayas. The sound of splashing waves has given way to the roar of bulldozers and other heavy equipment. Roads surrounding the dam are often muddy, with deep grooves. They are often virtually impassible, especially during monsoon season.



Since its inception, the project has experienced a myriad of delays and problems. In 2008, construction was suspended because locals alleged that the company building the dam, the GVK, was disposing of the ground material into the Alaknanda River, causing environmental hazards

(Prashant 2008). The company was also alleged to have raised the height of the dam without appropriate approval (Kala 2011). In 2009, a coffer dam collapsed due to sudden rise in the water level of the Alaknanda river caused by the incessant monsoon rains (Kazmi 2009), threatening the health and well being of people in the vicinity. Houses are beginning to show cracks due to the increasing instability of the earth beneath them.

Dangers related to the dam project are very real. Flooding is major concern and would displace many people in the area, some of whom have already been once displaced. This project also threatens religious sites, such as the sacred Dhari Devi shrine, which the dam company has proposed to “relocate” (Kala 2011). In the area of the dam, dust and sound pollution are evident. The once serene and scenic Alaknanda River running through the region is now covered by a cloud of dust and surrounded by the rumble of heavy construction vehicles. Moreover, there is evidence that the dam, like many in the region, is being building in what has been characterized by scientists as an “earthquake-prone zone” (Gautam 2008).

Proponents argue that dams such as this will provide residents with much needed electricity, helping to alleviate power outages that are so frequent and interrupt the work and lives of people in the area. Yet the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, & People found that the 208 large Hydroelectric Plants included in their study were operating below capacity, and about half generated less than 50 percent of the planned power output (Dasgupta 2010).

Many of the large dams projects, such as the Narmada and the Hirakud award little or no compensation to the people (most of whom are struggling to begin with) who are dislocated as a result of construction. Where compensation and/or employment are offered, it could be argued that this contributes to a further shift away from agricultural to money economy in an area that produces very little. Residents, eager to grab gainful employment but generally lacking specialized skills and higher educations, become increasingly vulnerable to, and dependent on, large corporations and a global economy for whom profit is the main goal.

All over India, ordinary people have been engaged in mass protest to stop what they argue is “a climate where environmental and human rights issues are increasingly being sacrificed at the alter of development” (Iyer 2010). Women and men in the Garhwal region in particular have long been active participants in protesting against development projects that threaten the sustainability of the environment and livelihood of the people. Scientists and professors at area colleges and universities have argued critically against large dam projects. And yet the voices of the people who

live in the surrounding villages have remained relatively silent. Moreover, there has been little research that examines their attitudes and beliefs concerning the dam project and its affect on their lives and the lives of others in the community.

Results

All of the villagers interviewed reported that they are well informed about the dam project. They also said that they are aware of other large dam projects in the region, such as the Tehri, Maneri Bhali, and Koteshwar dam projects.

Preliminary results show that women, more than men, have a somewhat negative view of the dam project, particularly with regard to religious issues. When asked whether they were in favor of the Dhari Devi shrine being relocated, 40 percent of women compared with 75 percent of men reported affirmatively. Sixty percent of women, versus only 25 percent of men said that there “must not be any tampering with the original structure.” With regard to environmental issues, the biggest concern by far was reported to be the pollution caused by the construction project. Over half of the men and a third of the women said that the dust and sound permeating the air is a constant source of discomfort. They also reported that the damaged and uneven condition of roads in the vicinity of the dam makes travel difficult if not impossible at times.

Table 1: Attitudes of Residents Toward Religious and Environmental Effects of Dam Construction

In favor of temple relocation	Female	Male
Agree	40%	75%
Disagree	60%	25%
Must be no tampering with original structure		
Agree	60%	25%
Disagree	40%	75%
Dust and sound a constant source of discomfort		
Agree	29%	62%
Disagree	71%	38%

When asked about whether, and which, village facilities had improved as a result of the dam project, the majority of respondents, both men and women reported that they had indeed improved. They identified improvements such an escorting school bus for children and a water tanker for sorting out the problem of potable water.

Somewhat surprisingly, although they did report some concerns, most of the residents interviewed, both men and women, say that they are

generally supportive of the project. Although many have lost land to the construction, they report that they are satisfied overall with the compensation package provided by the dam company. Most reported not having to migrate out of the area. More importantly perhaps, they are satisfied with the monetary compensation and employment opportunities offered by the dam company, although women are somewhat less likely to report satisfaction:

Table 2: Attitudes of Residents Toward Relocation, Compensation, and Employment

Some affected people had to relocate to safer grounds	Female	Male
Agree	80%	93%
Disagree	20%	7%
One member from every affected family was hired by the dam company		
Agree	90%	88%
Disagree	10%	12%
Affected villagers received satisfactory or handsome compensation by the dam construction company		
Agree	60%	90%
Disagree	40%	10%

In fact, those interviewed reported that every affected villager who lost agricultural land to the project was offered employment. Probing further, we found that one member of the family received employment, most likely the male householder. Due to the overall level of satisfaction with their treatment by the dam company, none of the residents reported that they had engaged in political activity with regard to the construction project.

Implications and Conclusions

Although residents of the villages most affected by the dam construction know that there are negative environmental, health, and religious consequences and feel these are important, economic factors are the primary force driving their generally positive attitudes toward the project. This would make sense, given the fact that people in the area, deprived of land for farming, are increasingly dependent on a money economy. Given the lack of jobs in the area, village residents are grateful for the employment opportunities offered by the dam company. They do not seem to know, or care, that these jobs are not necessarily permanent or that living and working in the area may lead to long-term health problems. Their satisfaction in turn reduces the potential for mass resistance or organized political activity of any kind. The dam company has therefore

done a very good job of satisfying the immediate need for jobs and money income (in part caused by the project due to loss of agricultural land). In doing so, the company has effectively squelched a possible popular uprising in the area that could cause delays in construction or prevent the construction of the dam altogether.

Women report less concern than men about pollution issues related to the dam. One potential explanation for this is that women are most likely not the family member who is engaged in paid employment by the dam company and/or elsewhere. Thus, they do not travel the dusty roads or work in the most polluted areas in the immediate vicinity of the construction; thus they may not be as aware of the pollution as are the male family members. Their greater concern about the religious effects of the dam construction might also be explained by the gendered division of labor in the family. Women are typically responsible for the care of the home and children. Because their interests are more closely tied to the home and family than the paid workplace, and as such feel responsible for the instilling proper values and morals in their children, they may feel more threatened by the removal or alteration of religious symbols.

These findings point to several possible policy implications. In the short term, public policy should address the problem of air pollution. Although they may not surface for some time, sound and dust pollutants will eventually result in health problems for the workers and the village residents. Additionally, roads surrounding the construction should be well maintained so as to allow residents to travel freely and safely to and from their homes. This is especially important during monsoon season, where heaving rains contribute to landslides. If roads are not properly maintained, they become vulnerable to being washed away, thereby creating a dangerous situation.

In the long term, public policy should address the issue of job creation in the area so that residents are not solely dependent on the dam company for survival. This would give them more leverage to fight for decent roads, air, and the care and maintenance of important religious sites – all of which are important and deeply meaningful in the lives of the people of this area. Policy makers should work with the business community and H.N.B. Garhwal University to develop jobs in Srinagar and surrounding areas. Beyond this particular project, there must be other options for survival before residents can be truly free to act in their best interests regarding the location and consequences of any “development” initiative. Sustainable development must be linked to “sustainable livelihood.”

Within the last year, dam construction on the Alaknanda has once again been suspended. On June 2, 2011, the environment ministry had issued a

stop-work order against the dam following complaints from former Madhya Pradesh BJP chief minister Uma Bharati that the project would result in submergence of the Dhara Devi temple in the Srinagar valley. This means that all of the families who were dependent on wages from the dam company are going without. And because there is less fertile land available for farming as a result of large-scale development projects like this one, villagers will not be able to sustain themselves on agricultural production. Policy makers need to think about these and other long-term implications of dam projects on the lives of those who are most vulnerable.

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