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Power projects threaten Himalayan rivers

They will destabilise ecological balance of the region, say locals and environmentalists

Rajesh Sinha.

Plans for the construction of over 200 big and small hydel projects on Himalayan rivers originating in Uttarakhand have evoked a protest movement from the people of the area.

Forming groups organised under Uttarakhand Nadi Bachao Abhiyan, villagers, led by some prominent environmental activists, have launched a campaign to save the rivers of the region from which Ganga and Yamuna originate. From January 1, they have started *padayatras* (marches) in 12 different river valleys of Uttarakhand-Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Bhilangana, Mandakini, Tons and Yamuna-which will end on January 15.

Several eminent persons from various parts of the country, including Magsaysay award winners like Rajendra Singh, Dr Sandeep Pandey and Arvind Kejriwal, among others, are supporting the campaign.

Pointing out that these river systems are classified as ecologically sensitive by the government itself, Ayan Biswas of People's Science Institute said despite that, work was underway to set up 220 hydro power projects, threatening the fragile ecosystem of the region, its aquatic life and the food chain of the rivers. As many as 62 of the projects are

large, with a proposed capacity of 100MW, he said.

"The Ganga and most of its glacial tributaries will be converted into a series of ponds (reservoirs behind the dams) connected by pipes (tunnels). Most of the upper reaches of the Ganga river system will become dry as the water is pushed into tunnels," he said. Shoddy construction of an 11.5km long tunnel for the Vishnu Gaad hydropower project in Chamoli district has led to land subsidence in Chayeen village, destroying homes of about 30 families. While the district administration has agreed to find them alternate accommodation, another 100 families survive fearfully from day-to-day, worrying about a similar fate in the near future. Slope instability has also been reported from Pala village, which sits in the middle of the Loharinag-Pala and Pala-Maneri hydropower projects in Uttarkashi district. Both projects are on the Ganga river.

"We are not campaigning against hydropower generation in Uttarakhand. We believe, however, that there are better ways to generate hydropower that threaten people's lives and livelihood less. The state government needs to study the issues carefully and

prepare a comprehensive policy with the genuine involvement of communities that are likely to be affected, so that they can also be partners in the development process," says Dr Ravi Chopra of the Uttarakhand Nadi Bachao Abhiyan.

Concerned citizens of Uttarakhand and social activists have begun a campaign to mobilise communities and pressurise the government to save their rivers. Declaring 2008 as 'Save The Rivers Year', marches are being organised from January 1-15 to promote mass contact, and hold public meetings and discussions with local communities. The walks will also lead to a study of the state of the rivers and a compilation of people's concerns. A signature campaign will be undertaken during the walk. The 12 teams will gather in Ramnagar for a conference to share their experiences on January 16-17, 2008. Specific programmes for the remaining year will be chalked out at the conference. Consequently problems of the people and their concerns will be presented to the state government, along with their direction to the state.

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Power struggle

The state govt has planned 220 hydropower projects on Himalayan rivers, without consulting the inhabitants of the region

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Local **people** and eminent environmentalists have formed Uttarakhand Nadi Bachao Abhiyan to sensitise people about the fall-outs of these projects

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