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Dam build-up: 'Save Bhagirathi' campaign gathers steam

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Will the Bhagirathi river lose its identity following the construction of scores of hydel projects on it?

It's a million-dollar question haunting the Uttarakhand government in the face of mounting protests from environmentalists, who have launched the "Save Bhagirathi" campaign in different parts of the state.

Uttarakhand, which is fast emerging as the new "energy state", has an ambitious plan to generate 25,000-30,000 Mw in the next three to ten years through these hydel projects. Big companies like Reliance Energy, GVK, GMR, NHPC, THDC and NTPC are into the power business in the hill state. But all is not well with these dams. From Pithoragarh district in the Kumaon region to Chamoli district in Garhwal, the new projects have uprooted thousands of people and sounded the death-knell for several towns and villages.

Environmentalists claim these projects will "swallow" the river once they start



Uttarakhand, which is fast emerging as the new "energy state", has chalked out an ambitious plan to generate 25,000-30,000 Mw of power in the next 3-10 years through hydel projects on the river
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building their tunnels. And it's not the existence of the river alone that's threatened. A large number of people living in the hills of Uttarakhand fear they will be rendered homeless once the construction begins. During the past three months, they have undertaken marches and held rallies to voice their protests.

The construction of the Tehri dam pioneered the concept of big dams and wreaked havoc on the lives of nearly 100,000 people.

Along with the Old Tehri town, the erstwhile capital of the Tehri kingdom set up by

Maharaja Sudershan Shah in 1815, over 100 other villages met their watery grave.

In Pithoragarh, the 280-Mw Dhauliganga project jolted Ailagarh village, from where 24 families were uprooted two years ago. Nearly 50 km from Ailagarh, the central government is now planning to construct the mega 6,000-Mw Pancheshwar hydel project, thrice the size of the Tehri dam, on river Kali on the Indo-Nepal border. This is likely to uproot nearly 80,000 people.

Already, local people are up in arms against the project.

Similarly, people in Chamoli district are agitated over the construction of huge tunnels. Another mega project on river Alaknanda near Joshimath is creating a slope instability problem for Joshimath town. The list

goes on.

Sadly, except for towns like Uttarkashi and Harsil, the Bhagirathi river would be forced to pass through long, dark tunnels. "If we want electricity, it has to come from rivers," said Chief Minister BC Khanduri.

After the completion of the 304-Mw Maneri Bhali-II, nearly five-six more projects are in different stages of construction on the river route, with Pala Maneri (480 Mw), Bhaironghati (300 Mw), Jad Ganga (200 Mw) among the major ones. "Just leave Bhagirathi. This is the river which is sacred to crores of people," said MC Mehta, Magsaysay Award winner. Besides, intellectuals in the hill state like top Garhwali singer Narendra Singh Negi are also lending their support to the "Save Bhagirathi" campaign.