


Kosi High Dam: Indian 'Hydrocracy'

[Opinion] India's downstream damming of rivers negatively impacts Nepalese

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With the advent of the monsoon season, hard times get worse for Nepali villages as they face being submerged by downstream Indian barrages. High dams like those at Gandak, Khurdalotan, and Mahalisagar, to name a few, inundate Nepali villages mercilessly every year, leaving thousands of people stranded and homeless.

Nepal has faced the perennial threat of submergence and mass displacement during rainy seasons owing to these Indian dams, but then India often resorts to nefarious tactics to construct dams and barrages on its border with Nepal to minimize, in turn, havoc caused by Nepali rivers on Indian towns and villages downstream.

India does harbor a special fondness for Nepal's water resources. Its proposal to raise a 269-meter-high dam in Sunakhambi Khola on the Sapta Kosi river, 5 km north of Barahachhetra temple in Sunsari district, is yet another expression of their uncontrollable eagerness to tame the Himalayan rivers.

The rationale for constructing the high dam is that that the Kosi barrage, built fifteen years ago, is deteriorating and could yield at anytime under the surging water pressures of a rainy season, according to media reports.

India's dedication to this project dates all the way back to 1947, but went into full swing last year with the issuance of a detailed report, after Nepal reached an agreement with India to advance to a first-level project study.

It has been learned from various reliable sources that India has begun field studies and surveys, setting up field offices at a dozen locations in Nepal last year. A veil of secrecy has been judiciously maintained, as outsiders, whoever they may be, are barred from ferreting out even the slightest details concerning the dam.

The Indian side has shrouded the project in mystery. At the same time, India's claimed benefits for Nepal are being questioned as overdrawn.

As the project proceeds, human rights activists, politicians, academics, and others are crying "foul," and, most importantly, it has stirred up discussions among intellectuals as to how much the dam will do for Nepal. Can Nepal use this dam to her advantage? Legitimate questions like these are gaining ground in Nepal.

Despite this uproar, India has remained determined to carry out clandestine field surveys and soil testing.

Meanwhile, India is upbeat about its proposed project. Entitled the "Sapta Kosi Multi Purpose Project," India claims it will irrigate 68,450 hectares in Nepal and quench the thirst of drought-prone areas measuring 1,520,000 hectares in India. Besides irrigation, about 3,500 MW of electrical power would also be generated from water stored in the 269-meter-high reservoir.

But the opponents of the dam strongly question the benefits claimed by India. "These benefits are grossly exaggerated and would never accrue to the extent suggested and claimed in the proposal," Dr. Gopal Sibakoti Chinton, a human rights activist, was quoted in the media as saying.

"Even in India, big dams like Sardar Sarovar have failed to yield what was promised at the time of construction," he added. "If it has not happened in India itself, how can it be naively expected that an Indian-built dam in Nepal would deliver the goods?"

Nonetheless, along with these queries we also need to be objective and go back to an assessment of the benefits and losses that the Kosi barrage and other Indian-built dams have meant for Nepal up to the present day.

It is high time to ask ourselves - what have we gained from the Tanakpur, Mahalisagar, Khurdalotan, Gandak and other barrages?

"An objective analysis of the entire gamut of water agreements signed with India is needed to chart out a future strategy when it comes to dealing with India on our water resources," according to one expert.

This is not to say, however, that Kosi Dam should not be constructed, but an objective consideration of its socio-economic impact is required.

The bedeviling fact, however, is this: According to a preliminary impact study, the proposed Indian plan will displace 75,000 people from about 79 Village Development Committees (VDCs) in nice districts. About 111 settlements in the 79 VDCs, sprawling over the banks of the Sun Kosi, Tamor, and Arun rivers, will be totally submerged, while 47 settlements will face partial submergence, and 138 will become fractionally submerged.

"If the dam is going to cause such upheaval, can the crops produced from the 68,450 hectares of irrigated land in Nepal compensate for this huge loss?" argued the bimonthly magazine, *Pro Public/Good Governance*, in its report.

Meanwhile, there are innumerable challenges for the Nepalese government if the proposal finally takes off. The grave challenge for the government will be to relocate huge numbers of displaced people.

Does the government have any concrete rehabilitation policies? Where will those 75,000 people be resettled? These questions are quite relevant at a time when people displaced from the Kosi barrage project in the 1950s are still fighting for compensation. In the light of this, how can those displaced by the high dam be assured that they will be properly reimbursed?

Moreover, it is no longer a secret that, despite building 3,600 large dams of its own, India has failed

to fulfill pledges of promised development to its own people. The [World Commission on Dams Report](#) puts the figure of people affected by the dams at about 600 million worldwide over the last fifty years. If that is the case, then what is prompting India to build yet another dam on its border with Nepal?

Why hasn't India learned anything from America? America built 5,500 high dams but stopped because of irremediable socio-economic consequences for people, the environment, and the riverine system. According to international criteria, dams exceeding 15 meters in height are considered high dams.

Every year, the promotion of high dams affects two million people globally, in addition to environmental costs, so Nepal must not remain upbeat about reaping maximum advantages from the Kosi high dam. It must not keep quiet but should assess the gap between actual costs and benefits that Nepal will incur in the long run.

How Nepal will benefit on all counts from the proposed dam is yet to be seen, but upon scrutinizing the Indian proposal, it is no longer a secret that Nepal will be the big loser in the long run if it allows India to build the controversial dam.