

“Don't hinder the Pinder”

River Pinder is the last free flowing tributary of the Alaknanda



Report by:

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Like other Himalayan states in India, Uttarakhand too is publicizing Hydroelectric Projects (HEP) as the main source for economic progress and advancement of the state and its people. With some commissioned projects, many under construction and more still in the planning stages, the riverine ecosystem of all rivers in Uttarakhand are likely to get degraded. The projects will certainly impact those residing in the river valleys and dependent on the rivers. Already both the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda River, headwater streams that come together to form the National River Ganga, have become muck dumping yards for HEPs. Limited social and environmental safeguards and their poor enforcement and monitoring have allowed project proponents to alter not just the course, but also biological systems of sediment, biota and water flows in these rivers. This is vital given that Uttarakhand is a rich reserve of floral, faunal and biotic diversity.

Uttarakhand and many of its rivers are now recognized as dam building hot spots. Due to the excessive drilling, digging and construction works for hydroelectric projects, it is estimated that every fifth person in Uttarakhand will be displaced by changes and impacts on water resources, forests or land.

Currently the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand generates about 3,000 MW (with another 2,000 MW available from the centre) for a population that is about two-thirds that of Delhi, which incidentally receives approximately the same amount of energy. So it is not a shortage of power that is the main concern for Uttarakhand, much of whose energy requirement is met from traditional fuels.

Every river in Uttarakhand has a dam and hydropower project planned on it.

Are tunnels and silent reservoirs the future of free flowing rivers?

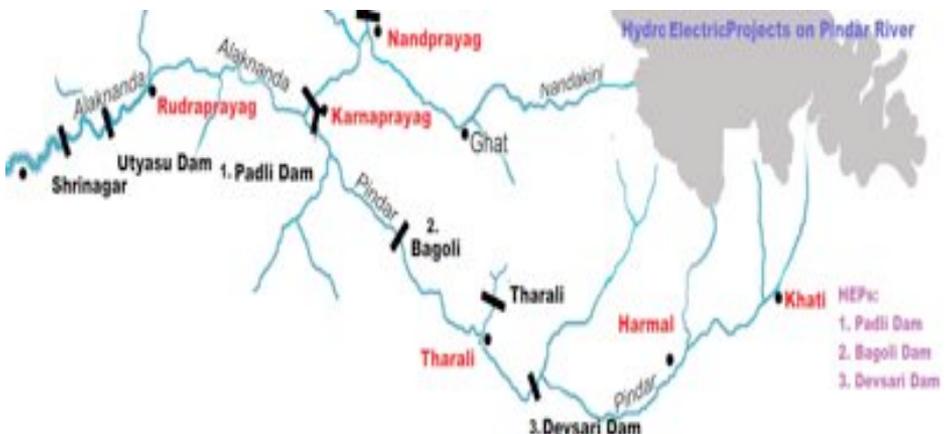
Dam planning on River Pinder

The Pinder River originates from the Pindari Glacier in district Bageshwer, Kumaun region. After some kilometers, the Pinder enters Chamoli district, in Garhwal region. Passing through a biodiverse rich area, this scenic river valley is also the path of the *Jaat yatra*, the *Raj Jaat yatra* of Nanda Devi, which have been observed for centuries. This is of cultural and religious significance, not only

for the locals, but Hindu pilgrims all over the world. The Pinder flows into the River Alaknanda, the confluence of which takes place at Karanprayag. It is one of the headwater streams that eventually form the Ganga. The cultural significance of the Vishnupadi Alaknanda, of which the river Pinder is a tributary, cannot be overemphasized.

Pinder, like all other rivers in Uttarakhand, is also under the threat of hydropower projects. The proposed Devsari HEP is located on the Pinder between Nandkeshri Bridge and Simli Gad in Tehsil Tharali. SJVNL, a joint venture of Government of India (70%) and the State Government of Himachal Pradesh (30%) is the project proponent having signed the Implementation Agreement with the Government of Uttarakhand in November 2005. The storage dam project with hydropower capacity of 300 MW was converted into a Run-of-River Scheme with a reduced capacity of 252 MW in April 2007. As per plans of the proposed Devsari HEP, water will be channeled 18 kilometres to a powerhouse, which will then release water into the planned reservoir of another downstream-proposed Bagoli HEP (72 MW). Thereafter the river meets another storage reservoir of the 27 MW Padli HEP (See Map below). As a result, the Pinder will be dammed, diverted, stored and released intermittently all the way from Deval to Karnprayag. These projects will interrupt the flow of biota, sediments and water, destroy the riverine ecosystem, and impact the culture of the people in the river valley.

Map: Proposed hydropower projects on the river Pinder



The Pinder valley has seen devastation due to landslides on a continuous basis. The monsoon of 2010 was the worst in recent memory. The whole valley, especially four Blocks, namely Deval, Tharali, Narayanbagar and Karnprayag, were blocked off due to landslides. Food and fuel supplies were hindered.

This is one of the reasons why the people of the valley have campaigned against these dams. Their struggle has been ongoing for years, from the early planning stage until today. But project proponents stealthily completed their surveys and other related works, without engaging or informing the locals. The anger of the people in the Pinder valley was palpable during the three public hearings organized for the Devsari HEP, now estimated to cost more than Rs 2,300 crore.

Three major dams are planned on the River Pinder. The Devsari HEP (252 MW) is most talked of given that it is now well beyond the planning stages. The environmental impact assessment and environmental management plan were prepared in October 2010. In the latest news, last year in December, the Forest Advisory Committee, which appraises forest diversion proposal, has made some observations and sought some changes. The clearance is awaited still. The inhabitants of the valley opposed the two Environmental Public Hearings, but somehow the third time on 20th January 2011, the Public Hearing was declared a success; the formality of holding a Public Hearing was considered completed. The peoples struggle has continued under the banner of *Matu Jansangthan* and *Bhu-Swami Sangharsh Samiti*. The distinctiveness of this struggle is that it not only covers affected people but the entire Pinder valley and its 20,000 inhabitants. This is the first time after the Tehri dam, when in Uttarakhand people are raising their voice against a dam before construction has started.

Public hearings lacking public participation and peoples consent

1st Public Hearing (October 13, 2009), Village Kulsari: The environmental Public Hearing process of the proposed Devsari HEP has been a sham. In the first public hearing, organized at village Kulsari in October 2009, nearly a thousand people called the following slogans: “*We want development not destruction*”, “*Stop The dam - Public Hearing Is fake*”, “*Let Pinder Flow Freely*” and “*Protect our Livelihoods*”. The proceedings were disrupted even before they could begin. The disruption came against the backdrop of earlier such public hearings in the

region, which have been observed by the authorities as mere formalities. In the case of Pala-Maneri, Kotli-Bhel 1-A, 1-B and 2, Lata-Tapovan and other such HEP projects, in spite of opposition from people, Uttarakhand Pollution Control Board declared that the process of public hearing was complete the very next day. The opposition to the Devsari HEP became the first occasion when the government agencies were not able to perform a sham Public Hearing.

Matu Jansangthan, an informal collective, had prepared a petition for the public hearing, which clarified the opposition to the dam and the associated problems with project planning, including all issues affecting people and the environment. The public hearing time was announced for 11 am to 2 pm, and advertised on big banners in all areas. However there was no advertising in the main proposed submergence area. People were not happy with this, yet they managed to gather in large numbers.



Pinder is the last free flowing tributary of the Ganga's headwaters (*Photo: Matu Jansangthan*)

While the meeting was being conducted, the UPCB, the sub-divisional magistrate, and SJVNL officers were seated inside a temporary pavilion. Representatives of *Deval Sangharsh Samiti* (Deval struggle committee) & *Matu Jansangthan*, along with Block headmen and a group of people went to meet them. The Block headmen told them that inhabitants of all three blocks affected by the proposed dam are against the project and stopped the public hearing from taking place. After the disruption, a public meeting was held at the very same

site, but in opposition of the dam. The company placed false charges against 11 people by name under IPC 148, 332, 427, 435 and 504, and booked another 60 people anonymously. In spite of the promises made by SJVNL, after nearly a month long agitation, the project proponents did not take back the case; it is still pending in the judicial courts.

2nd Public Hearing (July 22, 2010), Village Deval: The second Public Hearing, organized at Deval in July 2010, had the police and administration working together to do anything in their power to conduct a public hearing, However, the people again opposed the Public Hearing process, and their demands led to its' deferment. Hence, the letter and spirit of the Environmental Impact Assessment notification of 2006 was not followed in both public hearings.



The Peoples Public Hearing was held in April 2011 (*Photo: Matu Jansangthan*)

3rd Public Hearing (January 20, 2011), Village Chepdu: At the third public hearing in January 2011, once again the people received no prior information as mandated by law. They were told that the public hearing was going to be held at Tharali, but the public hearing was held in another village, Chepdu. Around 1,000 locals who came to attend the meeting using their own resources, in opposition to the HEP, were not allowed to speak and raise their observations and concerns. Yet, large barricades were placed around the venue and the meeting was declared a success. In another sham of a public hearing, the government and the dam company were seen working together, securing each other's interests.

What do the people of the Pinder Valley want?

People clearly understand how the dam company operates. We too are familiar with the consequences of these projects, having witnessed the ecological and social devastation of the Tehri Dam and other dams in both the headwater streams of the Ganga and their tributaries.

Matu Jansangthan and *Bhuswami Sangharsh Samiti* organized a "Peoples' Public Hearing" and called nationally renowned environmentalists and experts to its panel. These included: Prof. Meher Engineer, Mr. Manoj Mishra, Dr. Shekhar Pathak, Dr. Sudha Vasan and Dr. Sanjay Kumar.

The peoples' public hearing was held in April 2011 at the confluence of River Kail and Pinder. Around 2,000 people attended representing villages affected by the proposed Devsari HEP in the Pinder valley. This was the people's response to the farcical public hearing held at Chepdu village in January earlier that year.

To reclaim their right to a fair hearing, mostly women from more than 15 Gram Panchayats attended the hearing with banners and slogans, demanding that the dam not be built and that the Pinder River remain unimpeded by large dams. The participants emphasized that the Pinder is the only tributary of the headwater streams of the National River Ganga that remains un-dammed. Concluding the people's public hearing, the panel of experts on listening to the views of the attendees came to the following conclusion:

- There appeared a fair representation at the meet from the project-affected people, including women;
- There was complete opposition to the proposed project to dam the river Pinder after its confluence with river Kail, near Deval village;
- Even one speaker, who maintained that he was not opposed to the construction of dams in the state, expressed his opposition to the proposed project. He argued that project proponents sidestepped all democratic norms and are imposing the project on to the people.
- The project to dam the river Pinder must not be constructed in the face of its widespread dismissal by people of the valley.



People's campaign against these dams has been ongoing for years (*Photo: Matu Jansangthan*)

Pinder Valley Hills are not stable; Landslides are an enduring phenomena

It is well known that Uttarakhand is classified in Seismic Zones IV & V, implying that the area is in constant threat of earthquakes. Due to dam projects, many areas have also become further vulnerable to landslides and seismic activity, partly due to widespread digging and tunneling in the mountainscape. The monsoon in 2010, for instance, caused many landslides across the state. *Matu Jansangthan* and other affected people had written to the Geological Survey of India (GSI) to assess the Pinder valley in Chamoli district. The villages around the Pinder River have been known to witness many landslides each year, and it is vital that this area be surveyed. It can safely be assumed that if the projects are constructed, the frequency of landslides in the area will increase.

The extent of devastation caused by landslides has been underestimated by the administration. For instance, the village of *Sunau* was established on the ruins of a past landslide, which occurred 150 years ago, when the entire village was wiped out. Later people from other areas came and settled down here. In 2010 again, major landslides put the residents at risk. The landslides damaged the arable land below and around the village of the Suanu gram panchayat. All the

water resources, namely *gadheras* (streams) and lesser waterfalls essential to meet the drinking water needs of these villages either dried up or got diverted. At *Padmalla*, a girl perished as her house collapsed. The condition of the *Kunnipartha* village was even worse as it needs to be entirely rehabilitated.

Given the fact that Devsari HEP is proposed to be built at Nandkeshri and its tunnel is designed to pass under the villages of Paingad, Sunau, Devalgad, Soona, Tharali, Kunnipartha, Chepdu, Nandkesari, etc, all the way till Paithani, a full geological investigation of the project affected areas must be conducted before proceeding.



Herbal wealth can meet the growing demand for Ayurveda (Photo: Matu Jansangthan)

Cultural significance of Pinder Valley

The Pinder River is the only northward bound Himalayan River in India, and happens to be the last main tributary of the Ganga in Uttarakhand that has not been dammed. All other rivers here flow southward. This Pindereshwari Ganga is supposed to free the souls of the departed and hence it was named Pinder, where *Pind-daan* means death rites. Meaningful to scores of people, the confluence at Deval is the only confluence in the country where the waters of 5 rivers meet - the Karganga, the Pinderi Ganga, Saraswati Ganga, Pandi Ganga, and Pushpa Ganga. That is why it is called the Panch Mahaprayag, (great confluence of five) and is no less revered than Badrinath or Kedarnath. The

Pinder valley is also the path of the Jaat Yatra, the Raj Jaat Yatra of Nanda Devi, which has been observed for centuries in the region. This is of cultural and religious significance to not only the locals, but to Hindus around the world.

The confluence at Deval is the spot where pilgrims immerse and bathe in the river during the Nanda Devi (goddess) Raajraat Yatra, also called the Maha Kumbh yatra or pilgrimage. The Pinder valley is also home to the Bhramakapaal Shila stone, which according to Hindu mythology is found at two places- Badrinath, and Deval. All of the above are living cultural traditions, which will be disrupted if HEPs are to be developed in the valley.



Women carrying river water; banner reads "Let the Pinder flow freely" (Photo: Matu Jansangthan)

Dam projects impact local economies and livelihoods

Hydropower projects, far from creating jobs, impact the job and food security of the local people, especially those dependent on forest produce, those collecting and selling sand near the river, as well as those involved in limestone mining for whitewash etcetera. There is no proof of dams having creating much local employment as promised for locals anywhere in Uttarakhand. Besides, there are several other existing resources that could be used to generate employment. The rich herbal wealth of the region is well known, but has not yet been tapped into. The medicinal herbs, growing on roadsides, can supply to the growing Ayurveda and herbal health products market. Tree farming is another viable option.

Tourism and tourism-based enterprise too have a bright future in the region. The valley is beautiful and culturally rich. The employment generated from these resources will be less damaging than employment from HEPs.

We are not against generation of Hydro Electric Power (HEP).

The campaign for a free flowing Pinder river maintains that mini and micro run-of-river HEP projects can and should be undertaken by providing technology, training and financial help from the Government, which could be completed with small investment, whilst keeping impacts to a minimum, with zero displacement of people. It must be mentioned that such projects do exist in the Pinder valley: the 400 KW Tharali, 800 KW Kothial Sainth, 750 KW Govindghat and 800 KW Tapovan HEP projects. But these projects are not functioning for a variety of reasons. Instead of starting work on destructive large dam hydropower projects, the lesser capacity projects should be revived, especially for local benefit.

It is also important to mention that we are not advocating that the Pinder valley be declared an "Eco-Sensitive Zone". The rights of people are not to be snatched away; they should be given first right to sustainable use of catchment area resources. We want it to be a "**Pro-people Sensitive Zone**".

Whilst we support similar struggles and peoples' movements in other parts of the Himalayas, the cultural and environmental significance of the Pinder River cannot be overemphasized. As the last free-flowing river/tributary of National River Ganga in the Uttarakhand state, it should be allowed to retain this status and not be diverted into tunnels or impeded to form silent reservoirs. As a start, the Devsari HEP should be cancelled.

We request you to join the campaign and petition the following:

Shri Harish Rawat Chief Minister of Uttarakhand
Email: cm-uk@nic.in

Shri Prakash Javadekar Minister of State (MoEF-CC)
Email: pjavadekar@gmail.com

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The Ganga gets its name at Devprayag, the confluence of the 'Bhagirathi Ganga' and 'Vishnupadi Alaknanda Ganga'. The Pinder, the last free flowing tributary of the Ganga in the upper reaches is one of the main tributaries of the Vishnupadi Alaknanda Ganga, celebrated for its 5 confluences.

Let the Pinder flow wild and free. This is the wish of the people residing in the Valley.