

Dated: 19 January, 2022

To,
The Chief Minister,
Government of Himachal Pradesh

Subject: Concerns regarding public safety hazard due to water seepages during tunnel testing of 180 MW Bajoli-Holi HEP, Chamba, H.P.

Shri Jairam Thakur Ji,

We are writing this letter to yet again bring into your kind attention recent public grievances around safety concerns, which have arisen during tunnel testing of 180 MW Bajoli Holi HEP around Holi Gram Panchayat.

Menace due to various hydropower activities, flouting laws and regulation by the hydropower project management companies has become the new norm in Himachal Pradesh. The current chain of events in Jharauta village, Holi Panchayat, Chamba once again shows complete negligence of safety and accountability in Hydro Power projects in the State, as highlighted in report 'The Hidden Cost of Hydropower' submitted by us in June 2019 (*Annexure 1*). A collective memorandum regarding safety concerns was also submitted to the Ministry (MoEFCC) by concerned socio-environmental organizations, including Himdhara Collective, on May, 2019 (*Annexure 2*).

Looking into the urgency of this particular incident and ongoing negligence from relevant authorities, Himdhara Collective team conducted a field visit to the Holi area. After on the ground truthing and evidence collection, further consultation with affected communities and local authorities, we would like to bring our observations into your kind attention. The detailed fact-finding report of the same is attached for your kind reference (*Annexure 3*). The report indicates poor decision making, in relation to left siting of the project from initially proposed right bank of Ravi, by competent government authorities itself. Several large cracks on residential houses and private/public lands, heavy water seepage and consequent landslide (debris flow) on 3rd January hints towards the geological fragility of the area. The Fact-Finding report further showcases the near future risk of life for 40 families residing in Jharauta village and current circumstances of fear and trauma among affected families living under life threatening conditions.

Currently inactive Dam Safety Cell and lack of comprehensive geological risk assessment, for hydropower activities, in fragile geological strata appears to invite grave human-made hazard for the people of Himachal Pradesh.

We would like to request your attention to the following demands with regard to long term regulation and management of risk and public safety regarding Hydropower Projects:

- A **comprehensive scientific study** by reliable and competent research agencies is necessary for effective decision making and avoid life threatening near future hazards in the area.
- **HP State Dam Safety Organization needs to intervene and investigate** related safety concerns in public interest.

- **Activation of the State Level Safety Authority and audit dam safety cells** at the project level with complete adherence to safety norms failing which no project should be allowed to be commissioned or operate
- Until the National Dam Safety rules are passed an Executive order for creation of a **grievance redressal mechanism** for addressing issues brought forth by public, related to risk posed by seepage or any such incidents leading to or aggravating further hazard risk in all hydro project areas.
- Such **high-risk zone situated villages** (Jharauta village) should be **declared ‘Fully Project Affected’** at the time of the environment and social impact assessment. Band-aid fixes in the form of compensation and temporary relocation does no justice to the physical and psychological difficulties experienced by communities.
- The incident should be taken as a lesson for future hydro projects on highly fragile geological strata (a signature of Bharmour region and entire Ravi River Basin) to avoid potential hazard and related human life/ economic loss. A High-Level Committee should be urgently constituted to bring out a **White paper on ‘Hydropower related safety hazards’** in the state.
- The concerned authority should **develop a protocol to be followed by hydro project developers at the time of testing** of different components of hydro projects and there should be provision of punitive action if not followed.

We urge you to look into the matter with utmost urgency, due to potential hazard risk for the inhabitants of such affected communities. The utter disregard for safety regulation under such Hydroelectric Power Projects need active and strengthened regulatory mechanisms, for responsible consideration of such community risks in alignment with ‘Precautionary Principle’. Hoping for substantive action and inquiry of the issue at hand at your end.

Encl: As above
Thanking you,
Sincere regards,

Vivek Negi and Upkar Singh
Himdhara Environment Research and Action Collective,
Palampur, Himachal Pradesh

Copy to:

The Chairman, Central Water Commission (CWC), Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India

Member Secretary, The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Government of India

Chief Secretary, Government of Himachal Pradesh

Additional Chief Secretary, Multi Purpose Projects and Power, Government of Himachal Pradesh

Chief Secretary cum Chief Executive Officer, State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA), GoHP

The Director, Directorate of Energy, Shimla.