

The gang of four

Tehri Dam: Under construction in the Tehri Garhwal hills, this dam is located in what is considered to be one of the most seismic zones in the world. Seismologists agree that an earthquake of magnitude of 8.5 on the Richter Scale cannot be ruled out in the region, during the life of the dam. However, despite this and despite numerous and widespread protests by both the local people and by other concerned persons across the country, the dam continues to be constructed. If this dam collapses — if an earthquake of the anticipated magnitude occurs — 70 conservative estimates suggest that lakhs of people will be washed away and the towns of Rishikesh and Hardwar will be destroyed.

Deforestation in the Himalayas: The forests in the Himalayas are being rapidly degraded. This is not only leading to a loss of biodiversity and aggravated incidents of landslides and slips, but also making it difficult for the local people dependent on these forests to meet their basic needs. Deforestation in the Himalayas is also an important cause for the cycle of floods and droughts affecting the foothills and plains.

Recent developments have brought out a new and greater danger. In the first week of September, the Government of Uttar Pradesh had to release excess water from the Rihand dam in Mirzapur district, because heavy rains and degraded catchments resulted in the reservoir becoming over-full. This resulted in extensive floods downstream in Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh, reportedly submerging 175 villages as well as Rewa town and causing 14 deaths and the loss of property worth Rs 200 crore. In a similar case, some years back, water had to be suddenly released from the Bhakra Dam, resulting in extensive loss of life and property in Punjab.

Urban Air Pollution: The air quality in Delhi is rapidly deteriorating. According to a recent World Bank document, annual health incidents in Delhi due to air pollution include over seven thousand premature deaths and nearly 40 lakh cases of sickness requiring medical treatment. Though a major source of air pollution in Delhi is motor vehicles, we are daily adding 200 vehicles to Delhi, and this number is expected to go up to nearly 500 by 2000 AD. There is almost no effort to arrest the growing numbers of private cars by improving public transport.

Thermal power stations and other industrial units are also major contributors to Delhi's pollution levels. However, despite this, power stations located within the city are allowed to flout air emission standards with impunity. And it took no less than the Supreme Court of India to close down and shift out some of the more polluting industrial units.

Green areas help mitigate some of the adverse impacts of air pollution, but greenery in Delhi is shrinking, with the government, the "development" agencies and private and commercial interests all conspiring together to put much of Delhi under tar and concrete. With Delhi's winter conditions of atmospheric inversion, the levels of toxicity in the city's atmosphere will climb to new heights.

Unfortunately, it is not Delhi alone that is being affected by air pollution, Jalandhar, in Punjab, has recently been in the news because of its high and increasing pollution levels.

Biodiversity Conservation: The threat to the tiger is symptomatic of the threat being faced by animals and plants all over the country. Their last refuges, the national parks and sanctuaries, are themselves under attack. Commercial interests, industrial and mining interests, timber Mafia, animal poachers, gene smugglers and "development" projects are now targeting the one or two percent of wilderness left in this country. Bureaucratic inaction, partly because of a lack of resources and political support, and a lack of involvement of the local people in conservation, has made protection systems ineffective.

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