

SAFETY FIRST: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON MULLAPERIYAR DISPUTE AND DAM SAFETY AUTHORITY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Energy incl. Renewable & Non-renewable

The [Central Water Commission \(CWC\)'s proposal](#) to let the Mullaperiyar dam's Supervisory Committee continue for a year essentially means status quo continues. The proposal makes the Chief Secretaries of Tamil Nadu and Kerala accountable and provides for the participation of technical experts as panel members. The proposed arrangement, presented before the Supreme Court on Tuesday, has become necessary as the CWC is of the view that the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA), the regulatory body envisaged under the recently enacted [Dam Safety Act](#), will require one year to become fully functional. On Thursday, the two States are expected to inform the Court of their response. Given the features of the 126-year-old Mullaperiyar dam and the controversies surrounding its lime and mortar structure, both States would have nothing much to complain about regarding sticking to the existing arrangement for some more time although they differ in the way they approach the dam. Located in Kerala, it is used by TN for multiple purposes. While TN is keen on getting the strengthening work completed to raise the water level to 152 ft from 142 ft, Kerala wants a new dam built. In the backdrop of landslides in Kerala after heavy rain, fears, though misplaced, have arisen over the dam's structural stability. Regardless of these apprehensions being addressed through technical and scientific bodies, the issue of safety crops up time and again. What this underlines is that there should be no room for complacency about the dam's safety. It is for this purpose that the apex court too has been addressing the issue of having a stronger institutional mechanism than the existing Supervisory Committee which has been rendered almost toothless.

Ideally speaking, the authority would have been well suited to handle issues concerning the Mullaperiyar, as the Act empowers the body to perform the role of the State Dam Safety Organisation (SDSO) in this context because the NDSA assumes the role of SDSO for a dam located in one State and owned by another. But, as more time is required to have the authority fully in place, the Centre has chosen to rely on the existing structure, with the respective Chief Secretaries being made accountable. With a sub-committee functioning under the Supervisory Committee and one more panel under the National Disaster Management Authority, the oversight mechanism appears to be fine. Still, however well-designed the scheme might be, it is for the authorities to make sure their actions instil public confidence during the monsoon, when the issue of safety in Kerala acquires precedence. It is also their duty to ensure there is no panic and to deal with scaremongers.

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