

Dam safety bill: a lot of focus on structural safety, but hardly much on operational aspects

The Centre will table the Dam Safety Bill of 2018 in the monsoon session of Parliament, which starts on July 18. This is an important Bill: there are 5,254 large dams in operation and another 447 under-construction ones in India. In addition to these, there are thousands of medium and small dams and most of these structures are maintained by states, while some of the bigger ones are managed by autonomous bodies such as the Damodar Valley Corporation and the Bhakra Beas Management Board. The structural and operational safety of these dams is crucial because about 75% of large dams are more than 25 years old and about 164 dams are more than 100 years old. According to a PIB release, India has had 36 dam failures in the past. Any accident can lead to huge losses of lives and property, and also impact power generation, irrigation and water supply and flood control. Yet, India does not have a uniform law and administrative structure to ensure the safety of these structures.

The Bill provides for proper surveillance, inspection, operation and maintenance of all dams to ensure their safe functioning. It also envisages the establishment of a National Dam Safety Authority, a regulatory body to implement the policy, guidelines, and safety standards. The Bill proposes the constitution of state-level committees on dam safety. The nodal authority is also empowered to examine unresolved points of issue between the state dam safety organisations of two states, or between the state dam safety organisation and the owner of a dam in that state.

Though a law on safety of dams is welcome, there are problems in the Bill. First, it is too focused on the structural safety of dams, not so much on their operational safety. This is a critical lacuna. Here's why: The Comptroller and Auditor General of India's report on the Chennai floods of 2015, which came out on Wednesday, clearly points to operational failures.

The report says that there was an indiscriminate discharge of water from the Chembarambakkam reservoir, in excess of inflows, which burdened the Adyar river, leading to floods in the city and its suburbs. In cases such as these, the erring official should be hauled up, but that has not happened in this case or any of the earlier cases that resulted from operational mistakes. Second, all structural and operational decisions must be in the public domain, and only then will it be easier to focus on the flaws.

This is not difficult: Karnataka (for some dams) and Madhya Pradesh (for all dams) update daily information on their websites. Last but not the least, while government officers are responsible for the safety of dams, the process could be further strengthened if independent experts are also allowed to participate.

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