

Libyan tragedy raises alarm for ageing dams

Experts in India warn that those above 50 years old are at risk, call for government to revisit Dam Safety Act

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The jitters of the Derna dam collapse in Libya that claimed over 3,800 lives earlier this month are being felt in India.

After the tragedy on the night of September 10-11, *The New York Times* reported last week that the Mullaperiyar Dam in Kerala is among some of the major dams in the world that are “nearing obsolescence”.

Although government authorities maintain that there is no immediate danger to the dam located in Idukki district, the decades-old safety issue has resurfaced with experts pointing to well over 200 ageing large dams in India that are over 100 years old.

Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, observed that “dams above 50 years are of high risk”.

“In the context of climate change, dam management needs to be finetuned. More intense rains are now occurring. This means that the spillway capacity for which the dams were originally designed is outdated. There should be an independent review to examine the safety aspects of all dams in India. The Central Water Commission is undertaking this task, but it has a poor track record,” Thakkar added.

According to the Central Water Commission (CWC), India has 5,334 completed and functional large dams. Of these, 234 functional large dams are more than 100 years old. Besides, 1,034 operational large dams have ages ranging from 50 to 100 years.

Experts are raising alarm bells after the failures of the two dams in Derna, Libya. According to some estimates, at least 10,000 people are missing following the catastrophe.

“Mullaperiyar Dam in Kerala, India, is over 100 years old, visibly damaged, and located in a region prone to earthquakes. Its collapse would harm 3.5 million people downstream,” *The New York Times* said in a report.



After heavy rain, the opening of the shutters of three dams, including Mullaperiyar, triggered floods in Kerala in August 2018. *The New York Times* reported last week that the dam in Kerala is among major dams that are ‘nearing obsolescence’

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When contacted, R Ramkumar, a member of the state planning board in charge of flood control, stated that Kerala is not anticipating any immediate threat to the dam. “None of the experts who evaluated the strength of the dam have raised any issues. Hence, there is no immediate reason to build a new dam,” Ramkumar told *Business Standard*.

According to the CWC, Tamil Nadu is set to conduct a study on the safety of this dam.

Experts also suggest that the government should revisit the Dam Safety Act, taking climate change issues into account.

“With the climate already being changed, these aged dams are becoming foes rather than friends, and the recent Libya crisis is a testament to this exacerbating crisis. Such crises are not new to India, and the current Dam Safety Act needs to be revisited,” said Abinash Mohanty, sector head, climate change and sustainability, IPE Global (an international development organization) and an expert reviewer of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s sixth assessment report.

“Integrating hyper-granular carrying capacity assessments and oper-

ational safety components, which adhere to principles of climate risk assessments, into the current act should be a national imperative. Any further delay will turn this crisis-in-making into a disaster,” Mohanty added.

The Libyan incident took place at a time when in India, the Himachal Pradesh government discovered that 21 out of the 23 dams in the state had violated safety norms. There are 23 hydel projects with a total capacity of 9,203 megawatts in the hill state, operated by players such as the National Hydro Power Corporation, National Thermal Power Corporation, Bhakra Beas Management Board, Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Limited, and independent power producers.

Thakkar added that structural flaws were not the only issue with dams, as newly built structures too had cracked in the recent past in India. In August last year, the wall of an under-construction dam in Madhya Pradesh’s Dhar district collapsed, affecting 18 villages. Similarly, in July 2019, the Tiware dam in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra gave way due to heavy rains, resulting in the loss of 19 lives. The dam was built only in 2000.