

Chenab Hydropower Project



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India has taken a decisive step by reviving the Sawalkote Hydroelectric Power Project on the Chenab River. This move comes months after India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan. The project, first planned six decades ago, had been stalled due to treaty restrictions. Now, India is asserting its water and energy security priorities by fast-tracking this hydropower initiative.

Indus Waters Treaty

- The IWT was signed in 1960 under World Bank mediation.
- It divided the Indus basin rivers between India and Pakistan.
- India received rights over the eastern rivers — Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.
- Pakistan was allocated the western rivers — Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab.
- India was allowed only limited non-consumptive use on the western rivers, mainly for hydropower projects without large storage capacity.

Suspension of the Treaty

Recently, India suspended the treaty citing Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism. This suspension ended obligations like prior project notification and data sharing. India also restricted water flows from its dams on the Chenab, notably Baglihar and Salal. This caused downstream water shortages in Pakistan, affecting crucial crops such as paddy and cotton and raising serious concerns in Islamabad.

Sawalkote Hydropower Project Details

The Sawalkote project is located near Sidhu village in Ramban district, Jammu and Kashmir. It is designed as a run-of-the-river scheme with a 192.5-metre roller-compacted concrete gravity dam. The project will harness the Chenab's high-velocity flow in the Western Himalayas. It aims to generate 1,856 MW, making it the largest hydropower project in Jammu and Kashmir, surpassing the 900 MW Baglihar project.

Significance

The Chenab River's catchment area spans over 10,000 square kilometres above the snowline, offering immense hydropower potential exceeding 150,000 MW regionally. Reviving Sawalkote aligns with India's goal of energy self-reliance and maximising its share of western river waters. The project is valued at Rs 22,704 crore and is being fast-tracked as a "project of national importance" with reduced bureaucratic delays.

Shift in India's Water Policy

India's decision to revive Sawalkote after suspending the IWT marks a strategic shift. It no longer adheres to treaty constraints limiting storage and consumptive use on western rivers. This reflects a broader policy to prioritise national interests in water and energy security. The move also signals India's intent to assert greater control over transboundary water resources amid geopolitical tensions.