

Govt may replace expert panel on Ganga with technocrats

MOVE The new body will decide the fate of hydropower projects on the river

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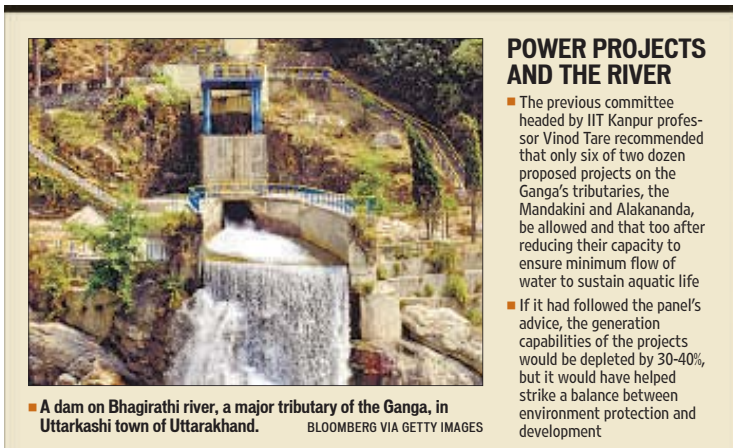
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NEW DELHI: The environment ministry is set to replace a panel of experts with a body of technocrats to decide the fate of hydropower projects on the Ganga, signalling the government's inclination to move forward with the ventures despite resistance from within and caveats from the Supreme Court.

The issue emerged as a major challenge for the BJP-led government that took office last year vowing to conserve the river that is revered by millions of Hindus and also provide electricity to all 1.2 billion Indians.

The previous committee headed by IIT Kanpur professor Vinod Tare recommended that only six of two dozen proposed projects on the Ganga's tributaries, the Mandakini and Alakananda, be allowed and that too after reducing their capacity to ensure minimum flow of water to sustain aquatic life.

Sources said the governments' plans would have been rendered economically unviable if it had followed the panel's advice, with generation capability depleted by 30-40%, but it would have helped strike a balance between environment



■ A dam on Bhagirathi river, a major tributary of the Ganga, in Uttarkashi town of Uttarakhand. BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

POWER PROJECTS AND THE RIVER

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The Supreme Court imposed a ban on construction of new hydro projects in Uttarakhand after the flash floods in 2013 killed hundreds, and it asked the environment ministry to examine the impact of such ventures on the local ecosystem.

Some arms of the government, such as the power ministry, opposed the expert panel's recommendation, noting that

forest clearance was granted to these projects before the devastation, officials revealed.

"Their (power ministry) view is that the ministry cannot revise its own clearance now," a government representative said.

To find a way around, the environment ministry decided to get these projects reviewed afresh.

Sources said the ministry will set up a new committee likely to be headed by BP Das, a known

proponent of hydro projects, with a joint secretary from the department as its convener. The panel, when constituted, will be the third to review these 24 projects in less than two years.

The new body is likely to have more technocrats than scientists, say sources, while activists fighting to save the Ganga allege this is being done to ensure clearance for the contentious projects.