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Review on Hydroelectric Dams and Major River Valley Projects in India

Madhushree K J¹, Tejas S Bharadwaj², Bhagavath Bhat³, C R Navneet⁴, Nabhya Lal⁵

Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, BNM Institute of Technology, Bangalore, India¹

Students, Department of Mechanical Engineering, BNM Institute of Technology, Bangalore, India^{2,3,4,5}

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a comprehensive review of hydroelectric dams and major river valley projects in India, examining their historical evolution, technical foundations, socioeconomic contributions, and future prospects. Beginning with India's first hydroelectric installation at Sidrapong (1897) and progressing through the post-independence era of large-scale multipurpose projects, the review traces how rivers once known as sources of devastation were transformed into national assets. The fundamentals of hydroelectric power generation are discussed, covering energy conversion principles, key system components, and turbine selection criteria for varying hydraulic conditions. Projects are classified by operational mode, installed capacity, and hydraulic head, with particular attention to the distinction between storage and run-of-river schemes. The advantages of hydropower — including renewable energy supply, long operational lifespan, low operating costs, and multipurpose utility for irrigation, flood control, and navigation — are weighed against limitations such as ecosystem disruption, large-scale population displacement, high capital costs, and vulnerability to sedimentation and climate variability. Eight major river valley projects are reviewed in detail, including the Damodar Valley, Bhakra-Nangal, Hirakud, Kosi, Tungabhadra, Nagarjuna Sagar, Upper Krishna, and Narmada Valley projects. In-depth case studies of the Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) Dam and Hirakud Dam highlight engineering innovations, regional development impacts, and ongoing maintenance challenges. A comparative analysis contrasts early masonry gravity dams with modern concrete and earthfill structures incorporating advanced instrumentation. With India's installed hydropower capacity at 47.2 GW against an exploitable potential of 148.7 GW, and national targets of 70 GW by 2030, this review underscores the continuing centrality of hydropower — alongside pumped storage and small hydro — to India's renewable energy transition and sustainable water-energy management.

KEYWORDS: Hydroelectric power, river valley projects, multipurpose dams, India, renewable energy, irrigation, flood control, pumped storage

I. INTRODUCTION

Hydroelectric power generation originated in the late 19th century, marking humanity's first large-scale harnessing of renewable energy. The world's inaugural commercial hydroelectric plant commenced operations in 1882 at Appleton, Wisconsin, USA, producing 12.5 kW from Fox River waters using a direct-current dynamo. This innovation rapidly proliferated: by 1895, Niagara Falls powered 5 MW for Buffalo, New York, via alternating current transmission over 32 km, revolutionizing electricity distribution. Europe's Alps and Scandinavia followed, with plants exceeding 100 MW by 1910. Globally, hydropower constituted 25% of electricity by mid-20th century, peaking at 1,300 GW installed capacity today, though growth slowed due to environmental concerns.

India's hydropower journey began modestly under British rule. The Sidrapong plant (1897, Darjeeling, 130 kW) preceded Shivanasamudra Falls (1902, Karnataka), Asia's first AC hydro station at 1 MW, supplying Mysore and Bangalore via 140 km lines a feat of early transmission engineering. Pre-independence efforts totaled under 100 MW, constrained by colonial priorities favoring exports over infrastructure. Post-1947 independence catalyzed explosive growth: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru championed dams as "temples of modern India," launching the First five-Year Plan (1951) with ₹200 crore for irrigation and power. The Damodar Valley Corporation (1948), modeled on America's Tennessee Valley Authority, pioneered multipurpose river valley projects, taming flood-prone basins while generating 150 MW initially

Hydroelectric dams underpin national development across economic, social, and strategic dimensions. Economically, they deliver baseload and peaking power at ₹2–3/kWh operating cost (versus ₹5–7 for coal), supporting industries

contributing 30% GDP. Socially, irrigation from reservoirs like Hirakud and Nagarjunasagar sustains 60% of agriculture, averting famines and enabling green revolutions Mandya's paddy yields quadrupled post-KRS. Strategically, flood control on "sorrow" rivers (Damodar, Kosi) protects 100 million lives; National Power Grid integration ensures equitable distribution. Yet, challenges like sedimentation (1–2% annual capacity loss) and rehabilitation underscore sustainable evolution.

River valley projects embody integrated water resources management, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals for clean energy (SDG7) and zero hunger (SDG2). As India targets 500 GW renewables by 2030, hydropower's storage role complements solar/wind intermittency, cementing its centrality to Viksit Bharat. This report examines these facets through technical fundamentals, classifications, case studies, and future trajectories.

II. FUNDAMENTALS OF HYDROELECTRIC POWER GENERATION

Hydroelectric power generation transforms gravitational potential energy stored in elevated water masses into electrical energy through a sequential process of hydraulic, mechanical, and electromechanical conversion. Water accumulated in a reservoir possesses potential energy proportional to its mass and height above the turbine level, expressed as $E=mgh$, where m is mass, g is gravitational acceleration (9.81 m/s^2), and h is the vertical head. Upon release, this potential energy converts to kinetic energy as water accelerates through conduits, ultimately driving turbine rotation before exhausting as low-energy tail water.

Central to the system are interrelated components forming a closed hydraulic circuit. The dam impounds river flow to form a reservoir, ensuring steady supply and flood storage. Intake structures with trash racks filter debris, channeling water into the penstock a steel-lined pressure conduit (diameters 2–10 m) where hydrostatic pressure builds to 10–100 bar depending on head. Surge shafts mitigate water hammer from sudden valve closures. The powerhouse integrates turbines, generators, and auxiliaries: water impinges on turbine runner blades, extracting impulse or reaction forces to produce shaft torque, which a synchronous generator converts to three-phase AC power via electromagnetic induction. Tailrace tunnels return water to the river, completing the cycle.

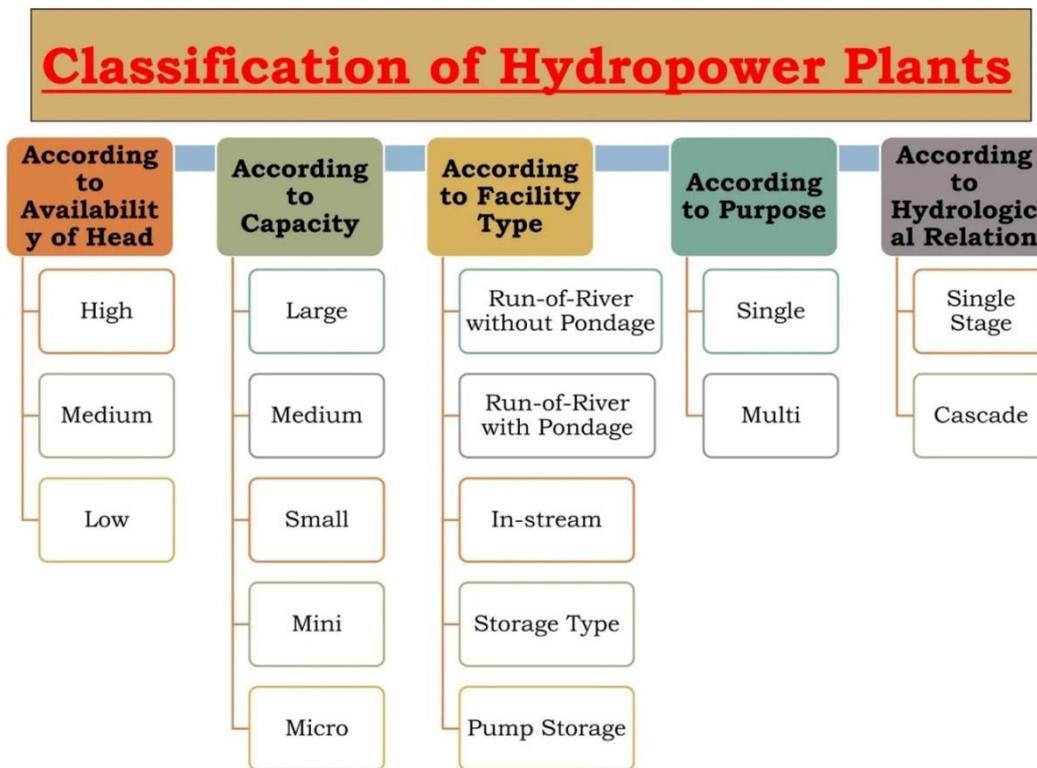


Turbine selection optimizes energy extraction for site-specific head and discharge. Impulse turbines (Pelton wheels) suit high-head (>300 m) schemes like Himalayan run-of-river plants, employing jet nozzles to strike bucket-shaped buckets at 0.45–0.50 jet velocity. Reaction turbines dominate low-to-medium head (<200 m) storage projects: Francis turbines (mixed flow, 50–300 m head) feature spiral casings and adjustable wicket gates for variable load; Kaplan (axial flow, <50 m) offer high specific speeds for low-head, high-flow rivers like the Cauvery. Efficiencies reach 90–95% at design points, with part-load drops minimized by governor controls maintaining 50–60 Hz frequency.

III. CLASSIFICATION OF HYDROELECTRIC PROJECTS

Hydroelectric projects classify primarily by operational mode, installed capacity, hydraulic head, and scheme configuration, reflecting site hydrology, economic viability, and environmental fit. The fundamental dichotomy pits storage (impoundment) against run-of-river (ROR) systems. Storage projects employ large reservoirs (capacity >10% annual inflow) to regulate seasonal flows, enabling peaking power (daily/weekly modulation) and dry-season generation. Examples include Bhakra Nangal (9.34 bcm reservoir) and Hirakud (8.14 bcm), which store monsoon surplus for irrigation and 1,000+ MW output during deficits. ROR schemes minimize impoundment (<5% inflow), harnessing natural discharge via short ponds, suiting perennial rivers but yielding baseload only e.g., Nathpa Jhakri (1,500 MW, Sutlej). India's 70% post-2000 additions favor ROR to curb submersion

Capacity delineates economic scale and grid integration. India's Ministry of Power (pre-1989, now MNRE for small hydro) sets: micro (<100 kW), mini (101 kW–2 MW), small (2–25 MW), large (25+ MW to <500 MW), and mega (≥500 MW). Micro/mini systems power remote hamlets via pico-turbines, aggregating 4,500+ MW across 20 GW untapped Himalayan and Northeast potential. Small hydro (4.2 GW installed) thrives decentralized, exempt from mega-project clearances. Large or mega dominate national grids: Tehri (1,000 MW), Sardar Sarovar (1,450 MW), supplying 80% hydro output with HVDC evacuation. Globally, >10 MW qualifies as small. India's 25 MW thresholds align with developing economy.



Head-based taxonomy optimizes turbine deployment: low (<30 m, Kaplan/propeller), medium (30–300 m, Francis), high (>300 m, Pelton). Low-head suits coastal/plains rivers (e.g., Godavari barrages); India's Western Ghats/Northeast host most medium-head (80% capacity); high-head exploits Himalayan gradients (Subansiri Lower, 2,000 m fall). Pumped storage (PSH), a storage variant, reverses flow during off-peak to refill reservoirs, yielding 4–5x cycle efficiency India's 47 GW potential (e.g., Ghatghar, 250 MW) counters solar or wind variability.

IV. ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF HYDROPOWER**4.1 Advantages**

Hydropower stands as a cornerstone renewable energy source, perpetually replenished by the hydrological cycle without depleting finite fuels like coal or uranium. Unlike thermal plants reliant on imported fossil fuels in which India spends ₹8 lakh crore annually, hydroelectric systems harness domestic river flows, insulating against price volatility and enhancing energy security. Storage projects like Bhakra Nangal regulate monsoonal deluges into year-round supply, achieving near-100% availability factors during wet seasons and supporting grid stability.

Facilities exhibit exceptional longevity and minimal operational expenditure. Well-maintained dams operate 50–100 years, far surpassing coal plants' 25–30-year lifespans, with refurbishments extending service by decades at 20–30% of greenfield costs. Levelized cost falls to ₹2–4/kWh versus ₹5–7 for thermal, driven by negligible fuel that is zero post-commissioning and staffing that is 1–2% of capital annually. Bhakra's 1,325 MW output, operational since 1963, has generated over 500 billion kWh at cumulative costs under ₹1/kWh, yielding 10–12% IRR over lifecycle

Multipurpose utility multiplies socioeconomic returns beyond electricity. Reservoirs irrigate 35 million hectares e.g., Hirakud: 2.54 lakh hectares, avert floods Kosi: ₹5,000 crore annual savings, enable navigation, foster fisheries 10–15% protein source in reservoir states and promote tourism/recreation. National Power Grid integration allows peaking service ramping 20–100% load in minute complementing solar or wind intermittency, as seen in Karnataka's 40% RE mix stabilized by KRS and Jog Falls.

4.2 Disadvantages

Environmental degradation accompanies large-scale impoundment, submerging forests and farmlands while fragmenting aquatic habitats. Bhakra displaced 36,000 ha ecosystems; Narmada projects inundated 37,000 ha, emitting 10–20 million tons CO₂-equivalent methane from decaying biomass initially. Altered downstream flows reduce fish migration i.e. 30–50% salmonid decline in Himalayan rivers, disrupt sediment transport causing coastal erosion in Godavari delta, and elevate eutrophication risks from nutrient trapping.

Population displacement and rehabilitation pose profound social challenges. Sardar Sarovar relocated 40,000 families; India's 5,700 dams displaced 50 million since 1947, often inadequately resettled amid land scarcity. Protests i.e. NBA Narmada Bachao Andolan highlight livelihood losses for tribal communities, with R&R costs escalating projects 20–30% beyond budgets and timelines.

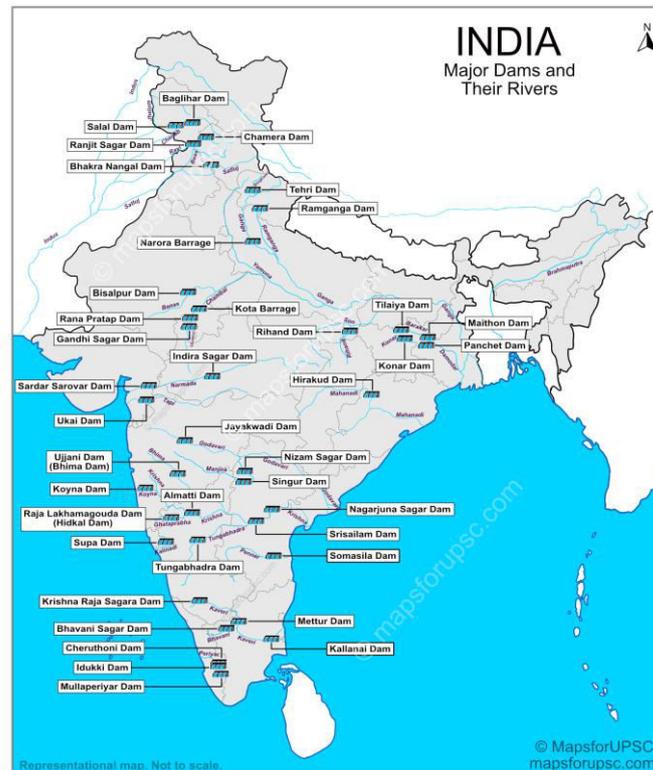
Dams aren't the clean, harmless solutions they're often sold as. They disrupt entire ecosystems, blocking fish migration, altering water temperature, and destroying downstream habitats that depend on natural sediment flow. Over time, sediment buildup reduces a dam's lifespan and efficiency, turning a "long-term" project into an expensive maintenance problem. They also displace communities, flood fertile land, and create massive social and economic costs that are routinely underestimated. Add the risk of catastrophic failure, seismic impacts, and methane emissions from submerged vegetation, and the idea that dams are purely beneficial or sustainable doesn't hold up under scrutiny.

High capital intensity and long gestation hinder viability. Initial outlays reach ₹8–12 crore/MW versus ₹4–6 for solar, with 7–12-year construction amid clearances delays Subansiri Lower i.e. 2,000 MW pending 15 years. Sedimentation slashes reservoir volumes 0.5–2%/year i.e. Hirakud lost 25% since 1957, curtailing output/Irrigation; dam safety demands perpetual investment amid seismic zones i.e. IMD monitoring for 1,500+ high-risk structures. Climate variability exacerbates risks erratic monsoons cut Himalayan output 15–20%, questioning reliability in warming scenarios.

V. MULTI-PURPOSE RIVER VALLEY PROJECTS

Multi-purpose river valley projects represent integrated infrastructure systems that harness entire river basins through coordinated dams, reservoirs, canals, and power stations, optimizing water resources for concurrent objectives rather than singular irrigation. Originating from the Tennessee Valley Authority model in the USA (1933), these projects treat rivers holistically controlling floods, generating power, irrigating farmlands, and fostering regional development. In India, they emerged post-independence as strategic responses to perennial challenges: monsoon floods devastating eastern plains, droughts parching peninsular interiors, and acute energy shortages amid 80% rural agrarian dependence.

Canals irrigating 4.5 lakh hectares alongside thermal power. Prime Minister Nehru's vision of dams as "temples of modern India" accelerated replication: Bhakra Nangal (Sutlej, 1950s), Hirakud (Mahanadi, 1957), and Chambal Valley (Rajasthan-Madhya Pradesh) followed, transforming "sorrow" rivers into lifelines. By 2025, over 50 major projects span interstate collaborations, governed by tribunals like NWDT for Narmada, ensuring equitable allocation amid federal tensions.



Primary objectives systematically maximize river potential:

Irrigation expands cultivable land during rabi/kharif seasons; Bhakra's 3,402 km network serves 14.6 lakh hectares, boosting food grain output by 20–30%. Hydroelectric power generation provides clean baseload/peaking (e.g., Hirakud's 307.5 MW); collectively, these projects contribute 25% of India's hydro capacity. Flood prevention stores monsoon peaks Kosi barrage averts Bihar inundations affecting 20 million annually. Navigation develops inland waterways; reservoirs enable barge transport, cutting logistics costs by 40%. Domestic and industrial water supply pipes urban needs (e.g., Tungabhadra to Hospet) and factories.

Soil conservation employs check dams and afforestation to curb erosion; Damodar reduced siltation by 70%. Fisheries thrive in reservoirs, yielding 10–15% regional protein; forest development via catchment treatment enhances biodiversity and carbon sinks.

Nationally, these projects underpin development: irrigating 35 million hectares (40% net sown area), generating 47 GW hydros, saving ₹50,000 crore in flood damages yearly, and interconnecting via National Power Grid for 99% availability. Challenges like displacement (50 million affected) and sedimentation spurred reforms EIA 1986, R&R Policy 2007 yet their legacy endures, embodying planned economic growth from Nehruvian socialism to sustainable hydrology.

VI. MAJOR MULTI-PURPOSE RIVER VALLEY PROJECTS OF INDIA**6.1 Damodar River Valley Project**

The Damodar River Valley Project was the first multi-purpose river valley project of independent India. It is a joint venture of West Bengal and Jharkhand. The Damodar River was notorious for frequent floods and was known as the “Sorrow of Bengal.” Dams were constructed at Tilaiyya, Konar, Maithan, and Panchet to control floods and store water. The project has a canal network of about 2495 km and provides irrigation to approximately 4.5 lakh hectares. It also supports thermal and hydroelectric power generation and has contributed significantly to regional industrial development.

6.2 Bhakra–Nangal Project

The Bhakra–Nangal Project is one of the most important river valley projects in India. It is a joint venture of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. The Bhakra Dam is constructed across the Sutlej River and forms the Govind Sagar reservoir. The canal network extends about

3400 km and irrigates nearly 14.6 lakh hectares. Bhakra Dam is one of the highest gravity dams in India and plays a crucial role in irrigation, power generation, and flood control in northwestern India.

6.3 Kosi Project

The Kosi Project was primarily undertaken for flood control, as the Kosi River was known as the “Sorrow of Bihar.” It is a joint project between India and Nepal, with a dam constructed at Hanumanagar near the international border. The project provides irrigation to about 8.75 lakh hectares. A portion of the hydroelectric power generated is supplied to Nepal, highlighting regional cooperation in river basin management.

6.4 Hirakud Project

The Hirakud Project is constructed across the Mahanadi River near Sambalpur in Odisha. The Hirakud Dam is the longest dam in India, with a total length of about 4800 m. The project was designed to control floods, provide irrigation, and generate hydroelectric power. It irrigates approximately 2.54 lakh hectares and supplies power and water benefits to Odisha and neighboring states.

6.5 Tungabhadra Project

The Tungabhadra Project is a joint venture of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The dam is constructed across the Tungabhadra River near Hospet. The project provides irrigation to about 5.5 lakh hectares and generates hydroelectric power. The reservoir formed is known as Pampa Sagara and has significantly supported agricultural development in the region.

6.6 Nagarjuna Sagar Project

The Nagarjuna Sagar Project is constructed across the Krishna River at Nandikonda in Telangana. Its main objectives are irrigation and power generation. The project provides irrigation to approximately 8.3 lakh hectares and plays an important role in supporting agriculture and water supply in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

6.7 Upper Krishna Project

The Upper Krishna Project is a major irrigation project in Karnataka, constructed across the Krishna River near Alamatti and Narayanapura. The reservoirs formed are Lal Bahadur Shastri Sagar and Basava Sagara. Together, they provide irrigation to about 6.47 lakh hectares and have recently contributed to hydroelectric power generation. The project supports both irrigation and drinking water supply in northern Karnataka.

6.8 Narmada Valley Project

The Narmada Valley Project involves a series of dams constructed across the Narmada River, including Sardar Sarovar, Narmada Sagar, and Upper Narmada projects. The project is administered by the Narmada Project Authority and governed by decisions of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal. It provides irrigation, drinking water, and hydroelectric power to Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and parts of Maharashtra. Despite controversies, it remains one of the most significant river basin development projects in India.

VII. HYDROELECTRIC POWER SCENARIO IN INDIA

Hydropower accounts for 12–14% of India's total electricity generation as of 2025, with an installed capacity of 47.2 GW amid a gross potential of 148.7 GW (42% exploitable). Despite this, plant load factor averages 25–30% due to monsoon variability, yielding 176 billion kWh annually versus a possible 660 billion kWh. Growth has plateaued post-2010s from environmental clearances and high costs, but recent policies target revival.

State-wise, Himalayan and peninsular clusters dominate. Karnataka leads with 4,000+ MW from Shivanasamudra (first AC hydro plant, 1902, 42 MW), Jog Falls (1,100 MW drop), Tungabhadra, and Alamatti. Odisha's Hirakud (307.5 MW) anchors eastern grids; Himachal's Bhakra-Nangal (1,325 MW) exemplifies northern hubs. Andhra Pradesh/Telangana contribute via Srisaïlam (1,670 MW) and Nagarjunasagar (810 MW) Tamil Nadu's Mettur and Pykara sustain southern demand. Madhya Pradesh (Gandhisagar), Maharashtra (Koyna, 1,960 MW), and Gujarat (Ukai, Sardar Sarovar)

The National Power Grid, operational since 1991 under Power Grid Corporation, interconnects 428 GW across five regions, enabling 99.5% availability. Surplus from hydro-rich states (e.g., monsoon peaks in Northeast) flows to deficits like Tamil Nadu, reducing curtailments by 40% via

HVDC lines (e.g., ±800 kV Raigarh-Pugalur). This integration supports RE variability, with hydro providing 20% balancing services.

Challenges persist: sedimentation erodes 1–2% reservoir capacity yearly; climate change alters monsoons, risking 10–15% output drops; and disputes (e.g., Cauvery) delay projects. Hydro Policy 2021 reclassifies large hydro as RE, unlocking ₹1 lakh crore investments for 20 GW additions by 2030, favoring pumped storage (47 GW potential). Future emphasis on small/micro hydro (20 GW untapped) and refurbishments will elevate hydropower's role in India's 500 GW RE target.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Hydroelectric dams and major river valley projects stand as enduring pillars of India's infrastructure, powering national development since independence. With installed capacity at 47 GW (12–14% of electricity mix), they underpin energy security, irrigate 20+ million hectares, and avert flood losses exceeding ₹10,000 crore annually across projects like Hirakud and Kosi. Post-1947 initiatives, from Damodar Valley Corporation onward, transformed "sorrow" rivers into assets, aligning with Nehruvian "temples of modern India" vision Bhakra alone exemplifies this, distributing 1,325 MW to six states via the National Power Grid.

These projects' multipurpose ethos irrigation (e.g., Bhakra: 14.6 lakh ha), power (total hydro 176 bn kWh in 2023), navigation, fisheries, and soil conservation has catalyzed socioeconomic transformation. Karnataka's KRS boosted Mandya's rice productivity by 40%, while Narmada initiatives greened Rajasthan deserts, enhancing GDP contributions from agriculture (15–18%) and industry. Yet, evolution reveals trade-offs: early dams' 50–100-year lifespans now demand ₹50,000 crore in rehabilitation for aging structures (70+ over 50 years old), addressing sedimentation and seismicity.

Looking ahead, hydropower's future brightens amid India's net-zero 2070 pledge. Government targets 70 GW by 2030 (adding 30 GW via 50 GW tendering), emphasizing small hydro (15 GW untapped in Himalayas or Northeast) and pumped storage (27 GW potential) to firm renewables. Initiatives like the 50,000 MW Hydro Initiative (2003 onward) and RTC-RE tender's counter challenges: high capex (₹8–10 crore/MW), EIA delays (e.g., Subansiri), and water stress projected by 2050. Technological shifts digital twins for predictive maintenance, fish ladders for ecology, and hybrid solar-hydro mitigate limitations, targeting 40% Hydro in generation by FY2030.

Ultimately, river valley projects' legacy endures, fostering equitable growth. Strategic investments, policy reforms (e.g., Hydro Policy 2021), and interstate coordination via NWDT models will unlock 148 GW exploitable potential, ensuring sustainable water-energy nexus for 1.4 billion. Prioritizing dam safety, community resettlement, and climate resilience positions hydropower as India's renewable vanguard.

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