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# The Hidden Risk in India's Ageing Dams

 **BUSINESS STANDARD**8 June 2026 · **ECONOMY** · **GEOGRAPHY** · **GS3**

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# The Hidden Risk in India's Ageing Dams

Business Standard 8 June 2026 **GS3**

Source: [ujjyari.com](http://ujjyari.com) — Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India keeps building new infrastructure while older assets like dams quietly age. Should the state spend as much on maintaining what it has as on building new, and how is that prioritised politically?"*

Source: [Original editorial](#) Business Standard

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources **HOW**

## WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The **Bhakra Dam** wall deflecting beyond its safe limit is a localised alarm, but it points to a national problem: India's vast stock of **ageing dams** is a systemic, under-managed risk. For an aspirant, this is a GS3 case on **infrastructure asset management, disaster risk and fiscal prudence**, and a window into a deeper truth, that India treats infrastructure as something to build rather than to maintain.

## THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

India has **over 6,000 large dams**, many past their design life, with **sedimentation** and **climate-driven extreme rainfall** raising failure risk. A dam failure is **catastrophic and irreversible**, yet budgets favour building new over maintaining old. India has the framework (**Dam Safety Act 2021, NDSA, DRIP**); what it lacks is **lifecycle asset-management discipline**. Prevention is far cheaper than disaster.

## THE ISSUE, DECODED

CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
<b>Lifecycle asset management</b>	Maintaining an asset across its whole life	The discipline India lacks
<b>Sedimentation</b>	Silt filling reservoirs over time	Reduces capacity, alters stresses
<b>Dam Safety Act 2021</b>	Law creating the safety framework	The institutional tool
<b>Build-versus-maintain bias</b>	Preference for new over upkeep	Leaves ageing assets under-funded

## THE ANALYSIS: WHY AGEING DAMS ARE A SYSTEMIC RISK

- 1 The stock is old.** Many of India's 6,000-plus large dams were built decades ago and are past their design life.
- 2 Climate compounds it.** More frequent extreme rainfall tests dams beyond their original design assumptions.
- 3 Sedimentation erodes safety margins.** Silt reduces capacity and changes the loads a dam must bear.
- 4 The bias is toward building.** New projects win budgets and attention; maintenance is neglected until crisis.

## DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

*the Dam Safety Act, 2021 created the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) (regulator), the National Committee on Dam Safety (NCDS) (policy), and State Dam Safety Organisations.*

**Rehabilitation:** *the Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (DRIP), World Bank-aided. The scale: India has over 6,000 large dams; many of the largest were built in the early decades after independence. The case: Bhakra (Sutlej, Himachal Pradesh; Gobind Sagar reservoir; BBMB); safety study by IIT-Roorkee. Concept: lifecycle asset management; emergency action plans; real-time dam instrumentation.*

## THE DEBATE

**Argument for prioritising new infrastructure:** With limited resources and large development needs, new capacity must come first, and periodic safety reviews are adequate.

**Argument for maintenance discipline:** A single dam failure is catastrophic and irreversible; under-funding maintenance is a false economy that gambles with lives.

**The balanced verdict:** New infrastructure matters, but **maintenance is not optional**. India should institutionalise lifecycle asset management so that monitoring, rehabilitation and emergency planning are continuous, funded responsibilities, not afterthoughts.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

*Building is visible and politically rewarded; maintenance is invisible until something fails. The strong answer surfaces the hidden liability of under-maintenance and reframes prevention as the cheapest option. This “maintain what you build” lens applies to dams, roads, power grids and public buildings across India’s infrastructure.*

## DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

6,000+ ageing dams + sedimentation + extreme rainfall -> rising failure risk. The bias: budgets favour building new -> maintenance under-funded -> hidden risk grows. The fix: lifecycle asset management + empowered NDSA + DRIP funding + real-time monitoring -> prevention.

## THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Institutionalise lifecycle asset management** for all major dams.
- ② **Fully empower the National Dam Safety Authority** and state bodies.
- ③ **Fund rehabilitation** through DRIP and dedicated maintenance budgets.
- ④ **Deploy real-time instrumentation** and enforce emergency action plans.

## THE TAKEAWAY BOX

*“India treats infrastructure as something to build, not to maintain.” Critically examine via ageing dams and asset management. (250 words)*

*“India is good at building dams and poor at remembering them; the cheapest disaster is the one prevented by maintenance no ribbon is ever cut for.”*

*Dam Safety Act 2021 (NDSA, NCDS, SDSOs) · DRIP (World Bank) · over 6,000 large dams · Bhakra (Sutlej, Gobind Sagar, BBMB) · lifecycle asset management.*

*Should governments spend as much on maintaining existing infrastructure as on building new, even though maintenance wins no headlines?*

*Connects to GS3 PYQs on disaster management and infrastructure; probable forward question is the build-versus-maintain framing above.*

*today’s Bhakra Dam article; static GS3 on disaster management and infrastructure.*

**Sources:** *Business Standard, Ministry of Jal Shakti, NDSA*

Source: [The Hidden Risk in India's Ageing Dams — Ujijari.com](#) | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

**The Bhakra Dam’s structural strain is a warning that India’s large stock of ageing dams represents a systemic infrastructure, safety and fiscal risk, requiring a shift from one-off repairs toward disciplined, lifecycle asset management backed by the Dam Safety Act.**

#### ✓ SUPPORTING

- India has over 6,000 large dams, many past their design life, and structural ageing combines with sedimentation and climate-driven extreme rainfall to raise failure risk.
- The political and budgetary bias toward building new assets over maintaining existing ones leaves ageing infrastructure under-funded and under-monitored.
- A dam failure is catastrophic and irreversible, making prevention vastly cheaper than the human and economic cost of disaster.


**COUNTER**

Some argue that with limited resources and pressing development needs, new infrastructure must take priority, and that periodic safety reviews are sufficient.


**WAY FORWARD**

Institutionalise lifecycle asset management, fully empower the National Dam Safety Authority, fund rehabilitation through programmes like DRIP, deploy real-time instrumentation, and treat maintenance as a first-order budget priority.

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**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**
**QUESTION**

*"India treats infrastructure as something to build, not to maintain." Critically examine in the context of ageing dams and asset management. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

A dam wall deflecting beyond its safe limit is the kind of news that briefly alarms and is quickly forgotten. But the Bhakra strain points to a structural problem in how India treats its infrastructure: as something to build, not to maintain.

**BODY**

India operates over 6,000 large dams, a significant share built decades ago and now ageing past their design life. The risk is compounded by two forces: sedimentation, which steadily reduces reservoir capacity and alters stresses, and climate change, which is increasing the frequency of extreme rainfall events that test dams beyond their design assumptions.

A dam failure is not an ordinary infrastructure breakdown; it is a potential catastrophe for downstream populations, irreversible and enormously costly in lives and money. Yet the political economy of infrastructure favours the new over the existing: ribbon-cuttings win attention and budgets, while quiet maintenance does not.

The result is ageing assets that are under-funded and under-monitored. India has the institutional

scaffolding to do better, the Dam Safety Act, 2021 created the National Dam Safety Authority and state-level bodies, and the World Bank-aided Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project funds strengthening.

What is missing is the discipline of lifecycle asset management: treating maintenance, monitoring and rehabilitation as a continuous, first-order responsibility rather than a reaction to crisis. Real-time instrumentation, mandatory periodic safety reviews and emergency action plans should be the norm, not the exception, for every major dam.

### CONCLUSION

The cheapest disaster is the one prevented. India must value maintaining its infrastructure as much as building it, and treat ageing dams as the systemic risk they are.

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