



Waiting for a Dam

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Once again, in November 2019, I found myself in an SJVN waiting room. But it was a new waiting room. Many things had changed in the two years since my last visit to the Arun valley in Northeast Nepal. Most importantly, after ten years of



planning, measuring and assessing, construction work for the Arun-3 hydropower project had started. Also, the developer [SJVN](#) - Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam, or Sutlej Hydro Power Limited - had taken full possession of the large plot of land close to the airport in [Tumlingtar](#) that had been bought by the government of Nepal during the first attempt to build this dam in the 1990s. Over the past decade, I had visited SJVN offices in Khadbari, Kathmandu, and New Delhi, but this here was something new: a real compound, with high brick walls and a main gate with security personnel. In front of the main gate we ran into three young Indian engineers. [Udisha](#) introduced herself as a PhD student working on Indian dam building in Nepal and Bhutan and said that we had come from Kathmandu to talk to one of the executives. One of the engineers, let's call him Manish, called his superior, announced our arrival and asked us inside the compound.

It took Manish half an hour to return. In the meantime, I took pictures of the model of the hydropower plant that was located in the entrance of the building and wondered whether the high walls were connected to several instances when homemade [bombs](#) had been planted around the project site over the past years. When the young engineer came back, his face had darkened. He was very sorry, but his superior would not be able to see us because we did not have a written permission from the [Investment Board Nepal](#) (IBN). When we replied that indeed we had and showed him text messages from a senior staff member, he became even more obscure. Even if we had a written confirmation by the IBN, he mused, we might also need a document by the Indian embassy confirming our good intentions. "I'm very sorry, but some bad people have come recently. It is very difficult for us." He was clearly uncomfortable throwing us out like this.

