

Dammed in

Large dams are emerging as a major issue of conflict in North-eastern India.

by Neeraj Vagholikar



*Photo: Sarikah Atreya AND Bhaskar Bora
The site of the Lower Subansiri project.*

On November 17, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) completed 150 days of an ongoing *satyagraha* against a juggernaut of large hydroelectric projects planned in Sikkim. Among the many concerns raised are the likely socio-cultural impacts due to influx of large labour populations in areas with small numbers of local indigenous communities and the ecological impact in the fragile Teesta river basin. Further east Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur have seen vocal protests by students' unions and other civil society groups against the upstream and downstream impact of a large number of dams planned in the region.

Unique features

The government and proponents of large dams in the Northeast paint a win-win picture: exploiting the country's largest perennial water system to produce plentiful power for the nation, economic benefits to states through power export to other parts of the country, flood control and small displacement of local communities. The North-eastern region has been identified as India's 'future powerhouse' and 168 large dams of a cumulative capacity of 63,328 MW are planned.

However, several unique features of the Northeast — geological fragility; location in a highly seismic zone; diversity of ethnic communities, a large percentage of which is dependent on traditional natural resource-based livelihoods; unique socio-cultural and agro-ecological practices; biodiversity richness — pose a challenge to these ambitious plans. As the Centre and States push for these hydel projects, large dams are emerging as a major issue of conflict in the region.

One of the major arguments in favour of large hydroelectric projects in the Northeast is

that there is relatively 'small displacement' by submergence as compared to other parts of the country. But a careful perusal of the ground situation indicates that displacement is grossly underestimated.

Shifting agriculture (*jhum*) is a dominant traditional land use in the hills of Northeast India and plays a critical role in the livelihoods of people, maintaining agricultural biodiversity and providing food security. Increasing pressures on land have resulted in the shortening of *jhum* cycles (the length of the fallow period between two cropping phases), thus impacting its ecological viability. The submergence of land by hydel projects will further shorten the cycle and enhance the pressure on the surrounding areas, thus affecting the environment and livelihoods over a much larger landscape.

Loss of forests

In addition to submergence, land use restrictions will apply in the Catchment Area of the reservoir as per mandatory norms to reduce siltation and increase the life of the reservoir. Further, compensatory mechanisms required as per forest laws to offset the loss of forests due to the project also lead to protection of other areas by change of tenure and access regimes to land and resources.

For example: conversion of Unclassified State Forests in Arunachal Pradesh, with currently greater access available to communities, into Reserved Forests with greater state control. Thus impact on local communities is well beyond the submergence area.

However, the social and ecological impacts of these conditions have not been assessed in the existing planning and decision-making process and do not reflect in the decision on the overall viability of the project.

Dr. Mite Lingi, General Secretary of the Idu Cultural and Literary Society (ICLS) says "The small displacement argument to sell these projects needs to be confronted. The entire population of the Idu Mishmi tribe is 12,000 and 13 large hydel projects have been planned in our home, the Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh. As per this faulty argument, there will be little social impact even if our entire population were supposedly displaced."

Further the concerns being expressed are not restricted to the issue of displacement. The ongoing satyagraha in Sikkim focuses on the impact of hydel projects on Dzongu, the holy land and reserve of the Lepcha tribe. Sociologist Vibha Arora says: "Such protests are not merely on grounds of displacement but that the region's cultural and ethnic traditions are rooted in the Teesta and its environs."



Threatened landscape: The Dzongu valley in Sikkim.

A major concern in the Northeast is the influx of a large labour population from outside. Dr. Lingi adds, "We have been given constitutional and legal protection, particularly with respect to our land rights and restricted entry of outsiders. Thirteen large projects in the Dibang Valley will bring in outside labour upwards of 100,000 people for long periods, as these are long gestation projects. We are concerned about the demographic changes and other associated socio-cultural impacts as the Idu Mishmis are only 12,000 in number. The development policies are a glaring contradiction to the constitutional and legal protection we have been given."

Livelihood and ecology

A major emerging concern has been the livelihood and ecological impacts in the areas downstream of these large dams — loss of fisheries, changes in *beel* (wetland) ecology in the flood plains, agricultural losses, massive boulder extraction and sudden water releases from reservoirs in the monsoons increasing flood vulnerability. However, downstream impact studies continue to be poor.

After a sustained campaign to address the downstream impact of the Lower Subansiri hydroelectric project coming up on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and other groups such as the Peoples Movement for Subansiri-Brahmaputra Valley (PMSBV), a committee constituting academics from Assam has been recently setup to study these impacts.

"Unless prior comprehensive downstream impact studies are carried out to decide the viability of the multiple projects planned in Arunachal Pradesh and downstream communities in Assam acknowledged as projected affected persons (PAPs), we will see violent conflicts in the Brahmaputra basin over the issue of large dams in the future," says Keshoba Krishna Chatradhara of PMSBV.

The governments need to recognise the region-specific impacts of these large hydroelectric projects in the Northeast. A politics of denial of negative impacts in the decision-making phase will only lead to ugly conflicts in the future.

The writer is CNES-Setu National Media Fellow 2007 and member, Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group.

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