

Mega dams: campaigning against the plans of the Indian government

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In demonstrations barely reported in the media, peasants and students in the Northeastern Indian state of Assam are fighting together against a proposed gargantuan network of dams across the upper reaches of its rivers in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the world's six most seismically active regions. The movement has gathered impressive momentum against a project that threatens devastating environmental, demographic and socio-economic impact.

The anxiety and disquiet among the downstream dwellers created over the construction of mega dams in Northeast India has left Assam's politics in a simmering state.

On the foothills of the Eastern Himalaya, lush green tea gardens fill up the North Bank of the Brahmaputra in Assam's Sonitpur district. Driving further up, through NH 52, towards the northern towns of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, one sees countless rivulets and tributaries flowing down from the northern state of Arunachal Pradesh. In recent years, in a drastic change of topography, the green landscape has gradually given way to dried up rivers and sandy floodplains - thanks to massive sand deposition in the lower reaches of these swirling rivers. In the summer of 2011, sand deposition due to the changing course of the Gai River alone had buried farmlands amounting to thousands of hectares. Jiadhhol and Misamari, smaller rivers once known for causing flash floods in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts have now sanded up one village after another. Whereas in June 2008, the released load waters from the dam in Ranganadi, another tributary flowing from Arunachal-Himalaya caused heavy floods and engulfed as many as 3 lakhs people.

Blame it on the new river engineering employed by the Indian central government in the myriad tributaries of Arunachal Pradesh that converge to become the mighty Brahmaputra. The dispossessed, displaced and distressed peasantry of these sleepy villages along the national highway are now all out on the streets day and night, braving the winter cold. For they fear further devastation once the under-construction dam on Lower Subansiri, the largest tributary of the Brahmaputra, begins operating. And at present they have the crucial backing of a whole range of people - from organizations and parties to middle class elites. In fact the long-enduring anti-dam movement in Assam, mainly geared against the state's Congress government and NHPC Limited has gained an unprecedented momentum in the past few weeks; so much so that it has brought the construction work at the project site in Gerukamukh to a complete halt. People in the state are now fighting together against a proposed gargantuan network of 168 mega dams across Arunachal Pradesh, one of the world's six most seismically active regions. The project is thought to be India's largest ever hydro-power adventure.

The anti-dam convulsion in the Northeast Indian state of Assam, especially the one against the Lower Subansiri project has a decade long history. The project itself was envisaged by the Brahmaputra Flood Control Commission as back as 1955 with a view to flood moderation and irrigation. Finally the Brahmaputra Board transferred the project to NHPC in May, 2000 without any

decision regarding the scientific investigations. As the riparian anxiety and the uncertainties about its socio-ecological impact grew by 2002, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) started campaigning against the mega dams. At the same time a few other NGOs too joined the rally and held protest marches at various points. Finally in December, 2006, a tripartite meet was held involving the Assam Government, NHPC and AASU, after which a scientific expert committee was set up to investigate the 2000 MW project.

Ironically, NHPC had begun the construction work at a furious pace without carrying out a downstream impact study. Only after AASU launched yet another agitation did the NHPC start cooperating with the expert committee in September 2008. So when the final recommendations of the scientific study came out on 28 June, 2010, they put the public mood in Assam into a panic. The revealing report states, "The selected site for the mega dam of the present dimension was not appropriate in such a geologically and seismologically sensitive region. Therefore it is recommended not to construct the mega dam in the present site." On 17 July, 2010 the House Committee of Assam Legislative Assembly, formed after shrill demands by the opposition parties, asked the government of Assam to follow the expert committee recommendations and take necessary action with the centre.

Fuelling fire to the suspicion of their being New Delhi's puppet, the oblivious Assam government took no stand in regard to downstream anxious concerns. After a public hearing in Guwahati on 10 September, 2010 former Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, wrote in his letter to the Prime Minister, "Personally I believe some of the concerns that were expressed cannot be dismissed lightly...Right now the feeling in vocal sections of Assam's society particularly appears to be that 'mainland India' is exploiting the Northeast hydro-electricity resources for its benefits, while the costs of this exploitation will be borne by the people of Northeast."

Despite such directives, when a defiant NHPC continued the construction of the Lower Subansiri Mega Dam, AASU allied with 26 ethnic organizations including local Mising bodies such as TMPK and MMK in 2010 to kick off a fully-fledged agitation. Significantly, another major organization that has appeared as a powerful player in the anti-dam disquiet since the beginning is the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS). Its general secretary Akhil Gogoi, RTI activist and peasant leader, who shot to fame with his crusade against corruption in the last five years, has been able to successfully mobilize popular sentiments against the dams over the last one and a half years.

After sporadic disruptions over the 2011 assembly polls and other issues, a full-blown statewide agitation broke out in the last month. On 1 December, more than 3000 activists led by AASU and KMSS filled the Lakhimpur town to block the further movement of an equipment-carrying 14 wheel jumbo carrier towards the Subansiri dam site. One month of full scale protests and an effective blockade against NHPC in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts have fired the Assamese public imagination, and given birth to a regional movement. Barely reported in the national or international media, the anti-dam unrest has nevertheless attained such gigantic proportions that a tense state government had to call the agitating groups to the negotiation table on 5 January. So far, though negotiations continue, no consensus has been reached.

After leading a weighty more-than-a-month long blockade, turning aggressive at times, KMSS general secretary Akhil Gogoi is now in Assam's capital city of Guwahati for the first round of talks. Speaking to this correspondent after the dialogue, Gogoi says, "Although we appreciate Government's wish to hold talks, there was no indication that they were ready to draw the project to a halt. In fact, experiences from all other anti-dam movements across the country tell us that the centre will use this as a strategy to calm the protests and delay the process."

Gogoi believes instead that New Delhi's absolute apathy contrasted with its huge peasant

participation make it a sustainable movement. Although downstream impact remains a major concern, there are other key issues as well that have fuelled profound resentment and agony in the public debates. The left-progressive faction within the movement has focused primarily on the issue of right over resources. Corporatization of water resources by the centre, they argue, through framing 'imposed laws' such as the National Water Policy is a clear violation of the state's constitutional right over water. "If this is not neo-colonial exploitation, what is?" - retorts a heated Akhil Gogoi.

Dubbing their struggle as an 'anti-imperialist' fight, KMSS has already vowed to resume and intensify the on-street resistance movement. On a slightly different note, AASU however maintains their inclination to pursue a non-radical democratic approach. In an exclusive interview, Dr. Samujjal Bhattacharya, Adviser to AASU and Chairman of North East Students' Organization (NESO), says, "We believe in a peaceful resolution of the issue through talks."

Calling each of the mega dams a Hydro-bomb, Dr. Bhattacharya adds, "We are not against development. But if development comes at the cost of the life, security and civilization of the people of Assam, no way would it be allowed." AASU attributes the project to a biased profit-making motive of the centre where Assam's water resources may serve the national interest, without addressing the decades-long problems of its people. Calamitous floods and erosion create havoc every year in Assam, only to go unaddressed by the government.

Assam's regional politics has always been framed by perceptions of New Delhi's political injustice and economic exploitation. Even a dispassionate look at history validates the sentiments and conditions that animate subnationalism in the region, to the extent of turning militant in the form of the separatist ULFA. In a state where a single public refinery could not be attained without launching a fullscale agitation, despite it being an epicenter of India's oil and natural gas production, what Assam will 'get in return' is a central theme in the mega dams debate as well. The total estimated power generation of the proposed 168 mega dams in Arunachal Pradesh would be around 75000 MW, much of which will be driven out of the region. Call it a cruel joke; Assam, despite having equal rights over the inter-state rivers, will receive only 50 MW as a royalty - 25 MW from the Lower Subansiri Project and 25 MW from the Kameng project. "Such simple arithmetic explains why anti-Delhi sentiments arise in this region" Dr. Bhattacharya remarks.

The future of the anti-dam movement

AASU views this campaign as not only a national issue in Assam, but to a great extent pan-northeastern. For that matter, their movement does not limit itself to Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts, but also encompasses the environmental concerns of other projects such as the Kurichu dam in Bhutan or the Tipaimukh dam on the Barak River in Manipur. As experts have warned of a plethora of environmental, geological, demographic and socio-economic problems, the Lower Subansiri project alone would use 31,000 bighas of pristine forestland in Arunachal, out of which 25,000 bighas will be submerged.

"Given such dangers, we demand a cumulative downstream impact study over the entire stress of the rivers. If peaceful negotiations fail, a full scale blockade movement will remain the only option," warns Dr. Samujjal Bhattacharya. His comment cannot be ignored. Showing a remarkable level of restraint, AASU has so far maintained a completely peaceful movement. With its impressive history and the unparalleled influence it enjoys in the Assamese public sphere, a leap into the role of a resistance movement by AASU would paralyze normal governance in Assam.

The state government however argues that mega dams are a must if India is to prevent the diversion of the Yarlung Tsangpo (the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra in Tibet). As China plans for the

world's largest hydro-power project in the upstream, New Delhi in that case will have to go to the International Court of Justice to show the beneficial use of the river in India. "But the people of the Northeast will become a pawn in the race between Beijing and New Delhi," Dr. Bhattacharya argues. "Assam's power need is at the maximum 1100 MW which is attained from state's own production and buying electricity from other projects. If we are to be granted First User Rights of the Brahmaputra by showing its beneficial use, we have suggested some multipurpose micro-projects which will both generate electricity for Assam and contain floods and erosion," the AASU leader adds.

In the first week of the New Year, a mega dam broke apart near the Brazilian city of Rio De Janeiro, rendering 13000 homeless. Such earth-shattering accidents have ushered in a new era of decommissioning. As recently as on September 30, 2011, Myanmar's President Thein Sein surprised many by stopping the construction of the \$3.6 billion Myitsone hydroelectric project in the Kachin state. A recent report of the World Register of Dams (WRD) suggests all the capitalist economies in the world including the USA have hugely reduced the construction of mega dams. In fact, the Indian Government, itself, of late has shown greater alertness on the issue of river dams across mainland India. The government has passed strictures on a whole slew of projects from Uttarakhand's Loharinag Pala (on socio-religious grounds) to the Polavaram dam in Andhra Pradesh (on grounds that mandatory public hearings were not held).

Whether such national standards apply to the peripheral Northeast remains the elusive question. The anti-dam movement in the Brahmaputra valley, a local commentator writes, has already surpassed the celebrated Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in terms of numerical strength. The social impact in Indian environmental struggles, be it the NBA or the Chipko Movement, largely remains confined to the affected areas and NGO circles.

In Assam, it has already acquired a significant subnationalist colour that has driven the whole of Assamese civil society towards supporting it. In a region where politics is premised upon the metaphorical poetics of a river as the lifeline of a nation, the anti-dam mobilization is here to stay. As the buzz grows louder, the book that easily attained best seller status in the recent NE Book Fair in Guwahati, was Akhil Gogoi's anti-dam dossier *Morubhumi Ahe Lahe Lahe* (Gently comes the Desert). The dams, without doubt, could turn the downstream valleys into a desert. But if they collapsed, an apocalyptic flood could swallow all in its path.

Tanmoy Sharma, 20 January 2012

P.S.

* From Open Democracy:

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* Tanmoy Sharma is a freelance commentator and a university activist based in New Delhi. He contributes to various newspaper and magazines on socio-cultural issues including the politics of Northeast India.