

Water conflicts in Arunachal Pradesh: The dam debate

Raju Mimi

The Indian government has in recent years initiated several policies to facilitate investment and utilization of natural resources in Arunachal Pradesh, under which it plans to develop hydropower projects. These power projects have been proposed to meet the increasing demand for energy in the country. However, success of these policies will be determined by careful considerations of multi-faceted problems and the level of public participation. Large dams in Arunachal have the potential to severely alter the cultural and ecological landscape of the region. It will have huge social and environmental costs such as displacement, influx of migrants, and destruction of forests. These devastations weigh heavy on the local tribal people who use these land, water and forest resources as the basis of their livelihood. Recent years has seen protests growing over large dams in Arunachal Pradesh. Several tribal communities in the state are totally opposed to building of multiple mega projects in their homeland. They see dams as threat to their socio-cultural fabric, where forced development will uproot them from their land, home and livelihood. These projects were created as public policies to meet India's growing demands for energy but have become source of conflict between the government and the people. Although government has forced reconciliation for some of the conflicts, controversy over several of the ongoing projects remains unresolved.

Projecting Arunachal as power house of the country

Decades of isolation has made Arunachal Pradesh one of the least developed states in the country with fragile infrastructure system and poor resource base. This has made state heavily dependent on central government for resources. The region's isolation mainly owes to colonial rule that consolidated and accentuated separateness from rest of the country. To bridge the divide, the government is currently charting a course for 'development' with over hundreds dams planned for Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal fell under the eyes of policy maker due to its rich water resources endowed with highest hydropower potential in the country. The centre has identified Arunachal Pradesh as the powerhouse of the country. According to an estimate of the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) and private power developers, Arunachal has the potential to generate over 57,000 MW of hydro power. The government plans to exploit this large perennial water system to produce cheap, plentiful power for the nation, which will bring economic benefits and employment generation.

Conflicts over large dams

The conflicts arising out of large dams in Arunachal are largely on cultural ground. The state is home to 26 major tribal groups who are closely attached to the land, rivers and forests as their customs, faith and traditions are strongly tied to these natural ecosystem. People opposed to dams feels that construction of the dam will herald the end of their culture and tradition and threaten their very identity. They also fear losing their political rights - rights over their land and natural resources - because the legal mechanism to prevent the inflow of migrants into the region will fail¹.

Arunachal Pradesh has the least population density in the country, with just over 13 lacs of people living in the vast area of over 80,000 kilometers square. Proponents of large dams in Arunachal see these projects as 'economically viable' as it has little direct 'displacement' and negligible 'rehabilitation and resettlement' issues². Such estimates are grossly underestimated. For example, the Dibang river basin is home to small indigenous Idu Mishmi community whose population according to the 2001 census is 9350³. One single dam, the 3000MW Dibang Multipurpose project proposed in Dibang river requires an estimated workforce of about 5800. Local affected groups has claimed that cumulatively for 17 large dams proposed in Dibang river basin will bring in population workforce of

more than one lakh⁴. Similarly, the 1250MW Hutong II hydroelectric project proposed in Lohit river basin in Anjaw district is likely to submerge the habitation of half of the population of Anjaw district⁵. Collectively 11 dams are proposed in Lohit river basin in Lohit and Anjaw district. Therefore, direct and indirect displacement is high if looked at in the perspective of local population. As a result, there have been protests against large dams in Lohit river basin, where affected people had staged road blockade to demand scrapping of controversial dams⁶. Also Dibang project have faced more than 6 years of public opposition and public hearing for the project cancelled 14 times.

Resettling displaced people to other locations might also be a difficult task. In Arunachal, lands are traditionally demarcated between different tribes and clans. So, attempt to resettle displaced people to areas that belong to other tribes or clans can lead to conflicts. The Chakma and Hajong tribes resettled in Arunachal Pradesh as a result of Kaptai dam had led to serious conflicts with the local tribal groups. This dam built in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the 1960s had submerged the traditional homelands of the Chakma and Hajong tribes, and forced them to migrate into parts of Northeast India.

Arunachal is predominantly mountainous characterized by rugged and undulating terrain, so there isn't much land available for permanent cultivation and habitation. The cultivable land is found mainly in lowland areas near the rivers where settlement is high. For example, the Adi people practice their wet rice cultivation mostly in areas near the Siang river. So if these lands are submerged then it is a significant threat to their land and livelihood⁷. Therefore, protest sparked off over 2700MW Lower Siang project since the first public hearing notice was issued on April 28 2010. Several affected villagers protesting against the dam on May 25, 2010 were injured after police resorted to baton charges. Even female members of the community were severely beaten up⁸.

Protests against dams have also intensified in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. On December 24, 2012 hundreds of people, mostly monks and villagers led by the Save Mon Region Federation (SMRF), took out a rally in protest against the construction of dams in the district⁹. The local Monpa tribe of the district fears that the dam construction will lead to distortion of the cultural dynamics of the area. The population of Tawang district is 49,950 as per 2011 census with an area of 2085 sq km lying close to Indo-China border. Due to its strategic importance, it is heavily militarized. More than a quarter of land in the district is occupied by Indian military forces. Another quarter is acquired by the civil administration that leaves very little land for common man's sustenance. The influx of labourers due to dam construction will further put pressure on resources¹⁰. Each dam building requires more than 2000 to 3000 workers with fifteen dams planned in Tawang. These outside labourers will completely overwhelm the local indigenous population, which will have a serious health, cultural and social impacts.

Undermining environmental concerns

Arunachal Pradesh is the richest biogeographical state of the entire Indian Himalayan zone. It is considered one of the 12 mega diversity hotspots in the World. Many aspects of dam building, like the submergence of forests, river diversions, blasting, digging, excavation, debris dumping and other construction-related activities, are likely to have serious impacts on the ecology of the state. However, in the rush for money and power, the regulators have sidestepped all the environmental concerns. The key document that aids in decision-making during environmental clearance process for large dams is the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Serious flaws have been pointed out in the EIAs for large dams in Arunachal. In the case of Dibang project, local activists have pointed out that EIA does not mention the impact on river islands in the downstream which is home to several endangered bird species¹¹. Also the EIA report states that "no major wildlife is observed¹²." Pointing out flaws in EIA for other projects in Arunachal, Dr Anwaruddin Choudury, a

renowned naturalist have said that for Kameng, Lower Subansiri, Middle Siang and Dibang projects, the EIA is very poor on wildlife aspects¹³.

Despite the poor studies, large power projects are being cleared by Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) of Ministry of Environment and Forests. According to a February 2013 study by the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP), EAC has zero rejection in six years from April 2007 to December 2012¹⁴. Over 35000 MW of hydropower projects have come to EAC from Arunachal Pradesh alone, by far the highest in the country for any state. All these projects have been accorded first stage clearance raising alarm among the stakeholders. These projects were cleared on a case-by-case basis, without fully understanding the possible cumulative environmental fallout of such a large build-up.

The state response

Virtually every large hydropower projects in Arunachal are treated fait accompli. For example, the Arunachal Pradesh government received an advance payment of Rs. 225 crores from the NHPC Ltd (project executioner) for the Dibang Project on 25 June, 2007. This move came before the public consultation process had begun. The Dibang dam was yet to receive environment, forest and techno-economic clearances by then. Therefore, these clearance processes became merely cosmetic exercises.

In another show of constitutional disrespect, the government of India subverted its own environmental norms. The Prime Minister of India laid the foundation stone on 30 January, 2008 for the Dibang project at Itanagar, state capital of Arunachal Pradesh which is about 500km away from actual project site. The foundation was laid the day after the first public hearing for Dibang Multipurpose Project was completed. These gestures of the government were a clear expression of disrespect for people's concerns giving way for doubts.

Also there have been a spate of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with public sector companies and several private players by the state government. The state sees its rivers and the hydropower potential as the proverbial goose that will lay the golden eggs. It expects to earn abundant hydro-dollars, similar to Arab countries which are awash with petro-dollars¹⁵. So in this rush for hydro dollars, Arunachal Pradesh Government has signed upto 233MoUs with hydro power developers to generate more than 63,000 MW of power. These MoUs are accompanied by upfront money, which the power developers pay to the state government. The total amount received as upfront money starting from the year 2005-06 to present is whopping Rs 144281.53 lakhs¹⁶. This upfront payment treats the project as fait accompli.

The rush to sign MoUs with power developers has continued even while protests were growing against large dams. People of Siang basin have accused the government to have kept them in dark while the state government continued signing MoUs and MoAs with power developers in the Siang valley¹⁷. It is evident that while formulating the policy to build large dams in Arunachal Pradesh, there was a clear absence of public participation and prior consent. Affected villagers of Dibang project have also alleged similar attitude of government of keeping them in dark about the dam at initial stages of planning¹⁸.

In recent years, the Arunachal Pradesh government has also started to mobilize paramilitary forces in the state. It planned to deploy 20,000 police personnel for the inter-state (Trans-Arunachal) highway, and 25,000 police personnel for the various hydropower projects being built in different parts of the state¹⁹. To contain the growth of protests growing against the dams in Arunachal, several anti-dam movements and activists were also branded as 'Maoists' by the state governments²⁰. Such repressive

measures have forced reconciliation for some of the conflicts such as for Dibang project where the local community has given up their resistance movement²¹. The government of Arunachal Pradesh has continued to overlook people's concern and it only appears determined to go ahead with the constructions of dams.

Challenges and way forward

While some grass-root opposition to dams might have resolved its conflict with the government, the controversies over large dams in Arunachal still remain unresolved. The key driver for building of these dams is the demand for electricity. The Planning Commission of India estimates that for Indian economy to grow at 9 per cent, it is imperative for the power sector to grow at 8.1 per cent per annum²². The urgency of dam building in Arunachal can also be explained in Indian government's claim to establish first user rights as a reaction to China's plans to build dams upstream. The policy makers driven by these 'larger' interests have failed to consider the grass-root concerns on dams. Moreover, the hydropower projects in Arunachal are being pushed as developmental intervention meant for improving the life of the people. Therefore, it is almost a difficult task to shape a common paradigm that takes into account the divergent views of those dam proponents and those opposed to it.

Under such constraints, the issue over large dams is likely to widen the conflict between government and the people if appropriate interventions are not made. The tribal people certainly want development and economic progress, but not at the cost of their culture and identity. Therefore, apprehensions by the people should be engaged with an open mind and their concerns legitimately addressed. This can be addressed by ensuring transparency and accountability in all decision-making and governance processes. Also government must respect the indigenous people's right over free, prior and informed consent over projects that may affect their lands, resources, livelihoods, and communities. Exercising sensibility over policy decisions in the state should be an imperative and such policy choices need to be explored and discussed with all stakeholders in order to create a middle path. Besides, suppressive actions might reconcile surface conflicts but can never address the root of the problem.

Endnotes/reference

- ¹ Interim Report of the Independent People's Tribunal on Dams in Arunachal Pradesh. 3 February 2008.
<http://www.iptindia.org>
- ² Damming Northeast India. <http://www.kalpavriksh.org>
- ³ http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_arunachal.pdf
- ⁴ <http://www.idfc.com/pdf/report/2011/Chp-25-Dams-and-environmental-governance-in-Northeast-Ind.pdf>
- ⁵ <http://www.echoofarunachal.com/?p=19103>
- ⁶ <http://www.arunachaltimes.in/wordpress/2012/06/06/villagers-block-road-demanding-scrapping-of-kalai-ii-dam/>
- ⁷ <http://www.echoofarunachal.com/?p=4027>
- ⁸ <http://www.arunachaltimes.in/archives/may%2027.html>
- ⁹ http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-26/india/36007268_1_tawang-monastery-lobsang-gyatso-power-projects
- ¹⁰ <http://tntmagazine.in/features/tawang-braces-a-different-battle/>
- ¹¹ <http://arunachalblog.blogspot.in/2009/07/letter-from-aimsu-icls-on-dibang.html>
- ¹² http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main38.asp?filename=cr120408rumble_jungle.asp
- ¹³ <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/Dam.pdf>
- ¹⁴ http://sandrp.in/env_governance/TOR_and_EC_Clearance_status_all_India_Overview_Feb2013.pdf
- ¹⁵ <http://www.arunachalhydro.in/pdf/State%20Mega%20Hydro.pdf>
- ¹⁶ <http://www.arunachaltimes.in/wordpress/2013/09/01/question-mark-over-use-of-rs-144281-53-lakh-upfront-money/>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.echoofarunachal.com/?p=4027>
- ¹⁸ Downstream people raise their concern, Roing Times, July 9, 2007
- ¹⁹ <http://www.roingcorrespondent.in/militarization-of-arunachal-to-begin/>
- ²⁰ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/Guwahati/Arunachal-tribe-branded-Maoists-to-check-anti-dam-protests/Article1-755336.aspx>
- ²¹ <http://www.themishmis.com/index.php/resources/paper/80-damming-dibang-river-idu-mishmi-s-resistance-against-3000-mw-dibang-multipurpose-project.html>
- ²² <http://www.pwc.in/assets/pdfs/publications-2011/wec-pwc-report.pdf>