

NE voice muffled to clear Dibang path

ROOPAK GOSWAMI

Guwahati, Oct. 20: The lone dissenting voice from the Northeast in the forest advisory committee was overruled to clear the 3,000MW Dibang multipurpose hydel project in Arunachal Pradesh, the largest in the making in the country.

Sources said committee member Firoz Ahmed from Assam had resisted the clearance of the project but other members had not agreed to his views. The report did not mention who gave the dissenting note but sources confirmed that it was Ahmed.

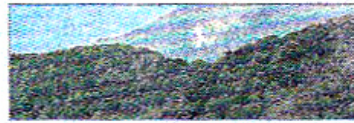
When contacted, Ahmed refused to comment.

Though the meeting was held on September 22 and 23, the committee made the report public today. Of the seven-member committee, three are non-official members.

"Large/mega dams across the globe are known to have considerable upstream and downstream impacts, both ecological and social. These critical ecological issues are equally valid even after a height reduction (ranging from 10 metres to 40 metres) in the case of Dibang hydroelec-

FACTFILE

- 3000MW Dibang Multipurpose Hydro-electric Project taken over by NHPC in December 2002 from Brahmaputra Board
- **Original project:** Diversion of 5056.5 hectares of forest land
- **Number of trees to be felled:** 30962400
- **Number of families to be rehabilitated:** 115



Dibang valley forest.
Telegraph picture

- **Cost:** Rs 14530.48 crore (November 2005 price level)
- Foundation stone of the project was laid by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008 before it got environment clearance

tric project. Therefore, though the user agency and the ministry of power has objectively tried to justify the 10-metre reduction in dam height as optimum from forest cover loss and socio-economic angle through sensitivity analysis, it does not fully address the ecological concerns, particularly in view of the rich biodiversity of the area," the note said.

Reacting to the clearance of the project, noted wildlife conservationist Bittu Sahgal told **The Telegraph** that such a move is akin to indulging in organ trade. Ignoring members' advice displays

governance at its worst, he said.

Sources said the project was cleared after pressure from the Prime Minister's Office and Union ministry of power.

The forest advisory committee had turned down the project once last year and this year. The project's estimated cost is Rs 15,000 crore.

A total of 4,577.84 hectares of forest land will have to be cleared in favour of the project on the Dibang river in Lower Dibang district. The project was cleared after a 10-metre reduction in dam height was agreed upon, at which forest

land requirement per mega watt is minimum and so is the tariff. The power ministry had asked NHPC to carry out a sensitivity analysis on the overall impact if the dam height was reduced by 40 metres. The corporation said the project would turn unviable if the height was reduced by 40 metres.

The original height of the dam was 288 metres. A total of 3.24 lakh trees will have to be felled for the project. Major Schedule-I species, like elephants, hoolock gibbons, tigers and leopards, are found in the area.

The site inspection report of the regional office of the ministry of environment and forests said as the proposed diversion site has a steep slope with patches of *jhum*-cultivated area, removal of trees will affect the micro-climate of the area and endemic wildlife and flora.

The other members said it is necessary to appraise the project on the basis of some objective parameters. The per mega watt requirement of forest land for hydroelectric projects and per unit power tariff are important objective parameters from ecological and socio-economic angles.