

Aspects of Lower Subansiri Project

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The throb of the Subansiri valley will stop on the day when practically no water will be released by NHPC except in the peak period of the evening, and for all the winter months to come, the river, which is entwined in the lives of the people, which gives them sustenance, their rich culture and lifestyle, will die on that day for ever, along with the dolphins, fish and ecology of the river. This certainly is one of the most disturbing and important aspects of the Lower Subansiri Hydro-electric Project (LSHP) in the present form. It means that for sustenance of the river and its ecology, at least 450 cubic metre per sec or so of water, as per experts, will have to be released, all through, especially in the winter months as an inviolable commitment by NHPC. There certainly can be no compromise on this issue. Yes, release of 450 cubic metre per sec of water or so, especially in the winter period, will lower the power generation projection of 2,000 MW, but here "greed of megawatts" must take a backseat. This must be a non-negotiable issue — whether NHPC uses the diversion tunnel, if possible, or digs a separate tunnel or enforces any other mechanism to ensure this automatic minimum flow, it just has to be done.

It is clear that the Central government wants electrical power from Arunachal Pradesh at any cost, closing their eyes on environmental im-

pact, downstream impact on people or safety of the dam itself. They are merely calculating the volume of water in Arunachal, height of drop and megawatts! The mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) based on which basically the Ministry of Environment and Forest gives clearance to any hydel project was a mere sham. The decision to build the dam was already taken; the various mandatory clearances were mere formalities. Otherwise how can there be such a shoddy Environmental Impact Assessment of LSHP with absurdities and glaring anomalies as pointed out by a reputed naturalist like Dr Anwaruddin Choudhury and others?

In the process, the Centre has treated Assam and its people as dirt, as a nonexistent entity. Otherwise how can they ignore the 1950 earthquake of 8.5 in the Richter Scale, when a whole hill fell on the river and blocked it, creating a reservoir which finally broke, sweeping away villages in the downstream. Even assuming that the dam structure is safe, if another earthquake of 7, 8 or more in magnitude in the Richter Scale occurs, which is a distinct possibility, and massive landslides or a whole hill collapses on the reservoir when filled to the brim, in a tea cup effect, as it is termed, water will then spill over the dam causing immense destruction on its way downstream. Experts can vouch for

the structural safety of the dam only — but certainly not against massive landslides as had occurred in 1950 when whole hills collapsed. Catastrophes occur all over the world and we have no control over nature's fury, but we cannot play with people's lives knowingly — knowing something which has already happened and yet pretend not to see it.

How can they ignore the facts about global warming — that there will be more rainfall in the NE region in a shorter period of time, a fact that has a bearing on all hydrological calculations for the dam and the reservoir, and if 'cloudburst' strikes at the wrong time when the reservoir is full, there is no cushion for it in the reservoir to prevent a spill of water over the dam?

People are now in the streets in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur protesting against the dam and all big dams in Arunachal, because their safety and interests have been totally ignored till now while planning and constructing the LSHP.

For all the vitriol which Akhil Gogoi has spewed, he, however, has brought to limelight these vital issues concerning the downstream people with a single-minded devotion — issues that cannot now be swept under the carpet any more. People have taken to the streets peacefully along with many other organizations including AASU, fearful of their safety and to save the ecology of the valley from destruction. They are in the streets

because Delhi does not seem to understand 'memorandums'!

This is the time for the Assam government with a popular mandate, to act and act decisively. We do not need big dams in Arunachal. But what has already been constructed over a few years in the Lower Subansiri project may be modified keeping the safety of the dam, ecology of the river and security of the downstream people as the guiding criterion. Recommendation of the Expert Committee comprising GU, DU & IIT-Guwahati must be given due cognizance in arriving at a modified version of the dam.

For the modified dam, to come up

- The safety of the dam structure, as needed, must be undertaken

- Minimum water for sustenance of the river, i.e. 450 cubic metre per sec or so must be released year round as an inviolable commitment by NHPC and to be monitored by an independent Agency of the Assam government

- Highest reservoir level lowered suitably along with sluice gates to give sufficient cushion to 'cloudbursts' and increased hydrological flow due to global warming, water surge due to massive landslides because of earthquakes and other imponderables.

- Suitable flood release measures for downstream undertaken.

For this, the Central government will have to

scale down its "greed of megawatts". In the process, the power generation may come down from 2,000 MW to maybe 1,500 MW — maybe less or more, whatever experts figure out, but that must be the non-negotiable criterion the Government of Assam must insist. In today's scenario, our people will be holding a very, very huge reservoir on their heads literally and will live in constant fear of a disaster to occur; their lifestyle entwined with the river to be destroyed for ever, their fields turned into fallow lands — the ecology destroyed, yet in return we are being offered a mere 200 MW or so of power! Because of the immense downstream impact on people and ecology, part of the Lower Subansiri dam as well as submergence area being in Assam, and in a general way because of the fact that any dam constructed in Arunachal will not only destroy its unique global biodiversity hotspot status but will also bring in immense ecological disaster in Assam, the ecology of Arunachal and Assam being entwined inseparably, the Government of Assam must insist on an equitable and just sharing of the cursed (?) bounty from projects in Arunachal in general and equal share in the LSHP. Also, the planning of all hydel projects in Arunachal must take place in an integrated manner with Assam as an equal partner under a statutory body to avoid any situation like LSHP which is detrimental to all concerned.