

Lower Subansiri Hydel Project

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 with 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 important aspects of the Lower Subansiri Dam project. It means that for sustenance of the river and its ecology at least 350 cu³m of water, as per the experts, will have to be released, all through, specially in the winter months as an inviolable commitment by NHPC. There certainly can be no compromise on this issue. The release of 350 cu³m per sec of water or so all through the year, will lower the power generation projection of 2000 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 at any cost, - closing their eyes to environmental impact, 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 natural history experts like Dr Anwaruddin Choudhury and others?

In the process, the Centre has treated Assam and its people as dirt, - as an 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

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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 magnitude 7, 8 or more 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 occurred in 1950 when whole hills collapsed. Catastrophies 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 shorter period of time, - a fact, that has a bearing on, all hydrolog-

ical 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 Lakhimpur and Dhemaji 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, needs to be congratulated for bringing out these vital issues concerning the downstream people to the forefront with a single minded devotion - issues that cannot be swept under the carpet any more. People have taken to the streets peacefully along with many other organisations 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 understand 'memorandums'!

This is the time for the Assam Government with a popu-

lar mandate, to act and act decisively. We need the dam, we need power, but the recommendations of the Expert Committee as constituted from GU, DU and IIT Guwahati must be given due cognizance and effect.

For the dam, left part of which falls in Assam, to come up the safety of the dam structure, as needed, must be undertaken. Minimum water for sustenance of the river i.e 350 cu³m per sec or so must be released, the year round as an inviolable commitment by NHPC. The 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.

For this, Central Government will have to scale down its 'greed of megawatts'. In the process, the power generation may come down from 2000 MW to may be, 1500 MW, may be less or more, whatever experts figure out, but that must be the nonnegotiable criterion the Government of Assam must insist. In today's scenario, our people will be holding a very huge reservoir on their

heads literally, - 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 mwatts of power! Because of the immense downstream impact on people and ecology, - part of the Lower Subansiri Dam as well as submerged 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, big dams being anathema in Arunachal, with Assam as an equal partner under a statutory body to avoid any situation like LSHP which is detrimental to all concerned.