

Dams and Environmental Movements: The Cases from India's North East

Jhimli Bhattacharjee

Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar

Movements against dams not only counts high among all environmental movements in India but also in the world. India's North East with its increased emphasis on construction of dams has also triggered number of protests in the region. This makes it necessary to delve into the issue of movements against dams in North East India.

When the director of Centre for Science and Environment, Sunita Narain maintained that the strongest environmental protests in India have centred around dams and displacement, a close look at the North East reiterates the fact. The harnessing of hydropower has however led to a lot of resistance from the people of the region. The strongest protests in the region are mainly against the dams that are to be constructed on the river Barak and Brahmaputra. Besides dams on Loktak and Tipaimukh in Manipur and on the Gomti river in Tripura have also invited strong resistance from the people.

The major objectives of this paper lie to understand the nature of movements against the construction of dams. It tries to explore the causes of movements against dams in the region in particular and in India and the world in general. Moreover, since the region is the abode of a number of ethnic groups with their distinct set of culture and values, the paper also keeps a scope to inquire if the region has a 'special variety of environmentalism' in so far as the movements against dams is concerned.

The data used for the purpose are of both primary and secondary types. Though primary data are used in certain cases, which are mainly the result of unstructured interview with certain activists, most of the data are of secondary nature and includes newspaper reports, information provided in websites and some published as well as unpublished research works.

A brief survey of literature on environmental movements in North East

Study of environmental movements in North East India appears interesting for its very geopolitical location and ethnic composition. A good number of social scientists have discussed about the close proximity of the people of the region and nature (B.K. Roy Barman. The region remained outside the colonial regime for a longer period of time and the state centric resource intensive path of development is the late arrival in the region. Another set of scholars have discussed about the disruption of harmonious relationship between 'human' and environment. There are also studies which try to find out the causes of environmental problems and seek sociological explanation to these problems. But there are very few studies on people's response to such problems. A.C. Sinha (1993) considered the British penetration into the region has led to the disruption of the man-nature relationship, but he did not find any noticeable awareness and grass root movement in the region to safeguard their interests in forest in particular and environment in general. He blamed the newly emerged tribal elite in the name of contractor-politician who are instrumental to subvert the local interests for their own vested interests to supply timber to the industry away from their states. In contrast to Sinha, Dutta (2003) and Hussain (2008) in a similar vein to Shiva and Bandyopadhyaya (1998) develops a critique of state as development giver and people as development receiver. Dutta while discussing about the causes of movement against Pagladia dam considers the incommensurability of languages and perception of development between potential displaces and implementing agency of the project. While giving similar kind view Monirul Hussain (Hussain : 2008) put emphasis on the organizational aspect of the movement. He considers the support of the movement by All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) gave it an added advantage. Political structure and arrangements are decentralized and autonomous compared to the non-tribal areas of Assam. Hence it is difficult for the central as well

as the state government to impose their dictate at will. For Hussain, these political factors also helped the movement to successfully resist the implementation of the PDP. The focus on differential political arrangement in the region and the role of political factor adds a new dimension to understand the environmentalism of this region. It not only reflects the political factor but also the nature and kind of activism prevailing in the region. North East India being an ethnically sensitive region comprises of people belonging to different ethnic communities who are not only conscious of their ethnic identity but also active in different fronts to preserve their identity which led to a different variety of politics and activism in the region. Hence environmentalism may get a ready platform to channelise its ideology from these platforms.

Hydropower generation: A brief look

Generating hydropower in North East India goes at par with the all India scenario. North East is regarded to have the potential to be India's largest Power House. The preliminary ranking study on the nation wide potential of hydroelectric schemes in October 2001 conducted by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), gives Brahmaputra the highest potentiality mark. The ranking study considered 168 schemes which have an installed capacity of 63,328 MW and 149 of these were given A and B ranks, indicating high viability (Menon et.al : 2003) . In addition to these over 900 mini and micro hydel projects have been identified to meet the local needs of the North East while the major portion of the power generated from the large dams will be evacuated to other parts of the country.

The paper here does not highlight the resistance of people on each and every projects. Few major projects which have generated much hue and cry have been considered for analysis out of which lower Subansiri, Tipaimukh and Pagladia counts along with some dams of minor range. The strongest protest centres around dams that to be constructed on rivers Barak and Brahmaputra. Besides mention can also be made of dams on Loktak lake in Manipur and on Gumti river in Tripura.

As mentioned earlier that Brahmaputra alone has the potentiality and because of it, a number of dams have been constructed on the different tributaries of Brahmaputra. Of its seven states, Arunachal could singly produce most of the megawatts required to fulfill the country's national policy to generate 50,000 MW by 2012 to provide cheap electricity for the needs of the teeming millions and the growing economy (Chhakchhuak : 2006). The major projects i.e., mega projects include Subansiri multipurpose dam project the proposal of which include three dams namely 1) Upstream of Daporjio near Menga village on Subansiri river 2) On Kamala river upstream of Tamen 3) Gerukamukh at the original site of Subansiri river. The second the Siang Multipurpose Dam Project presently modified into three alternative dams at 1)Upstream of Yingkiong near Pugging village on the river Siang 2) at 15 km. upstream of Kaying on the river Siyom near Raying village.3) Upstream of Pasighat near Routung village.

The mega projects including the Lower Subansiri (2000) and three projects in the Siang basin have already been handed over to the NHPC for preparation of detailed project reports (DPR). The public hearings have already been held for four projects – the lower Subansiri, the Siang middle project, the Ranganadi Hydro Project State II (RHEP-II) and the Dikrong, now called Pare Hydro Project.

Besides this, Tipaimukh power project is yet another project that generated enough hue and cry not only at national level but also at international level. The project to be located in Tipaimukh, at the confluence of Tuivai and Barak rivers adjoining Bangladesh, the project was to harness 1500 megawatt energy at an estimated cost of Rs. 6800 Crores at the recent price level (Dainik Yugasankha: 2006). The proposed 162,8 m. high rock filled dam aims basically at production of 1, 500 megawatt of hydroelectricity, irrigation of the agricultural fields and prevention of flood in Barak valley of southern Assam and the development of ecotourism, to be implemented by NEEPCO.

Another project that equally needs mention is the Pagladia dam project. It was originally conceived in 1968-67 as a minor flood detection project at an estimated cost of Rs.12.60 crores. In 1984-85, the project was taken over by the Brahmaputra Board.

Later, the irrigation aspect was added to the project costing 287.86 crores at 1988-89 price level. The project gradually took the form of multipurpose project with the goal of irrigation, flood detection and generation of electricity. The major target was protection of 40,000 hectares of land in Nalbari district, irrigation of 54,160 hectares of land spread over 145 villages of the district and to generate 3 megawatt electricity. A detailed report of the project in compliance with the observations of the technical advisory committee report of the Ministry of Water Resources was submitted in November 1992. This paved the way for the techno economic clearance of the multi purpose project. In 1995, the project received clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests and after updating the cost estimate of the project to 540.99 crores at 1999 price level, the Public Investment Board of the Government of India accorded its approval at the cost of 526.62 crores in March 2000.

Why protests?

North East India interestingly registers its strongest environmental movement centring the construction of dams. Though the projects are at different stages of development, some commonalities are observed in all cases. A clear observation is the social, economic, cultural and environmental impact of these dams on the affected people living in downstream areas. In most of the cases the experiences of the people with the project seems to create a crisis of confidence in the government particularly its department of environment and forests. The activists allege that the project clearance in the stages of site selection, making Preliminary Feasibility Report (PFR), Detailed Project Report (DPR), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), public hearings into stage managed affairs where people's voices were not allowed to emerge, ignored or cleverly manipulated to suit the project.

While taking lower Subansiri project under consideration, it is found that the 116 m. high dam would submerge 3,436 ha. of forests. The total requirement of forest land for the project is in Arunachal Pradesh and 856.3 ha. In Assam survey and investigation works have been completed and the Detailed Project Report (DPR) is presently undergoing the techno-economic clearance required from the MoEF.

The submergence area of the lower Subansiri dam will extend over 70 km. upstream along some of its tributaries such as the Kamala and the Sil. Since the submergence area is a gorge with steep slopes and rugged topography, relatively few villages will be directly displaced. According to the project authorities the dam will submerge the agricultural lands of two villages, Gengi and Siberite. The families to be affected belong to the Gallong tribe, a subgroup of the Adis. These are agricultural communities practicing jhum cultivation, terrace rice cultivation and wet rice cultivation near the river bed. Besides they also depend on forest for their livelihood. So, all these resources will no longer be available once they are displaced. According to the EIA report prepared by WAPCOS, New Delhi, for NHPC, the project affected people (PAP) will be offered housing and homestead land, cultivable land (one hectare), civic amenities, schools and vocational training in animal husbandry, horticulture, weaving and other activities. It has been seen that the Resettlement and Rehabilitation plan spelt out for the PAFs 38 hectares of cultivable land (one hectare for each family) and 200 sq. km. of homestead land for each family will be given as compensation for a total 960.11 hectares of land.

A major reaction and opposition from peoples' organization and environmental experts in the region came up because of the projects' failure to adhere to the legal processes created to safeguard public interest. Neeraj Vogolikar, an environmental activist and closely associated with the problems of environment in the North East maintained that MoEF has ignored the plea of the several organizations to the ministry for looking at the serious problems in the clearance process of the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project and granting the clearance for the projects.

Like Subansiri, Tipaimukh hydroelectric project also has been the bone of contention between the government and the affected people. The project is anticipated to submerge 275.50 sq. km of land surface in the state and to affect 191 sq.km (*Dainik*

Yugasankha : December 13, 2006) .¹ The dam is also anticipated to doom all the potentialities of the Barak catchment area. The project will submerge the national highway no. 53, the only alternative to Imphal Dimapur lifeline (NH No.39). Hence new alignment of the submergible points on the road will add a distance of another 60 kms to the existing Imphal-Jiribam-Silchar road. Though Manipur and Mizoram have been promised 12 percent of the output as royalty, the critics have long been warning that the dangers far outnumber the potential benefits. For instance, the Naga leaders claimed that the dam would submerge the socially and economically important places. The site chosen for the dam on the Tuivai river was also prone to intense seismic activity. The dam will also submerge various historical and legendary sites and sacred groves with vital spiritual and cultural significance to the communities and lead to destruction of rich biodiversity which is threatening the peoples' right to life and livelihood. Like other development projects in the north east, here too, the people that are most adversely affected are tribes: the Zeliangrong a constituent of three Naga tribes and the Hmar will be the direct victims of the project.

The dam also encountered opposition from the very day of the proposal for its adverse impact on 'Man and Environment.' The affected people had demanded that the project should not be taken ahead till the public scrutiny of the project is not accomplished. There is also demand that the project should follow the WCD guideline as it is going to affect the neighbouring countries. Thus this project also shows a 'crisis of confidence' on government by the affected people. Environmental groups alleged that the NEEPCO authorities have been ignoring the demand of the people to supply them with details of the environment study report despite the statutory provisions for supply of such reports to the people. They also alleged that the authorities concerned have paid no attention to the demand for holding public hearings in Manipur and Assam, which will also be affected by the project. Also, compliance with the international norms for consulting the riparian countries in case the river in question is an international one is also ignored by the authorities concerned in this case.

The crisis of confidence thus emerges centring different issues relating to social, cultural, economic and environmental impact assessment by the government on project affected people. If in one side there is a fear of loosing the homestead, on the other side it is the fear of loosing the cultural heritage. Along with these, the knowledge of the people about the fate of affected people of dams like Gumti, Koptai etc. also have created further crisis in affected people's mind.

The instance of Pagladia dam project highlights the problem in further detail. The project also registers major hue and cry from the affected people of the dam built on the river Pagladia. According to the project plan, a 23 kilometers long and 26 meters high dam will be constructed along with a reservoir to retain 446 million cubic meters of water. The main canal would be 66.2kms long and a branch canal of 39.5 kilometers making it 105.7 kilometers in total.

Altogether, 38 villages would be submerged under the proposed project. In January 2003, the government issued notification for the acquisition of land from the villagers. Mention may be made that all the villages expected to be submerged fall under the proposed Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) area. While the Brahmaputra Board, the implementing agency of the dam project claimed that only 20 percent of the potential displacees belonged to the Scheduled Tribes, according to the affected people the figure is around 90 percent. According to its estimation the Board has drawn up a Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) package at the cost of Rs .47.89 crores, aiming to rehabilitate 18 ,473 people and 3, 271 families. However, in the opinion of the affected people, the government figure was extremely low and the actual figure comes to around 50,000 people belonging to 5,000 families. Moreover the figure did not include the number of potential displacees of the five villages newly added to the original 33 affected villages pointed out by the dam resistance committee that had launched a long struggle against the construction of the dam and the Brahmaputra Board.

While the government claimed that it would compensate all the affected people of the dam project, by providing handsome R and R package, the people were not convinced. The villagers had their own view of the fate of the dam displacees based on their

assessment of the affected people of similar projects as has been mentioned in an article published in the souvenir of the PDPKASS. The people of the projects who have not been given rehabilitation and some of the projects which have not been completed are mentioned in the article as affected people of Borlia river, Suklai, Champanadi, military base at Satgaon in Guwahati, Jagiroad paper mill, capital complex at Dispur, NEEPCO Duliajan Project at Kathalguri, Dinjan Military Base and Numaligarh Refinery project (K.N. Bodo : 2000). The people were also aware of the fate of other projects, such as, Bhakranangal projects learnt from the interaction they had with the dam activists. Hence people felt that both the state government and Union Ministry of Water Resources have simply been fooling the people of Nalbari who were going to be affected by the project. Besides more than 40, 000 people were expected to be affected by the project, the government proposed to acquire another 34, 000 acres of land, which is very fertile. Though the project was going to affect different communities such as Rabha, Rajbanshi, Nepalese, Bengalis, Santhals etc, the Bodos were demographically the largest groups to be affected in the area, most of whom were peasants. Hence acquisition of land from them was thus the acquisition of livelihood of these victims. In addition to this, the proposed project would submerge four high schools and forty primary schools, several primary health centres, temples, *Namghars* and other places of worship.

While the rehabilitation of the social and cultural assets of these victims would be practically impossible to achieve, the economic rehabilitation was yet another hidden difficulty observed by the villagers. Though the Brahmaputra Board has prepared a separate R and R package for the displacees, only 47.89 crores had been allocated for the same. Moreover the potential displacees have lost faith in the state government and the claim of the Brahmaputra Board. Moreover the land selected by the government of Assam for the rehabilitation of the displacees were already occupied by thousands of refugees from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh), the Nalbari district does not have sufficient land at its disposal to accommodate the displaced population. Thus the people are aware that the government would not be in a position to rehabilitate peasants with due grant of fertile land in the newly settled area. Hence they are to be settled in hill reserved forests which will not only lead to forest loss but also once again bring a threat to the livelihood of the people. Besides, the district being densely populated, it can not accommodate the entire gamut of population in the same area which would lead to ethnic dispersion and loss of traditional kinship and ethnic ties. The lack of absolute ownership over land by many of the inhabitants of the affected area has created another feeling of scarcity in the minds of the victims. They feared that like in many other cases of developmental projects, the people who did not possess proper land documents will not be able to avail the R and R measures. All these cumulative feelings of the villagers have led them to refuse and reject each step by the Brahmaputra board and the government of Assam to implement the plan to construct a dam on the Pagladia river.

The situation has been better analysed by the noted social scientist from the region as the situation of contestation between state as development giver and people as development receiver which is continuing for four decades with a periodic lull. The protest of the people against the dam thus clearly reflects the unease of the people who are affected by the project, shows the penetration of the state in the lifeworld of the people who are affected by the project creating a legitimacy crisis or a crisis of confidence. Dutta here even questions the inter linkage between development and democracy. He highlights the incommensurability of languages and perception of development between the potential displacees and Brahmaputra Board of Assam. For him, the affected people find the project as illegitimate and undemocratic, what he considers as marginalization of democratic right of the people.

The move

The construction of dams in the region have met with opposition from the very inceptions. Different organizations emerged at different periods of time to register their protests. The organizations that strongly opposed the lower Subansiri dam project are *Arunachal Citizens' Rights (ACR)*, *Dam Displaced People (DAP)*, *Probable Project Affected Peoples Committee (PPAP)*, *Downstream Peoples' Committee (DPC)*, *Proposed Project Land Affected Peoples' Forum*, *Yazali (PPLAPFY)*, *Subansiri Bachao Committee*, *Siang Valley Bachao Andolan* etc. Citing the example of the impact of Koptai dam in Bangladesh which has displaced

thousands of Chakma to this region the Chairman of the ACR says, “We don’t need to go anywhere to see this; we have an example right here. Rehabilitation, no matter how good the intention, is just not possible.”²

Twenty NGOs and voluntary organizations based in North East have come together under the banner of the North East Dialogue Forum to register a combined protest against the building of large dams in the region (The Assam Tribune : 2006).³ The office bearers maintained that apart from the displacement of huge sections of people and infringement of land ownership rights , the proposed dam will also have a negative impact on the downstream residents of Assam, effect on whom had not been studied in detail. K.K.Chandradhara, Secretary of the Peoples’ Movement for Subansiri-Brahmaputra Valley (PMSBV), who was also present during the media briefing insisted that this flouting of rules and norms has been brought to the notice of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests by the activists of PMSBV which has been at the forefront of the opposition to the project since its inception. The case for the construction of mini hydel projects in place of big dams to meet the power short fall in the country have also been stressed .

The Tipaimukh dam has encountered opposition from the very day of the proposal. There has been pronounced campaign against the project for its adverse impact on environment. A committee named Committee against Tipaimukh Dam, which constituted various people’s organizations was formed to create mass awareness on the negative impacts of big dams and mobilize public opinions for resisting the controversial Tipaimukh High Dam. But the Union Power Ministry has continued to pursue the construction of the dam despite the continued protest from the project affected people.⁴ Various representatives from the Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD), NWUM (Naga Women’s Union, Manipur), NPMHR (Naga People’s Movement for Human Right), UNC (United Naga Council), ANSAM (All Naga Student’s Association, Manipur)including the ZU (Zeliangrong Union), ZWU (Zeliangrong Women’s Union), ZSUM (Zeliangrong Students Union, Manipur), ZYF (Zeliangrong Youth Front) called on the Governor and the Chief Minister of Manipur to apprise them about the feelings and stand of the people regarding the construction of the Tipaimukh dam. In reply, the Governor said all have the constitutional rights to preserve their cultural identity. He said that he knows Barak waterfall and Zelliad lake are the cultural heritage of Manipur. Similarly, the Chief Minister O. Ibobi Singh while listening to the people’s concern shared that a project of such magnitude should very much have wide consultation with the people who are to be adversely affected by the dam. But all opinions and commitments could hardly bring any reflection in the activities as the Dam Action Committee was very often brought the fact of lack of accountability of the Manipur Government in the preparation of different reports on the fate of the dam and its impact on people.

Five Naga organizations of Manipur: UNC, NWUM, CATD, NPMHR, ANSAM in another move have petitioned the centre to shelve the Tipaimukh Dam, citing threats to the existence of 18 Zeliangrong Naga inhabited villages and several sites held sacred by the community. The organizations in a memorandum to Union Power Minister strongly stated that the dam was not conceived with the interests of the tribal people in mind. They also threatened the Manipur government that they would go in for more stringent action if the government failed to shelve the project.

The organizations also demanded that the Nagas should not be denied the right to information on environmental assessment and for participation in any development project that affect their livelihood and dignity. The dams can not be allowed to be constructed if it is inevitably going to destroy one section of society. Besides the *Citizens Concern for Dams and Development* (CCDD) have demanded that till informed public scrutiny of the project is not accomplished, the project should not be taken ahead. CCDD also demanded that the project should follow WCD guideline⁵.

² Ibid

³ 3, August, 2006, *The Assam Tribune*

⁴ SANDRP, 2003.

⁵ Dams, Rivers and People update, *SANDRP*, February, 2003

On January 4, 2005, altogether 17 organisations from the country and abroad have objected to the then Union Minister of state for Industries and Public enterprises Santosh Mohan Dev who convened a meeting of the Chief Secretaries of the three states of Manipur, Assam and Mizoram at New Delhi for discussions on the project. The indigenous people spearheaded the people's movement in these two states arguing that the proper documents relating to the assessment study were not supplied to the people by NEEPCO authorities.

The public meeting on the assessment report called by the Mizoram Pollution Control Board on December 2, 2004, had to be postponed following wide spread public protest. In a communiqué to the authorities concerning the dam, on January 9, CCDD said "any decision on the Tipaimukh power project should not be taken without the prior and informed consent of the people of Manipur. An independent accountable and participatory Environmental Impact Assessment must be undertaken involving full participation of people of Manipur." CCDD also maintained that there are no concrete plans for resettlement and rehabilitation of the people who will be displaced by the project. It also added that no environment management plan, risk management plan or cost benefit analysis have been conducted.

The opposition to the Pagladia dam began from a period between 1968 and 1971, when investigation was conducted by the state for the construction of a minor flood detention project. To combat the government's attempt to construct the dam the educated people of the effected area formed a committee called "Pagladia Dam Protection Committee". Late Sri Mukundaram Medhi was the founder president of the committee and late Bitty Barman was the Secretary.

Soon after its inception, the activists of the protection committee went to Shillong, the then capital of Assam and demanded the immediate closure of the project by the Assam Legislative Assembly. Due to the relentless opposition by the people, the Government had to close the project. But the AGP Government tried to re-open the file of Pagladia dam project and restart the project by investing Rs.500 crores in order to solve the problem of perennial flood in the region.

After this declaration the disappointed people of the effected area formed another committee called *Pagladia Bandh Prakolper Khatigrastha Alakar Sangram Somittee* [PD PKASS] to counter what they consider to be an onesided undemocratic decision. Adopting a non violent and democratic strategy, this committee opened a new chapter in the history of movement against Pagladia dam project.

In their attempt to secure closure of the project, copies of the memorandum were sent to various agencies: the District Commissioner of Nalbari, the Chairman of Bramhaputra Board, the Chief Executive Engineer, Local Legislatures, Minister of Dam Control, Government of Assam and to the Chief Minister of the state. In 1989, a memorandum was sent to the Prime Minister of India through the MLA of Kokrajhar, late Samar Brahmachoudhury.

The movement took momentum in 2000, on the eve of the observation of sixteenth biennial session of PDPSSS. With lots of encouragement and immense mass support, the two day long session was observed successfully. The mobilization was done by the leaders of the movement through their speeches inviting the people to join hands in the protest against the project. The project was also severely criticized by Sri Sansuma Khungdor Bosumatiari, Member of Parliament (MP) representing the 5th Kokrajhar constituency, as well as by the core members of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), All Assam Rabha Student's Union (AARSU) etc. in their speeches during the session. The project was also criticized by the former revenue minister of Assam, Sri Padma Bahadur Chauhan in his long speech at the session. All the speakers criticized the dam for its destructive effect on the people of the downstream area and thus demanded for withdrawal of the project. In his speech, the MP had advised the protesters to send a

delegation to Delhi. A twelve member committee was formed following the suggestion of Sri Bosumatiary and on March 9, 2000, the delegates left Guwahati for Delhi under the leadership of the president of the movement committee.

The twelve member delegation reached Delhi on March 12, 2003. The delegates consisting of the *Sangram Samittee* leaders and the ABSU members were hosted by Mr. S K Basumatiary at his official residence. Parliament was in session at that time. Despite, a meeting with Central Ministers and bureaucrats was arranged by the MP. The memorandum demanding the closure of the project was given to the MP, and then subsequently to Srimati Bijoya Chokroborty, Minister of State, Water Resource Development, Mr. Zed Hussain, Secretary, Water Resource Department, Dr. AK Kundra, Chairman Planning Department, Prime Minister Sri Atal Bihari Bajpai, Mr.L.K. Advani, Home Minister, and Sri K.R. Narayanan, President of India.

Communication was also established with the former Revenue Minister cum Congress I leader, Mr.Padma Bahadur Chauhan residing in Delhi. However, not much could be achieved from the twelve member's delegation to Delhi. A meeting was arranged by the Brahmaputra Board on construction of the dam in Tamulpur. But agitated masses rendered the meeting futile by making a demonstration to the Central Water Resource Minister Bijoya Chokroborty (Pratinidin 22, 2000). Another meeting was held on February 1, 2001, between Bramhaputra Board, *Sangram Samitee* and the administration at the office of DC of Nalbari which was also attended by the renowned people of Nalbari District, the *Gao Burhas* of the affected areas and the then MLA of Tamulpur, Sri-Drhagra, but again the attempt failed to produce any tangible result. Likewise the endeavor to discuss on the building of Pagladia dam by the former Health, Panchayat and Rural Development Minister of Assam Dr. Bhumidhar Barman invited by the Brahmaputra Board of Assam, also went in vain due to the protest by the agitated people. The Minister had promised that no injustice will be done to the people of the downstream. On July 28, 2001 six MLAs of ABSU/BDLP along with the circle officer, the BDO of Tamulpur and some important people of Tamulpur visited the affected area of Pagladia river. In a discussion with the people of the Tamulpur area, the MLA promised to put pressure on Government to stop the dam project.

The Sangram Samittee, along with ABSU central committee, BDLP and the MP of Kokrajhar had called for a Dharna near the main Secretariat, for closure of the Dam work. But the government stopped the bus carrying twenty five participants of Dharna and with the help of the police and detained the bus in Amin gaon. The day following the incident when the Brahmaputra Board authority came to take measurement of the land inhabited by the Dam affected families, the agitated people did not allow the Brahmaputra Board Authority even to measure the land. Thus the different steps of the Brahmaputra Board authority went in vain as every time there is a massive protest by the effected people of the Dam project.

The movement has got widespread support from different organizations. These organizations are: All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU), Central committee; M.P. Lok Sabha, Kokrajhar, Bodoland Demand Legislative Party (BDLP), All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS), All Bodo Sahitya Sabha (ABSS), Bebak Rabha Kraurang Ranchum (BRKR), All Assam Sarania Cachari Students' Union (AASKU). All Assam Rabha Students' Union (AARSU), All Assam Napali Students' Union. (AANSU), All Assam Students' Union (AASU), Baganpara Anchalik Committee , All Assam Students Union, Tamulpur Anchalik Committee. On October 29, 2001, the PBPkASS with the cooperation extended by ABSU and BDLP organized a dharna near the Last Gate of the state secretariat at Dispur. The program received widespread support from the people. On their way towards Dispur, the procession was stopped near Amingaon checkgate, a distance of 20 kms from the state complex. While the crowd showed firm determination to reach the destination, the police used their *lathicharge* and exploded tear gas to suppress the protest. A large number of people, including children and women were injured in the Melee and many of them had to be hospitalised. Yet this did not deter the protesters. A large number of people continued to gather in the capital and demonstrated against the PDP. The demonstration was represented mainly by the ABSU, MPs and MLAs belonging to the BDLP, ARSU, and All Bodo Employees Federation (ABEF).

Police high handedness on the people protesting against the state is not a rare phenomenon in the region. In another incident, a group of young people informed of the corruption by the Brahmaputraputra Board official involved in rehabilitation package, had to

face police firing when they tried to put up posters to oppose the said corruption. According to the protesters the board officials had exaggerated the cost of the model house for resettlement from Rs.30, 000 - 1, 24, 620. They pointed out that the houses proposed were so small that they are inadequate even to accommodate a small family.

On January 29, 2004, the movement took a major momentum when a large contingent of officials from Brahmaputra Board and district administration reached Thalkuchi, to conduct the land Survey and to assess the compensation package required for the displacees. The angry villagers registered their protest by blocking all the roads barring the entry of the officials into the villages in order to stop the survey work they intended to do. Around 40,000 people participated in such protest including a significantly large number of women, children and aged villagers. When the people were adamant in their protest and did not give ear to the threat issued by the officials, the police resorted to blank firing to frighten the people, but to no avail. The team had to go back without completing their assignment after 35 days of continuous trial and confrontation with the villagers.

This movement is not only one of the oldest movements against dam construction it is also an important symbol of people's resistance against the anti people model of Government and lack of concern for the need and inspirations of the masses. While the government is sanguine for its extraction of hydro-energy, the affected people are also mobilizing their strength by seeking to establish network with the anti dam activists such as Medha Patkar and other like minded groups at state, region and national levels. Mention has already been made of the existence of antidam lobby in the region including the activists of affected people of Tipaimukh dam, Subansiri dam and other high dams which are equally threat to the people's life and livelihood in North East India.

But for the government of the state and nation, the hope for Vajpayee Government appears afresh with their fresh strategies developed time to time. The Chief Minister of Assam is thus with a new hope sent a letter to the centre to give more incentive to the people who would be displaced. "The local people are of the opinion that the dam will not help them in any way. We suggested the centre to release more incentives so that they can buy land in some other areas and settle there" (The sentinel : January 1 ,2006) . The Public Investment Board returned the project to the ministry saying that the Ziraat Survey which had given details of the land holders to be displaced is 'inadequate' and 'lacking in Facts'. The ministry has hence asked the government to sort it out with the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). At the end of 2005, hence a meeting was called in Guwahati between Bodo leaders and representatives of the Board and state government but it failed to arrive at any agreement. Endeavours were also going on to seek the aid of NGOs to persuade the people to accept the rehabilitation package.

The project has thus divided the population settled in the two streams of the river. The people living in the southern part of the district in the flood affected plain downstream of the river supported the dam while the upstream people settled in the northern part who stood to lose their land and livelihood from the project opposed it. While the upstream people were getting organized to resist the dam, the government was trying to mobilize the downstream people to support the dam, besides using repressive measures to suppress the anti-dam movement. Two NGOs Manab Seba Sangha and Assam Council for People's Action have been patronized by the Brahmaputra Board to mobilise support for the project. But the two NGOs failed in their missions in the face of popular opposition to the construction of the dam

Gumti dam : A lesson yet to be learnt

In Tripura, the construction of Gumti Hydel project generated environmental awareness and fight for right to land among the people of Tripura. This 30 km. high gravity dam has been constructed across the Gumti river about 3.5 km. upstream of Tirthamukh in South Tripura district for generating 8.60 MW of power from an installed capacity of 10 MW. The dam submerged a valley area of 46.34 sq. km. This was one of the most fertile valleys in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flat land suitable for wet rice agriculture make up a mere 28 percent of the total land area. According to official records, 2, 558 tribal families were displaced from the Gumti

project area. But this number only includes families who could produce land deeds to their land as proof of ownership of the submerged land leaving out a large number of families who could not do so.

According to Subir Bhowmick, the official estimates vary between 8, 000 to 10, 000 families or about 60, 000-70, 000 tribal people displaced by the project (Bhowmick 2003) .

The project has attracted major criticism and protests. Since the construction of dam involves large scale alienation of tribal land, the project has acquired an ethnic colour. The tribal insurgency gathered momentum by 1970s. In certain parts of South Tripura District, as much as 60 percent of the tribal lands were alienated and sold in distress conditions as a result of unequal economic competition with Bengali settlers. Along with the steady land loss suffered by the people, the submergence of a large swathe of arable land owned by the tribals in the Raima valley disturbed the ecological balance in the region. As Bhowmick says, this project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima valley, it also left a permanent scar on the tribal psyche. All tribal organizations including the communist backed *Gana Mukti Parishad* fiercely protested the commissioning of the Gumti hydroelectric project. But the protest was crushed by the Congress led Government which was determined to augment Tripura's power supply. This led to the augmenting of tribal unrest by dispossessing and denying thousands of their only source of livelihood, the land. Though the project was ultimately decommissioned for its inability to harness sufficient power, it has generated a new consciousness about the value of land and environment in the minds of people.

Success that counts

Movements against dams in North East India does not give a clear cut picture to make a final remark on its success or failure. It has been seen that despite the continuous protests the state is not able to give a final verdict against dam construction in the region. In case of Subansiri lower it is found that despite the protest by the down stream people and also by the Assam government the project does not get a halt. Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister is sanguine to construct the dam and the implementing agency NHPC claims to complete it by 2012. In case of Tipaimukh dam though the Indian government says no Tipaimukh move before informing Dhaka, the Manipur government is hopeful and still continues with its move for the dam which shows the will of the state is of more vigour than the protesters against the dam. Yet from analytical point of view the movement shows different levels of success of the movements against the dams. The region being in the remote corner does not find much handicap for communicating to different groups to campaign against the dam. Very often combined efforts are made to protest against the movement. by networking at local, regional, national and international level. in many cases it brought partial success which is highly observed in case of Tipaimukh dam that the Indian government has to give a second thought over the issue of construction of dam in Tipaimukh and in January 2010 the PM of India has assured Hasina not to go ahead with the project if it hurts Bangladesh. The case of protest against Subansiri also shows success in so far as the move is concerned. The protest by the affected people make it a political issue in Assam that in July , 2009 Assam Legislative Assembly had to set up a multi-party panel to look into the impact of the dams on Assam. The movement against Pagladia dam equally registers success as the protesters are continuously driving away the move of the Brahmaputra board to initiate anystep for the construction of the dam.

Conclusion

Throughout the work it is observed that the strongest protest in the region are mainly against the dams constructed on the river Barak and Brahmaputra. The major movements discussed in this paper are movements against Subansiri, Pagladia and Tipaimukh dams. Though most of these protests against dams involve number of environmental concern, a major concern that dominates these movements is the issue of compensation and the unjust and inadequate Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) package proposal which in turn criticizes state's attitudes towards its subjects. Besides, North East being a region highly inhabited by ethnic groups gets

another setback as most of the people are found to be worst effected because of tribal customary laws related to the ownership of land and other natural resources.

The study thus reinvigorates the very political closure approach which emphasizes state's penetration into the 'life world' of people. The situation is worse in case of North East India because of the distinct cultural practices of the people inhabiting this part of the country where penetration of state in the life world of people becomes acute.

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