

Big Dam and Environmental Movements in Assam

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Abstract: The first prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said that, “Dams are the temple of modern India”. Dams have been built for the purpose of development. In spite of its developmental benefits to nations, it has ignited many debates and criticisms across the world. The displacement caused by the large dam has drawn considerable attention in recent years. India’s northeast with its increased emphasis on construction of dams has also number of protests in the region. This makes it necessary to delve into the issue of movement against dam in the region. In this article, discuss about the big dam and environmental movements in Assam in the light of Subansiri multipurpose dam project.

Keywords: Environmental movements, Big dam, Anti-dam movements.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of environmentalism is particularly significant at present juncture with the alarming deterioration of the environment worldwide. Scholars and activists raised the concern for the protection of environment since long as it involves the question of the survival of human race on earth. For the protection of our nature, movement has emerged. The beginning of modern environmental movement can be dated back to attempts in 19th century Europe and North America to exhibit the costs of environmental negligence. However, after the World War II the awareness begins to emerge.

It covers broad and different areas. The organizational and ideological roots of contemporary environmentalism are commonly traced to the progressive conservation movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century in reaction to reckless exploitation of our national resources. After the World War I, the second wave of conservationism arose during and emphasized the mitigation of resource problems as well as development of resources to stimulate economic recovery. The 1950s saw the third wave of conservationism. More emphasis was placed on preservation of area of natural beauty and wilderness for public enjoyment. In this era spearheaded by older organizations such as sierra club, as a result “Wilderness movement” was introduced for the future availability of the natural resource as well as growing concerned about over population and air water quality [1]. These new and old issues gradually evolved into environmental concerned. These newer concerns were much broader than those of conservations were. By the 1970s, the third wave of conservationism has evolved in to modern environmentalism as signified by a flood of new groups at the national and specially the local levels. Environmental movements are talking place all around the globe.

In India also environmental movement have taken place around interest best activism. The Indian constitution itself contains provision for environment

protection in the Article 48- A. The movement against dams counts high among all environmental movements in India. Northeast identified as India’s future powerhouse and at least 168 large hydroelectric projects set to majority alter the rivers cape, large dam are emerging as a major issue of conflict in the region. The protection of the biodiversity hotspot region particularly in the North East of India and Assam has been the reasons for the environmental movement in the North Eastern Region. The displacement caused by large-scale irrigation and hydro projects has drawn considerable attention in recent years. Many authors have noted that project proposals for such large-scale water resource management initiatives seldom include an assessment of the displacement to be caused or for the cost of rehabilitation [2-4]. The harnessing of hydropower has however led to a lot of resistance from the people of North East region. The basis of protest is related to the claim that in the name of development and modernization sometime it brings unpredictable disasters to the people. It also brings imbalance eco-system as hundreds of hectares of land are submerged under water and the bio-diversity is greatly affected. Among the eight states of north east Assam could singly produce, half of the megawatts required to full-fill the needs of the country. The majors project include subansiri multipurpose dam project the proposal of which includes three dams namely- Upstream of Daporjio near megna village on Subansiri river, on

khamla river upstream of Tamen and Gerukamukh at the original site of Subansiri river which generated enough hue and cry not only the national level but also at international level.

Big dam and protest in Assam

In the last few decades, large dams across the world results in enunciation of the voices of people. Dams have both intended and unintended impacts, which can be positive or negative. There are so many historical evidence of dams induced displacement in India. The first struggle took place in India in the year 1927 against Mulshi dam in western India [5]. In India the silent valley movement in Kerala in the 1980s was the first significant victory for the anti dam movement. Since then there are so many anti-dam movements are going on in various parts of the country. The northeast India including Assam identified as the India's future powerhouse. The region is known for its biological and cultural diversity and the unique Brahmaputra river system. This region is geographically isolated and economically deprived region. The region is the homeland of the more than hundred tribal people and most of them are depend on natural resources for their livelihood. However, these natural resources were a favorite prey for the stakes in the state. They exploited the nature without any social concerned. These resulted larger issues of development and displacement as well as some unique species and habitats are threatened. The environmental impacts of dam are well documented. The preliminary ranking study on the nationwide potential of hydroelectric scheme in October 2001 conducted by central electricity authority gives Brahmaputra the highest potential mark. A number of dams have been constructed on the different tributaries of Brahmaputra. The major projects include lower Subansiri multipurpose dam Project, Pagladia river project, kapili dam project etc. Among these Subansiri multipurpose dam projects is the major project that generated enough outcries. The Subansiri is one of the principal tributaries of the Brahmaputra river and forms one of its largest sub-basins. The anti dam convulsion in the northeastern Indian states of Assam, especially the one against the lower subansiri projects had a decade long history. The Brahmaputra board's earlier plan to envisaged building single dam on the Subansiri to meet an installed capacity of 4520MW, but this project was opposed by the Arunachol Pradesh government. The project was subsequently divided into 3 stages; the upper, middle and lower. The subansiri inter-state hydroelectric project proposed to harness the hydel potential of the lower reaches of the subansiri river. The left bank of the dam would be in assam and right bank of the dam, the power house and most of the submerged would be in Arunachol. The dam site is 2.3 klmtr upstream of Gerukamukh village of assam. The 116 klmtr high dam would submerged 3.436 ha. of forests. The requirement of forest for the project is 4,039.30ha. out of which 3183ha. Is in Arunachol and 856.3 ha. is in Assam The project itself was envisaged

by the Brahmaputra Flood control commission as back as 1955 with a view of flood moderation and irrigation. Finally, the Brahmaputra board transferred the project to NHPC in May 2000 without any scientific investigations. As the uncertainties about its socio-ecological impact grew by 2002, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) started campaigning against the mega dams. Gradually some other Nongovernmental organizations also join the movement. However, in the year 2006 a scientific committee was formed to investigate the project. In the mean time, the NHPC had begun the construction work without carrying out the downstream impact study. When the final expert report come out in the year 2010 and the report states the selected site for the mega dam was not appropriate in such seismological sensitive region and they recommended not constructing the mega dam. Because, the region is an earthquake porn area. Besides AASU another organization that come forward to protest against mega dam since beginning is Krishak Mukti Sangram Samittee(KMSS) under the leadership of Akhil Gogoi. These organizations continuing the movements in the form of protest and dharna, fasting, bike rally; poster campaigning, etc and they mobilized the people of the region. After the 2011 general election, a full-blown state wise agitation broke out in the December. So many of people lead by AASU, KMSS to blocked the further movement of an equipment carrying 14 wheel jumbo carrier towards the Subansiri dam site. This protest was going on for one month against NHPC and government. Barely reported in the national as well as international media and the movement turned in to such as gigantic proportions that the government called the protests group leaders for negotiation. Though the negotiation continues but no consensus has been reached. Gradually the protests turned into more aggressive. The protests groups calling each of the big dams a hydro bomb. They claimed that the project is a profit-making motive of the centre where assam water resource may serve the national interest without addressing the decades long problems of its people. On the other hand as a royalty from Subansiri mega dam Assam will received only 25MW. Such causes leads to the anti Delhi sentiment among the people of the region. This problem is not a problem only for Assam but for the entire northeastern region.

The construction of such huge projects which distress the ecological balance and result in debate like development and displacement. It is found that the lower Subansiri dam project would submerged 3,436 hector of forests. The dam site and submergence zone falls in the eastern Himalayas. This is an important part of Indo-Myanmar bio-diversity hotspot, one of 25 such hotspot in the region. The area is also part of an important elephant corridor. According to the project authorities, the dam will submerge the land of two villages. As a diverse region various tribal communities' people are living in this region. The families to be affected belonging 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 riverbed. They also depend on the forest for their livelihood. So, not all these natural resources will be available once they are displaced. 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 process created to safeguard public interest. The rehabilitation & resettlement policy of the government is not fair and equal. Not all people are getting their compensation equally and sometimes the Brahmaputra Board officials involved in the corruptions so far as R&R is concerned. Besides these, a major catalyst to trigger the debate on downstream impacts of dam in Assam has been the repeated incidents of dam-induced floods across the state from upstream projects in recent years. The Brahmaputra valley, a thickly populated narrow strip of land with hills surrounding, it has awoken to the fact that it is going to be increasingly vulnerable to risks from existing and proposed large dams upstream. This realization is significant for civilization whose cultural identity- customs. Food habits, music, religious beliefs are inextricably linked to its river systems. The fight against dam in North East India is observed to take place not only to protect the environment but also to serve better deal for livelihood and compensation. It has been found that people do not have faith upon the government’s assurance.

Environmental Issues

A comprehensive environment impact Assessment is utmost necessary in the downstream from the dam site of any proposed hydro electric project. The EAI report through which the NHPC got the clearance from the ministry of forest and environment. It is become clear that no deep study was done in the entire downstream project during the preparation of report. The report not mentioned about the dams impact upon the river as well as the whole eco system [6]. Following are some environmental issues because of which the people of the region oppose the dam project.

Biodiversity

The project is situated in such a region, which has been recognized as one of the biodiversity hotspot region among the 25 regions of the world. For the construction of dam 4000hc. of forests will be used by the project authority. Its lies in the midst of contiguous forests comprising kakoi, Dulung reserved forest in Assam. The dulung and Subansiri reserved forests together constitute the subansiri important Bird area, a site of global significance for bird conservation identified as per international criteria developed by Birdlife international. On the other hand, the river Subansiri has rich fish diversity, which is destroyed by the mega dam project.

Flood Control

The construction company of the lower subansiri project claimed that a flood cushion of 15 m will be provided in the monsoon period which will only achieve partial flood moderation. They claimed that flood moderation could not be achieved if one dam will be keep aside. This is because the project has the clearance from the ministry of environment and forests that do dams will be built in the upstream of the Subansiri river.

Violation of Environmental laws

Since 2001, the project authority has committed serious violation of both forest act 1980 and the environment impact assessment notification 1994. Violation includes collection of stone, gravel sand and earth for the riverbed, massive construction activities for project housing and construction of roads on the left bank of the river, barrier of an elephant corridor with fencing in the Subansiri reserved forest, dumping of muck and debris in the river etc.

CONCLUSION

Large dams remain a necessary development option for providing water and energy resources to populations in developing countries that are in crisis. However, dam should only be constructed after a best practice options assessment process that gives sufficient emphasis to environmental and social issues and only where adequate policies exist and are implemented and where project authorities have legal responsibility to follow whatever conditionality are necessary to implement the project. Development is widely understood as something that brings about changes for the better. But what can we make of development projects destroyed the economic base of the local population. The problem of development and environment in India are extremely complex. It is important to note that people at all level of society often disagree about the best way to use resources in the most efficient, environmentally friendly way. Therefore, it is crucial that any environmental movement that seeks to be people’s movement, and aims to become relevant with the concerned of all poor and disadvantaged. The people are strongly against the construction of dam within the region because of various socio- economic reasons. They continue to protest against it in a peaceful democratic manner through demonstration, cycle rallies etc but their agony has failed to touch the policy makers.

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