Development Perspectives and Civil Society: An Understanding into the Politics of Dam Construction

Tanisha Gogoi*

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Abstract

Big dams more than any other infrastructural development projects have shared the impression of modernity; inspired by the dreams for development worldwide. In India within the ambit of development versus environment, big dams has become a contentious debate and earned a political significance mainly because of the resistance from the local communities being displaced. The role of civil society is considered significant in shaping the dam discourse, raising political consciousness and counter such developmental projects. The broader framework of the study involves a social critique of the current developmental pattern of India with reference to the networks of big dam construction in the North-East region. While the study will primarily be restricted to Lower Subansiri Hydropower Project, located at the border area of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The study includes a multi-sited ethnographic account of the field of contestations. Interviews were conducted, both at upstream and downstream villages through snowball sampling technique. The study establishes how there is a systematic exploitation of the rich natural resources during colonialism and is continued by the independent Indian State. It argues that the utilization of natural resources, especially water resource, post liberalization in these frontier regions is a conscious effort to assert control and bring it into the capitalist interest of mainland development paradigm.

Key words: *Development, Civil Society, Large dams, Displacement, Northeast India*

* Ph.D. scholar, at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: gogoitanisha@gmail.com

Introduction

Sovereign independent India, like many of the newly independent nations recognized development as a growth in Gross National Product (GNP) and measured it with per capita income. To achieve high growth, India relied heavily on industrialization, urbanization and modernization processes. This focus on economic growth has led to marginalization of a large section of people and increase in environmental degradation. The development pattern driven by economic growth is not only regarded as a process of improvement but is concerned with 'rapid and large-scale improvements in the levels of living of the masses of poverty-stricken, malnourished and illiterate people' (Cowen and Shenton: 1996: 408). Such process intended to resolve the pressing and immediate problems post-independence were widely accompanied by social inequalities, social injustice and severe damage to the natural environment. The fact that the subject matter is 'growth and not distribution' (Esteva: 2010: 8), reflects the mainstream concern for economic growth that permeated the entire realm of development thinking.

India has come a long way since then and reached a key moment in its history with rapid growth in global market. Today, India has beco me a favourite destination for corporate, business, journalistic and technological indulgence. The nation's success has been quite a spectacular and has evoked euphoria and adulation from both home and abroad. However, there is another narrative, another India, opposite to this shinning India; the India where incidents of farmer suicides and poverty are on the rise[1]. The growing gap between the upper and lower rung of people and mostly as a result of developmental activities, what Bhaduri (2007) terms it as 'developmental terrorism'[2]. There are conflicts over the claim for the use of natural resources as there is a competing rise in the number of users of natural resources.

While dam building in India was not solely a post-independence project, ideologically it was only after independence that large dams in India are considered symbol of modernity and technological revolution[3]. What Prime Minister Nehru referred to as 'temples of modernity' and spearheaded the nation to growth and development. McCully (2001) writes, "as dam building was equated with nation building, it no longer remained just a machine to generate power and store water; rather, it became a concrete expression of dominant ideologies of technological era, an icon of economic growth and scientific progress" (2001: 2). It implicitly suggested a new standard of measuring the nation's greatness with the height of a dam. However, the question is how development as modernity was made so important or essential?

What Warner (2015) states, 'the problem lies in the historicist essentialization of categories', like post colonialism, modernity and development; for instance Europe's claim vis-a-vis the 'universalizability' of her modernity. So, within the historical perspective, modernity can be defined as the ideology of an effective and successful westernism. This ideological implications are through the assertion that progress and positive change can occur in other societies by adopting the framework integrated by the western orientation.

This western theory of modernization as examined by Kaviraj (2005), are in two parts: first, it explains the sequential process of social change such as industrialization, emergence of nation-state, the rise of capitalism, increasing importance of scientific reasoning etc. Second it asserts a homogeneous and uniform spread worldwide through institutional development. Kaviraj, however rejects both the unilinear claims of modernization theory indicating the institutional differences of non-European societies. He explains, differences rather than homogeneity seem to be the base for the spread of modernity in non-European societies. While, one cannot deny the powerful normative claims of such categories in the current debates on development, nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that these meanings does not vary over time and space.

The Indian model of development and its exposure to modernity have only led to a revival of traditional identity in a framework of a new institutions and ideas. For Kothari (1970), 'the Indian response to modern stimuli consisted of asserting the Indian-ness of India, reformulating this Indian-ness, and giving it a modern character' (1970: 85-86). The modern values and ideas has only awaken the ancient identity and gave them a contemporary meaning. And therefore it is important to understand the relationship they enter and the processes with which they function with each other. This process of diffusion was not a homogeneous process and a large section of the Indian population was left out of this strange idiom of modernity. The strong conviction that India needs to be transformed into modern nation-state, a justification for the British rule in the first place was now taken up by the Indian nationalist who associates Indian backwardness and traditionalism to colonial rule. Thus, when a new political system emerged (after independence) mainly comprising of the nationalist elites, it referred to modernity to legitimise their statist developmental intervention.

However such developmentalism have also received increasing resistance from various sections of the civil society. Civil Society is increasingly considered a site for solving problems in India (Chandhoke: 2007: 611). Civil society today is widely viewed as a social space, including those sets of institutions or organisations that are identified as non-

statist or independent of government but are able to exercise influence either by co-operating with the state or by absolute opposition. Organisations such as the students unions, labour unions, and women empowerment related organisations, professional groups, business federations, institutions of free press, trade unions, social movement organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) etc involves components of civil society. Post 1977, two of the most dominant movement were the civil liberties and the environment movement in India. Civil society increasingly played a significant role in the protection and nurturing of the environment. The presence of NGOs in many project areas have made the affected people more vocal in demanding their rightful claims (Mathur: 2006: 75).

The broader framework of this paper involves a social critique of the current developmental pattern of India by taking large dams as an epitome of development which leads to the submergence of large tracts of natural resources (here, water and forest reserves). Large dam[4] construction has emerged as one of the major contending water issues in India as well as throughout the World (McCully: 1996). The rate of dam building across the world has declined in the past, for over two decades, as compare to its peak in the early 1970s. It was partly due to scarcity of feasible construction site for large infrastructure and partly due to successful civil society advocacy against adverse impacts of large dams (World Commission on Dams, WCD: 2000). However, in recent times, large dams are featured back to the development agendas of many developing countries, to meet the need of ever growing urban population and industrial needs. In addition, the current hydropower discourse is positioned as part of green and carbon-neutral sustainable strategy. Nonetheless, such claims are highly debatable and there is an urgent need to revisit the concept of considering hydropower projects as 'green, clean and safe' energy (International Rivers: 2008; Lima et al: 2007). Further, these projects are promoted as 'run-of-the-river'[5] hydropower projects which are considered environmentally benign. No doubt the run-of-the-river design is viable for small dams, however, for large dam, it is not considered feasible as it would require to divert the river water through long tunnels before the water is actually dropped back into the river at a downstream location after passing through the power house (Kohli: 2011: 19; Vagholikar and Das: 2010:4). These divergent tunnels are constructed through rock-blasting using explosives that adversely affects the fragile ecology of the region. Impacts such as landslides, cracks on houses of the local communities settled nearby, drying up of the river, huge piles of excavated debris etc are observed (Huber and Joshi: 2017: 78, Kohli: 2011: 20). Besides environmental degradation, the problems faced by displaced population is agonizing as rehabilitation and resettlement (which is a project based policy in India), has been found as insufficient, poorly conceived and implemented (Cernea: 2007: 1034). Moreover, such developmental

projects are proposed and constructed in regions inhabited by marginalised population who are largely dependent on river ecosystem and forest resources for their livelihood. While they have to bear the brunt of such developmentalism, in most of the cases, it is found that the benefits from such projects are used elsewhere.

The synergies between hydropower, green growth and economic development was facilitated by liberalisation. That is, post1990s, India's progress has been lagging by an acute power shortage. A need for harnessing power from every potential sources was strongly felt. In the past few decades, dam construction was concentrated mostly to the Northern and Southern region of India. However, dam propagation in the North Eastern region of India began in 2001 when Central Electric Authority (CEA) in its preliminary Ranking study of the hydroelectric potential identified the Brahmaputra river basin as one of India's largest storehouse of hydropower (Menon: 2009). The study estimated that Brahmaputra basin could generate as much as 58,971MW of hydropower, of which Arunachal alone has the potential to produce about 50,328MW of hydropower—highest in the country (Government of India, GOI: 2004: 37). There is a spate of Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with the government of Arunachal Pradesh. This process of fast-tracking hydropower development has led the potential developers to pay significant amount of money to the state government of Arunachal Pradesh as advance, even before any public hearing, detailed project reports or mandatory clearances. Such 'upfront payment' only means that the project becomes a fait accompli and the entire process of mandatory clearances becomes a farce as the government is in debt to the developers and support the projects irrespective of major adverse impacts.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of development process vis-à-vis the use of natural resources in mainly two states of Northeast India, that is, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. To look at how the natural resources of these frontier regions are brought into the capitalist interests of mainland[6] Indian development paradigm. What Baruah (2003) termed as 'nationalizing frontier space'. He states that, such measures are intended or unintended consequences of Indian state government to assert control over the natural resources of the frontier region and make it a part of India's national space. The whole question lies in the process of integrating marginal landscape into the nationalist dream of production of capital. Secondly, the study tries to understand how the civil society organisations, who plays a significant role, are attending to the diverse discursive resistance to the dam discourse in Assam. Further, the study seeks to look at whether there is a continuity in the postcolonial development imperatives from that of the colonial approach to Northeast, while evaluating the dichotomy of modern and traditional engagement with nature.

This paper offers an extensive study of Lower Subansiri Hydropower Project (LSHP hereafter), constructed on the Subansiri River, in the border areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, over a period of two years, 2016-2018. The study uses a multi-sited ethnographic approach due to its widespread network of civil society and protests. The tools of data collection included two sets of semi-structured interview schedule; one prepared for the upstream and downstream villagers and the other for the civil society organisations, involved in the anti-dam protest across the State of Assam. The downstream impact is extended to a distance of 130kms, from the construction site till the river Subansiri intersects with the mighty Brahmaputra. This distance covers three districts and the most affected villages[7] are situated near the bank of the river. In-depth interview with key informants, focus group discussions with local communities from both upstream and downstream villages, field surveys and observations, interviews with various government and hydro-developers (that is, National Hydroelectric Power Corporation officials) were conducted. Members of various civil society organisations were also interviewed to understand their role in anti-dam protests in Assam and how far they have successfully attended to the diverse responses of the affected people.

Lower Subansiri Hydropower Project (LSHP)

The Government of India's initiation to construct dams in almost all perennial rivers of the Brahmaputra basin in the state of Arunachal Pradesh was received by the people with a mixed reaction. One of them involving both the state of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh was the 2000 MW Lower Subansiri Hydropower Project. The LSHP was initially envisaged by the Brahmaputra flood Control commission in 1955 with a view to flood control and irrigation but was opposed by the Arunachal Pradesh government as it would submerge a huge area (Vaholikar and Ahmed: 2003). The Ministry of Water Resource in the year 2000 transferred the project to National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC)[8]. The dam site lies near Gerugamukh at the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the lower reaches of the river Subansiri. The river Subansiri is one of the principle tributary of the river Brahmaputra, contributing 11 percent of the total flow of the river.

There are a number of reasons for which the said dam created huge apprehensions amongst the downstream communities of Assam. Firstly, there was an initiation of construction before there was any public hearing which is legally mandatory. When some civil society organisation raised concerns, a public hearing was conducted on 4th of September 2001. The Project authorities and the Assam Pollution Control Board got the local semi-literate Assamese and Mishing communities (a dominant community inhabiting

the downstream area) to sign the resolution in favour of the project after a presentation was made in Hindi and English. Secondly, the Environmental Impact Assessment report (which was only a four page document) did not mention about the downstream impact or the environmental study of the dam. On top of that, there was legal violation by the NHPC, who went ahead with the massive construction of project houses on the left bank of the Subansiri River submerging a total of 131 ha of forestland illegally, without forest or even environmental clearances. This is a clear violation of both the Forest (Conservation) Act (FCA), 1980 and the Environment (Protection) Act (EPA), 1986[9]. Such violation of established legal procedures have only led to violent speculation that worked against LSHP and the construction came to a complete halt in December 2011.

India's Northeast: The tales of the lesser mortals

To have a comprehensive understanding of the nature of dams and its related concern in the Northeast, it is imperative to know the diversity of the region that it entails. The north eastern region of India constituting of eight states, is weakly linked with Indian mainland India through a narrow strip of land commonly known as 'chicken neck' corridor. The region is one of the global biodiversity hotspots, ecologically sensitive and geologically fragile. It is one of the most seismically active regions in the world and has experienced number of major earthquakes, two of which was above 8.7 Richter scale in the year 1897 and 1950 causing extensive geographical damage in the region. This part of eastern Himalayan region is known for its richness in natural reserves, including water and forests cover which is about 60% of the total geographical area. There are two major river systems in the region: the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley. The most populous part of the region is the Brahmaputra Valley in which majority of the indigenous communities depends for their livelihood such as fishing agriculture in its floodplains. The primary economy of the region is agrarian and majority depends on natural resource based livelihoods. Jhum (shifting) cultivation is the traditional form of land use which is considered for maintaining biodiversity of the region in the hilly areas. The unique river system plays a significant role in the traditions, customs, food habits, religious beliefs and practices of the communities in the region.

The region has always been treated as a security threat mainly because of its international borders (c.f. Baruah: 2005: 33-45); it has four international borders—China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Post-independence after the creation of (east) Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and then the Indo-China war in 1962 have only perpetuated this 'security paradigm'. Thus, most of the policies for the region were informed by it

(Mukhim: 2004). However, there was a shift in Government of India's approach towards the region from security paradigm to development paradigm (c.f. Sharma: 2018). There was an increasing government expenditure towards infrastructural development of the region. Indian government expert calculations show immense benefits that can be reaped off from hydropower (Jhunjhunwala: 2010), and is continuously proposed and built. While in many of the industrialised countries (mainly North America and Europe) big dams are being decommissioned and removed as its adverse effects are increasingly realised (Parasuram and Sengupta: 2001: 1882; Poff and Hart: 2002). Most of these projects are financed, planned and designed by the central government in New Delhi or in central government organizations located in the region. Projects such as building roads near the international borders are carried out by Border Roads Organization (BRO, a central government organization) where the role of the state government is negligible. Since 2001, a separate cabinet level Department of Northeast Development (DONER) has been included solely dedicated to bring these frontier regions into the mainstream development paradigm. During the same period, with the rising need for power in the industrial cities of 'mainland' India and its potential source in the Brahmaputra basin led to the spate of hydropower development in the region. The imperative to nationalize these frontier space was so high that factors such as rights of indigenous peoples, unique environment, interests or development choice of the people of the area, all played second fiddle.

It is interesting to note that the energy requirement of the region is quite modest. The electricity mix in Northeast region as on 31 May 2016, is that the percentage for renewable energy is just 7.43% amounting to 264.72MW, while coal and Diesel is just 8.73% (310.00MW) and 1% (36MW) respectively. Gas energy being highest with 47.84% (1.698.00MW) and second highest is hydro energy, which is 34.99% (1,242.00 MW) (GOI: 2016).The per capita energy use in the region is only a third of India's national average, and the industrial use of energy is less than one percent of India's total[10]. The accessibility of electricity in the interior villages is very less as compared to the rest of the country. Nonetheless, the power produced from these new project is almost entirely for use elsewhere. "Project design documents include a section on 'power evacuation': the transmission arrangements that would take electricity from power generation facilities to the national power grid" (Baruah: 2012). Thus, even if there is the speculation that the region is underdeveloped due to energy shortage, the electricity produced from these hydropower projects is not benefitting the region as such.

One of the significant arguments put forward to carry out these developmental projects is that, there is relatively lesser human displacement as compared to the other

parts of the country and that makes these projects as benign. However, the ground reality reveals that displacement in terms of livelihoods and rights are grossly underestimated. A majority of the population depends on natural- resource based livelihood. Due to the hilly topography of the region, there is little land where permanent cultivation is possible. Virtually all available cultivable land is submerged by such developmental projects. The degree of impact has to be measured keeping in mind the mentioned context. As mentioned earlier, the river water plays a dominant role in their day to day economic, traditional and cultural practices.

The dominant discourse legitimises large hydro energy as green, clean, reliable and affordable. Dam development are positioned as the only alternative to fossil fuel based electricity (Huber and Joshi: 2015: 13). The nexus between the government and powerful lobbies have legitimised large scale displacement (both human and environment) by overstating benefits and undermining the costs of such development projects. In addition, even though there are policy guidelines for social and environmental justice mainly after World Commission on Dams (WCD), in a significant number of cases, these policies have not been institutionalised to bring any democratic participation among the stakeholders. This gap between policy making and implementation prevents a sustainable alternative to emerge.

Civil Society and the Anti-dam Protest in Assam

The rising public apprehensions against large dams in Assam was also influenced by the much celebrated Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) throughout the 1990s against the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River (Sharma 2018: 5). The civil society in Assam was made aware of the new debates surrounding environmental issues. It was realised that the voice of marginalised people gets submerged under the conventional State-led development discourse. An effort was made by the civil society organisations to create a space for resistance against such developmental pattern, to challenge and address the political barrier against the people from Northeast.

A local Journalist, who was also a founding member of an organisation, People's Movement for Brahmaputra Subansiri Valley (PMBSV, mentioned later), said,

> *...after the Assam Accord in 1985, the AASU sent a memorandum to the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi for a multipurpose dam on the Subansiri river as a flood control measure. The first regional party government formed in 1985, under Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) has also supported the move.*

Contrarily, this popular opinion changed after one and a half decade and people turned against dam building in the region...

One of the reason for such change is believed to be a result of an already commissioned (in 2002) 405 MW Ranganadi hydropower project situated in AP. Although the Ranganadi dam was envisaged to mitigate flood, it, on the other hand caused recurrent flash floods in the downstream district of Lakhimpur from the excess water released from the dam during peak summer seasons (Sharma: 2018: 3).

In case of LSHP, after the environmental public hearing and the EIA report that was made public in 2001, a few environmental activists initially voiced their concerns on the ground that the submergence area for the project site includes a region rich in wildlife and biodiversity. They also pointed out the flaws in the EIA and in other project documents submitted for clearances that underestimated the adverse impact of the dam on the rich biodiversity of the region. Further a small group of concerned people residing in the downstream area came together to form an organisation named, People's Movement for Brahmaputra Subansiri Valley (PMBSV). However, their access to important information and documents was limited. Gradually, local members of student union, All Assam Student Union and All Mishing Student Union also known as TMPK (Takam Mishing Porin Kebang) organised protest against the dam construction. It was more a political mobilisation as they were demanding jobs and subcontracts for the supply of construction materials. Such mobilisation was criticised, as a member of PMBSV said, 'they were sloganeering against the dam construction and their first demand was 100 percent job security for the locals'. Another noted journalist narrated how members of various organisations have used the protest as a means to achieve a number of personal generous offers and negotiated powerful positions in government as well as got subcontract works of huge amounts in the construction sites.

On the other hand, there were many organisations and individuals who have worked rigorously for the benefit of the people, like River Basin Friends and Rural Volunteers Centre who coordinated with international bodies like International Rivers Network to create awareness among the downstream people. Further, noted policy campaigners for International Rivers, Ann Katherin Schneider and Medha Patkar who spearheaded the Narmada Andolan also visited to take part in various meetings and campaigns against LSHP in Assam. In the year 2004 there was a massive cycle rally from dam site to the district of Majuli alongside the riverbanks into the interior villages to mobilise the people. There was also a local daily called "Amar Hongbad" which was circulated as a part of awareness

campaign. Subsequently, the Supreme Court in 2004 allowed the Lower Subansiri but banned any more construction of dams in the river Subansiri due to the unavailability of a cumulative impact assessment report.

By 2005, the protest in Assam gained momentum while simultaneously the construction too began in earnest. Two of the most influential state-wide organisation, AASU and KMSS—a farmer's organisation, came together to lead the agitation against LSHP. Thousands of peasants, farmers, women and children came out to demonstrated their apprehensions against such large dams in the region. The issues now focussed on dam safety, impacts on the downstream inhabiting communities and the distribution of costs and benefits which did not receive any attention during the project approval process. It was argued that Arunachal Pradesh being the host state will gain revenue as well as 12 percent of electricity produced as royalty whereas Assam will face the potential adverse impact. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), who was the State's main political opposition, also merged with the protest. After many protest demanding proper study of downstream impact, in December 2006, a tripartite meeting was held involving Assam Government, NHPC officials and AASU, after which a scientific expert committee was set up involving experts from the three most prestigious academic institutions of Assam—Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University and Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati, to investigate the project. This was a critical step in the anti-dam discourse in Assam. An active AASU member said,

> *it was like a victory for all of us who were part of the protest. However the study took 4 years to release a report as the dam developers, that is, NHPC was delaying to award the study. While in these 4 years the construction continued rapidly and completed more than 50 percent of the project work...*

The expert committee report was published in 2010 which stated that, 'the selected site for the mega dam of the present dimension was not appropriate in such a geologically and seismologically sensitive region... Therefore, it is recommended not to construct the mega-dam in the present site' (2010: chapter X: 10).

After the export committee report was published, the protest against dam exhilarated as it confirmed the fears and inhibitions of the people. On the other hand, the ruling government of Assam was trying to present itself as considerate towards the people as the election of April 2011 to the State Legislative drew closer. The Assam government while maintaining a supportive position towards the idea of dam safety by modifying the design of the dam were also very careful not to support the demand of the protestors either. In

September 2010, the then Environment minister Jairam Ramesh visited the state and held a public meeting at Guwahati. Although he assured to convey the grievances of the people of Assam to the centre, he could not have committed much as in July 2011 he was shifted from Environment and Forest ministry to the rank of cabinet Minister.

Post the election of April 2011, the Congress Party was re-elected to power with a remarkable victory and the ministers including the Chief Minister started accusing the protestors of having been trained or have a Maoist modus operandi. Akhil Gogoi, the leader of KMSS and other leaders were charged of having links with not only the Maoist but also with the separatist extremist outfit United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Jihadi outfit HUJI (Harkat-ul-jihad-al-Islami) (Sharma: 2013: 163).

The then spokesperson of TMPK spoke vehemently warning about the possible threat to the downstream people from the dam constructed on a high seismic area. However, currently being part of Assam's government, his views seemed to have shifted. He said,

> *Development of the state depends on sufficiency of power supply... and NHPC have to take necessary measures to protect the downstream people. I have three major issues, first is the technical question, that is, the safety of the dam, secondly is the power sharing (with Arunachal Pradesh), and thirdly the rights and interests of the downstream. Now if these three issues are resolved then I think the dam could be constructed.*

For the people of Assam the experience with the anti-dam protest has evoked a sense of fear and foreboding. However, this sense of fear is not new as there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam by the colonizers before 1947 and by the Indian state after independence in the name of economic growth and development. The following section is a discussion on how this was initiated and continued mainly to cater to the need of the profit making capitalist production, of what is termed as 'resource colonisation' (Joy et al: 2017: 18) of Northeast by the rest of country.

The Colonial Legacy

The logic and the process of development in the Northeast has only made India's everyday control over these frontier space more effective, but at a substantial cost of social, political and environmental resources. This ideational process is not free from the legacy of colonial rule of modernity and development. During the colonial rule, the tribal[11] areas located in the Northeast were considered as protected territories so that they can continue

their 'customary practices' related to kinship and land allocation. Initially these areas were known as 'backward tracks' and later as 'excluded areas' as they were excluded from colonial laws that was operational in other parts of British ruled India. Post-independence, the sixth schedule of the constitution provided for autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts which have elected councils with powers to regulate customary laws, to regulate and determine the use of lands etc. However some areas, mostly today's Arunachal Pradesh and a part of Nagaland which were largely un-administered during the colonial period were considered not prepared for any institutions. They were temporarily administered by the Governor of Assam as an agent of President of India. Further, the Inner Line Permit, the nineteenth century institution restricted the entry of Indian as well as foreigner into the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.

Colonialism, as Nandy (1983) observes, does not end when the colonists were finally forced out. It is more like a state of mind in the colonizers and the colonized. Akoijam (2006) writes, "the postcolonial Indian state has only expanded and not transformed the basic institutional arrangements of colonial rule and administration..." (2006: 114). He examines that one of the reason for this continuity is western modernity which was the imperial colonial project in South Asia. The view that the colonial rule was not just about the rule and something else, always persisted. For instance, what constitutional historian Arthur B. Keith observes, "it was the aim of... the early British administrators in India [was] to train the people of India to govern and protect themselves..." (Keith: 1936: vii). The Indian nationalist for that matter did not reject or contested the colonial mindset that India was not 'modern' enough. In fact they believed in the rational universality of modernity in colonial state structure and thus inherited such institutions and regimes of power. For Akoijam (2006), "amongst all the people of the ex-colonies of South Asia, none seems to be so inextricably embedded in colonial modernity as the denizens of its eastern frontier" (2006: 116). And the developmental imperatives of post-colonial Indian state is to civilize and develop the "other", that is, the backward people of the northeast. Such manifestations of the India State's developmentalism has only created new concerns for the people and the civil society of the region.

The exploitation mainly in the extracting industries of oil, tea, coal and minerals have been practiced since the British period and continued after independence. Even today the major share of investment in both oil and tea industry of the state represents foreign investment (Joy et al: 2017: 105). In the early 60s, in spite of Assam being the highest producer of crude oil, the government of India decided to establish a new refinery at Barauni in Bihar rather than in the state. Further, while Assam is the highest producer of

tea in India, nevertheless the state of West Bengal earns more in terms of revenue, auction centres, head offices etc.

The following extracts from an interview with a founding member of KMSS who summarises what they are fighting against and what the people of the state are suffering from since the time of colonization. He stated that

> *the struggle is not just against the construction of large dam but also over the uncontested control of central government over the natural resources of the region. The people of the region should get to decide what is best for them and how they want to use these resources for their overall development, instead we still remain the producer of raw materials as well as the buyer of finished products... if we see for instance, for years now water related problems like flood and erosion have caused disaster in the state and water resource being a State subject, it was left for the State government to solve it, but once the same water has turned into a valuable asset and can be used for the purpose of production of electricity, the central government has taken over the water in the name of economic development paving the way for the private sector to exploit and accelerate commoditisation of water…*

The above discussion suggested a continuity in development imperatives informed by resource appropriation, by the colonial and the post-colonial independent government and it's persistence to the present day. Such continuity is not only of practice (large scale intervention), but also the associated values, including progress-oriented framing of development. Large scale intervention of untapped hydropower potential in Northeast and especially in the State of Arunachal Pradesh has become a site of conflict—a disjuncture between what was promised (as flood control measure), and what unfolded in reality, primarily for hydroelectric production; moreover to be transmitted to other parts of the country to serve the energy deficit. The Northeast as a frontier region, not only has a rich bio-diversity but also discursively constructed by history, politics and culture, from colonial to post-colonial period. Additionally, the construction of large dams has created a myriad of conflict, questioning the very basis of livelihood and traditional ownership of resources. Being a riparian valley, an overwhelming majority of population depends on its river system. The public opinion and the civil society of North East India is quite informed regarding the socio-political and ecological impacts of large dams and thereby brought the construction to a complete halt.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that there is a prototype of development that is promoted which conform to the ideas and expectations of the western developed countries. Development was seen as pure form of economic transition from one stage to another, which is evident in the 'stages of economic growth' by Rostow (1971), while it created an uneven development pattern. Large developmental projects like the 2000MW LSHP has evoked a sense of fear and social, political disempowerment and economic impoverishment among the otherwise nature loving indigenous communities of the region. In the upstream, the PAF (Project Affected People) in Arunachal Pradesh who initially gave an impression of unambiguous support to the dam, due to the government propaganda, soon realised the adverse impact of such projects in their habitat. There was a sense of helplessness and are left bankrupt (after spending all the compensation money!) as they have no other alternative means of livelihood except cultivation.

What can be gathered from the interviews with the downstream people and various organisations agitating against the dam is that they are not against dams per se but are against the process of decision-making and implementation. They seek for a just, equal and inclusive development, where the different stakeholders are part of the decision-making process. In addition they are of the view that more smaller dams can do less impact on the environment than a large dam. But again the question remains whether a fair, just and a prior informed consent to decision making is possible or not as the people who are going to be benefitted from the project are also considered as stakeholders.

Both the presence and absence of development takes the shape of conflict in its different forms (like culture, identity, ethnicity) in the region. The nexus between the government and the powerful lobbies which provides the raw materials for such projects are rather arbitrary and unaccountable. The role of civil society is very crucial as it provides part of the checks and balance on political and economic power. To narrow down the disjuncture between the state led development and what the people seek for, what is on paper and what is actually practiced.

A report on the first world-wide independent study in dams by World Commission on Dam (WCD) in the year 2000 stated that:

> *While dams have made an important contribution to human development and benefits derived from them have been considerable, in too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure these*

benefits, especially in social and environmental terms, by people displaced, by communities downstream, by taxpayers and the natural environment" (WCD: 2000: xxviii).

In other words, one cannot deny the importance of development in the region, however, the need on the part of the government is to emphasis on a more democratic development paradigm to include the heterogenous culture, ecology and geophysical character of the region. If such hydropower projects are carried out the way it's currently practiced, it will continue to shape the future of Northeast as it did during the nineteenth century as a troubled periphery without an alternative.

NOTES:

1 The highest Farmers suicide was recorded in 2004 and in 2016 from January to March, there were in total 116 suicides in three major agricultural producing states of Maharashtra, Telangana, Punjab, according to the statistics by the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmer's Welfare. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/116-farmer-suicides-in-first-3-months-of 2016/articleshow/52002524.cms ; while India has the largest number of people living below international poverty line in 2013, with 30 percent of its population under USD 1.90 per day poverty measure: http://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/india-has-highest-number-of-people-living-below-poverty-line-world-bank/story/238085.html

2 Amit Bhaduri (2007) states that Indian government irrespective of the political parties in power allied with corporations and marched endlessly towards the disadvantage and marginalised the poor through various land grabbing acts for various developmental projects, which he termed as 'developmental terrorism'. He talks about two glaring contrasts in India society: India of glitter and privilege and an India of despair, rage and inhuman poverty

3 Even though most of the large dams in India are constructed in the second half of the twentieth century, however the ideology continued since independence.

4 The International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) defines 'large dams' as those with a height higher than 15m or dams with a shorter height but a reservoir volume of more than 3 million m.

5 The term run-of-the-river (RoR) project is often misleading. It is used in variety of

projects. However, a hydropower projects is RoR, "only if the inflow is equal to outflow in real time basis, that is, when there is no storage or modification at all". Whereas, the big hydro projects in the eastern Himalayas, when they are referred to as "run-of-the-river", "involve large dams which divert the river waters through long tunnels, before the water is dropped back into the river at a downstream location after passing through a powerhouse. These projects are promoted as being 'environmentally benign' as they involve smaller submergences and lesser regulation of water as compared to conventional storage dams"-- Baruah: 2012; Vagholikar and Das: 2010:4.

6 A common distinction associated with the Northeast region and people as 'oriental' and therefore different from the mainland Indians. The idea is drawn from both racial (Baruah: 2005), as well as geographically and strategically isolated (Chakraborty and Chakraborty: 2010) forms of distinction.

7 See for instance, the Report submitted by The Exert Group, on 'Downstream Impact Study of the Ongoing Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Power Project at Gerugamukh' of National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Limited, 2010.

8 An undertaking run by Government of India (NHPC 2002).

9 The EIA notification issued under the EPA clearly says that: "No construction, preliminary or otherwise, relating to the setting up of the project may be undertaken till the environmental and site clearance is obtained." -- Vaholikar and Ahmed: 2003: 28.

10 "Energy and Energy Access: Northeast India Factsheet" Centre for Science and Environment-- http://cdn.cseindia.org/userfiles/factsheet-north-east-india.pdf

11 The term 'tribal' is a much debated concept in academia. In this study, I have used the term 'tribal' to refer to a community listed in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution that provides for the President of India to specify by public notification the 'tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of the Constitution be deemed to be "Scheduled Tribes". Galanter (1984), who examined how the Indian government arrived at the list, notes that the tribes were 'defined partly by habitat and geographic isolation, but even more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness — their ''tribal characteristics''. Just where the line between ''tribals'' and ''non-tribals'' should be drawn has not always been free from doubt' (1984: 150).

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