

# Arunachal dams: catastrophe in making

■ Pradip Kumar Bhuyan

**T**he most vital aspect of all the Arunachal dams is the water release mechanism from the dams and this has been cloaked in secrecy under the guise of the Run of the River (RoR) schemes, giving the impression that whatever is flowing in any river in the lean months is also flowing out through the turbines with no ecological damage to the downstream of the dam. Nothing is further from the truth.

For the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project (LSHEP), the Ministry of Environment & Forest (MoEF) has chosen to release only six cumec of water as per the Environmental Clearance (EC) for 20 hours of the day when the project will be off grid, that is no water, to the biggest tributary of the Brahmaputra in the lean months. It is simply tantamount to killing of the river, its biota including the dolphins and the lifeblood of the riparian people. In the four peak hours, it is proposed to release 2579 cumec of water by running eight turbines making the average for 24 hours of inflow and outflow the same in paper and for which it is being projected as a RoR scheme!

For the Demwe Lower (Lohit Lower) project near the Parasuram Kunda, RTI information reveals that only 10% of the average lean water flow will be released during the day time which will be a mere 33 cumec or so when the project will be 'off grid' and flood will be created in the evening peak hour period.

This mindset of the Government for the power-only projects in Arunachal, in total disregard to other

benefits from a hydel project and towards the ecology and the riparian people, is further highlighted when we take into account the fact that for the LSHEP, the MoEF fixed an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the project, only up to 10 km downstream of the dam, whereas 20 km downstream of the dam is home to the Gangetic dolphins, in red card list of endangered species of the IUCN since 2002. The 10 km downstream of the dam is also the limit for the EIA for the Demwe Lower and other projects.

In LSHEP, work was started even before the receipt of the EC by the NHPC Ltd and as per the CAG report and local knowledge, work worth Rs 24 crore or so was completed even before the receipt of the EC. The NHPC, the executive arm of the Government of India (GoI), knew that the mandatory clearances are mere formalities and that they will obtain the EC in due course as a matter of formality only! For all the Arunachal dams, the same concept of 'power at any cost' is being followed.

The Hydro Power Act 2008 is an example of the Government's mindset. It allows the developers to develop only 'hydro power projects', in exclusion of any other benefits as envisaged in the National Water Policy 2005 and the Brahmaputra Board Act. As per this Act, the Government takes money upfront on

signing of MoUs, making mandatory environment and forest clearances as mere formalities. Legality of the Act itself certainly needs serious scrutiny.

All the river projects in the Lohit, Dibang, Siang and the Subansiri basins are hydro power projects as per the Hydro Power Act 2008. As per the Government's version, these are all RoR schemes where water is proposed to be held up in the dams for 18-20 hours. Some of these projects are storage-based

MARCH 13, 2014

**The Hydro Power Act 2008 is an example of the Government's mindset. It allows the developers to develop only 'hydro power projects', in exclusion of any other benefits as envisaged in the National Water Policy 2005 and the Brahmaputra Board Act.**

projects and have some extra storage capacity only to keep the RoR projects functioning. The additional storage is not for flood control or any other benefits. Only the dam over Dibang at Munali, about 43 km from Roing, is termed as the Dibang Multipurpose Project, which is, in fact, a misnomer because only benefit, apart from power generation, is some moderation of flood only up to the confluence of the Lohit, 63 km downstream of the project. The name Dibang Multipurpose Project is a mere eyewash.

Now, after eight years of starting

the work of the LSHEP, the NHPC is saying that it will release 220-250 cumec of water by keeping one turbine running! But the fact is that the power house is located downstream of the dam and releasing water through a turbine in the power house will ensure that the river is totally dry in the downstream of the dam. Also, while dealing with nature, we need to project for centuries not decades. Who can guarantee that one turbine would be kept running continuously for 100-200

years? A few hours of closer will lead to the annihilation of the biota of the river including the dolphins which is India's National Aquatic Animal in the first schedule of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, and must be protected by law.

Today as per the Government's scheme of things, the riparian people in Arunachal and Assam are not only deprived of any benefits accruing to them as per the

National Water Policy and Brahmaputra Board Act from the hydro electric projects under implementation but will also lose what they have - flowing, pulsating, biodiverse rivers that give them livelihood and a lifestyle. All the rivers will be killed because practically no water will be released in the day time constituting what may be termed as a total travesty of environmental justice by our own Govt.

If these dams are completed and commissioned after one or two decades as per the water release mechanism as has been proposed by the

MoEF, one will be able to walk across the Lohit, Dibang, Siang and the Subansiri in Arunachal and the Brahmaputra near Dibru-Saikhowa in Assam in the day time and face a tidal wave and massive flood at night when over a thousand turbines will be turned on in the rivers of Arunachal which will sweep away wildlife, human habitations and everything in its paths. The fate of Majuli and other ecological and environmental disasters are incomprehensible. The first causality of the Demwe Lower in river Lohit will be the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and the Parashuram Kunda, the holy pilgrimage of Hindus, as practically no water will be released by the Demwe Lower dam in Lohit in the daytime in the lean months.

Arunachal is one of the 34 ecologically diverse terrestrial hotspot regions of the world and the environmentalists world over need to wake up to stop the mayhem in the making in Arunachal and consequently in Assam.

For the people of this region, it simply will be a battle for eventual survival. The issue of big dams in a highly seismic and fragile zone is a matter of grave concern. What is needed is a proper cumulative impact study of all the four basins of Arunachal. The release of 'sustenance water' in the winter months automatically without human control which also must be the normal average winter flow of a river is a sacrosanct responsibility of the Government for all these projects. There is more than enough water in all these rivers for the generation of power as well as sustenance of the river and sustainable development.