

Chapter 37

Tipaimukh Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project: A Policy Perspective – Indo–Bangla Priorities, Indigenous Peoples’ Rights, and Environmental Concerns

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ABSTRACT

Moving ahead from the freshwater reservoir versus climate change debate, the Indo-Bangla controversy over the Tipaimukh Project exists over the right of riparian states. India needs more energy to propel its economic growth, whereas Bangladesh is worried about downstream impact. The concerns of Bangladesh are based on the experience of severe water shortage and other impacts of Farakka Barrage and Teesta Barrage and also Himalayan Component of the Interlinking of River Project. Over the years some progress was made at bilateral level. But the major problem remains unaddressed i.e. without reconciling the issues of indigenous people a big dam cannot be constructed. This paper highlighted the existing scenario of Bangladesh and the indigenous people of Manipur in India in one hand and ecological, socio-economic concern in other hand i.e. obligation not to cause significant harm. There is no straight way answers available to be choose between a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; neither depends on the issues of ‘might’ over ‘right’ or ‘development’ over ‘destruction’, but on the circumstances to come.

INTRODUCTION

... It is not the technical arguments that makes Tipaimukh a threat but the political process that followed it. In fact the dam is tri-partite affair involving the Indian state, the Bangladeshi people and the people and the Manipuris of the North East India. In this case, the Indian government has not received consent from the two protesting people affected by the dam. Over time as protests and resentment have built up, many feel that the dam is really part of a bigger plan of a circle of dams of which Tipaimukh is the first. (Choudhury, 2012)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0423-9.ch037

Unlike every energy and water resources management plans, hydropower development projects come with both positive and negative impacts. Issues regarding climate resilience and climate change adaptation have become increasingly important for large infrastructure investments. Every hydropower plant is uniquely designed to fit to the site specific characteristics of a specific geographical location and the surrounding society, environment, ecology, the magnitude of environmental and social impacts as well as the extent of their positive and negative effects is highly site dependent.

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and home to almost one third of the world's poor. A country's economic development and energy requirement goes hand in hand. Growth of the economy is very vital for the overall growth of its citizen and poverty elevation and India is committed to its citizens for the same, the idea which is also enshrined in the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No.1 i.e. Eradicate Extreme Poverty & Hunger (United Nation Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.a). With the concern and commitment for Global Warming and Climate Change under various International Treaties and Convention to which India is a party, opting for less Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emitting technologies to meet its domestic energy needs while fulfilling its international obligations. Hydropower, a well-established and socially desirable renewable energy technology is a sound alternative to meet those challenges. Hydropower is a proven, mature, predictable and typically price-competitive technology. Above all it has among the best conversion efficiencies of all known energy sources: 90 percent efficiency as opposed to up to 50 percent efficiency of e.g. fossil fuel burning (Mendonça et al., 2012).

Whereas Bangladesh's concern is that the Tipaimukh Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project (hereinafter Tipaimukh Project) will have substantial downstream effect. Bangladesh is already suffering due to the Farakka Barrage in western part and due to the Teesta barrage in the northern part of the country, now the proposed Tipaimukh Project will create threat to livelihood in the eastern part as well. The loss of water flow will cause serious ecological problem and is a sustainable development issue which also finds place in the Millennium Development Goal No.7 i.e. Ensure Environmental Sustainability (UNDP, n.d.a).

Ever since the term 'Sustainable Development' has been coined by Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development) in its report 'Our Common Future' in 1987, it has been on the forefront of the global agenda. With the recent adoption of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 to carry further the targets of Millennium Development Goals, which was adopted in 2000 by world leaders. Numerous targets set by Sustainable Development Goals are very much relevant from the perspective of this chapter, especially Goal-6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all; Goal-7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; Goal-13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact; Goal-15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss; and Goal-16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies (UNDP, n.d.b).

The countries have different priorities for their own country. But in the process of development, countries have to find out that whose priorities are more sustainable, because development without sustainability has no meaning in reality. As the proposed project has led to controversy between India and Bangladesh over water rights as well as controversy within the indigenous people of Manipur, who are to be displaced by the reservoir. Because displacement due to development projects also often restricts indigenous people from availing the benefits of nature's services or ecosystem services as well. Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding among Manipur Govt., National Hydroelectric Power Corporation and Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd. on April 28th 2010 and signing of the subsequent Promoter's Agreement with the purpose of setting up a Joint Venture Company on October 22nd 2011 steep opposition started (Mehta, 2012).

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