



## People's movement against Tipaimukh project in Manipur: An assessment

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to undertake an in- depth study of people's movement against Tipaimukh Project in Manipur, in the larger context of popular opposition to development projects which displace indigenous populations of Manipur and the north- east region. By drawing upon both primary sources such as project reports, environmental impact assessment reports, reports of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and newspaper reports as well as secondary sources in the form of books and journal articles, it lays out the myriad reasons for popular resistance against the project such as loss of land and livelihood, impacts on indigenous culture and way of life, ecological costs, procedural lapses and lack of democratic consultative process among others. The paper also provides a detailed account of the different aspects of the popular movement against the project, such the organisations involved, different mechanisms employed to raise popular consciousness and various modes of collective action undertaken during the course of the movement. It concludes tentatively that when elected government acting in certain interests, implements developmental projects disregarding the voices and aspirations of indigenous people, social movements remains the only mechanism to articulate their voices and make the government accountable.

**Keywords:** social movements, Tipaimukh project, indigenous communities, Hmar, Zeliangrong Naga, Barak, Manipur

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### 1. Introduction

The contestation and movement over the Tipaimukh multi- purpose project present a classic case of conflict between the state, using its power of eminent domain, in instituting large scale development projects which aims to harness coercive control over natural resources and the indigenous communities at the margins of political system who are dependent upon these natural resources and surrounding eco- system for sustenance of their economic and social way of life. Such conflicts assume significance because it is direct fall out for a developmental model which seeks to tap and exploit natural resources for appropriation of revenue or surplus, by the state in alliance with private interests. At the receiving end of these developmental projects are indigenous people who owing to their habitat often face displacement, dislocation and other socio- economic and political costs of these projects. As they are communities in the political margins, often unrepresented in political decision- making process, social movements assume the role of an important mechanism to articulate their grievances to the government and seek reforms in policies in alliance with other groups sharing similar interests and conviction. Thus, social movements play the significant role of democratising decision- making structures.

The state of Manipur owing to its abundant water resources of its riverine and wet land system, has been drawing the attention of the government as favourable location for hydro- electric power projects. Government of India seeks to generate power from these projects in Manipur to supply power to its power deficient regions and also for sale to countries with deficient powers such as Myanmar (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. However projects like Loktak project, Mapithel project, Khoupum project among others have destroyed the surrounding ecosystem and affected the local population. The movement against Tipaimukh project should be studied in this context. Moreover, the dam site will sub- emerge important historical and cultural sites, intrinsic to identity of people inhabiting the area. In the following pages, the significance of Barak river and its surrounding ecosystem for culture and

history of indigenous communities, particularly Hmars and Zeliangrongs Nagas, different reasons for people's opposition to the dam, different modes of protests and demonstrations adopted during the movement will be discussed. To begin, ideological underpinnings of large development projects, particularly dams will be briefly discussed. A brief over- view of the project will also be done.

### (1) The Politics of Dam

Dams represent a symbol of human mastery over nature. It is a manifestation when two ways of thinking about nature, one viewing nature as threatening and thus needs to be tamed and the other which views nature as a source of resources and thus needing to be exploited for economic development are combined. Dam construction seems to be justified as long as it is framed in terms of water shortage in certain parts of society and the need to maximise harnessing of water resources for overall development of the society. The notions of common good and national development are being used to justify exploitation of resources from one part of society for the benefit of other. The logic of aggregate cost and benefit is being employed to justify enhance exploitation of water resources by one segment of the society by arguing that other segments are unable to exploit them optimally. Dams facilitate diversion of resources from utilisation by low-energy- use rural population to high- energy- use urban population without the consent of the former. The logics of national development, modernisation and progress are being employed to justify this transfer of resources. Thus, the debate over dams is complicated as dams are seen as symbols of national pride, revered as symbols of nation's progress, commitment to modernisation and development and technical advancement signified in the ability to tame nature (Fisher, 1999) <sup>[9]</sup>.

On the other hand, those who are opposed to construction of big dams point to the enormous human and social cost of displacement, loss of livelihood and way of life, ecological cost of destruction of flora and fauna, climatic impacts, among others. Displacement of people from areas submerged by dams has been the gravest impact. In most cases, people displaced by dams become landless urban poor and end up being politically invisible. A conservative estimate put number of people displaced by dams in the last fifty years at 50- 60 millions. A World Bank Report states that about a million people are displaced by development projects every year, which is higher than those displaced by war and natural disasters. An overwhelming majority of people displaced are poor and politically powerless. Moreover, a large proportion of population displaced belongs to indigenous communities. In India around 20 million people have been displaced by developmental projects in last four decades and 70 percent of this displaced population have not been rehabilitated. Adivasi population constitute around 40 per cent of this displaced population while their population share is only 6 percent. In Philippines too, a large majority of dams are constructed in areas inhabited by indigenous communities. All over the world, people who have been resettled or relocated are socially, economically and emotionally devastated by relocation (Fisher, 1999) <sup>[9]</sup>. According to WCD Report (2000) <sup>[2]</sup>, the benefits from dams are inequitably distributed, excluding women, poor and tribal communities from a share in the benefits. It rejected the balance *sheet approach* and adopted the *rights and risks* framework in order to identify stake holders. But it did not argue for total ban on

construction of dams. The report laid out a framework for dams related decision making process based on the five core values of equity, sustainability, efficiency, participatory decision making and accountability. It emphasized dialogue with stakeholders in all the stages (WCD, 2000) <sup>[2]</sup>.

A fundamental flaw in accounting the costs and benefits of dams is that only aggregate costs and benefits are accounted and not how the costs and benefits are socially distributed. Thus, negative effects of projects are justified as long as the aggregate benefits outweigh them. Often in practice, the officials and dam planners exaggerate the benefits and tend to underestimate the costs, particularly social and ecological costs. Now it is an established fact that resettlement and relocation of displaced communities cause several social, cultural and economic hardships. Resettlement tears apart communities, social cohesion, interpersonal relationships, social networks and the cultural way of life. Thus, it leads to anomie, insecurity, loss of cultural identity in addition to loss of natural and man- made resources. A great majority of people displaced by dams have politically disappeared, swallowed by urban slums becoming migrant labourers. Indigenous communities are far more vulnerable to the impacts of displacement. Studies show that they hardly recover from economic, psychological, cultural and other effects of displacement. The strong spiritual and emotional bonds that indigenous communities have with nature and strong communal bonds and ties are being shattered by displacement. While the existing guidelines for dam construction maintains that projects should lead to overall improvement in living standards of affected people, evidence suggests that lives of affected people have been impoverished economically or socially. The most common indicator used for comparison of life styles of people prior to and after displacement is income. But this indicator fails to account full value of previous lifestyle and full impact of shift from subsistence economy to a cash economy. Moreover, new living standard fails to meet previous lifestyle measured in terms of dietary diversity, leisure, stores of social capital, access to forest and river resources (Fisher, 1999) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Thus, the conflict over dam projects can be viewed in terms of two conflicting perspective over nature/ environment. One which is those of state and development authorities which view nature and land as natural resources and a commodity. While for the indigenous population who live and subsist on it, land is part of their lived landscape, an imagined sacred landscape. It is considered as homeland of belongingness and locus of ancestral connections. It is material embodiment of their traditional knowledge, a source of their distinct indigenous identity and a locus of claims for political autonomy (Arora, 2009) <sup>[4]</sup>.

### (2) The Tipaimukh Project

The Tipaimukh project was originally designed to control flood in Cachar plains in 1926. In the post independent period, the first proposal for the project was conceived in 1954 by the Central Water and Power Commission on the request of Government of Assam, for managing flood in Cachar Plains. The Commission identified three sites- Mainadhar (1955), Naraindhar (1964) and Bhubandhar (1965) in Assam. However, the proposal for construction of the dam on these three sites were rejected due to location on high seismic zones, geological instability, poor foundation structure, flooding situation and heavy sub- emergence. As a result, the site of the dam was shifted from Assam to current

site at Tipaimukh Village in Churachandpur district of Manipur and it was finalised in 1974 (AFCL, 2007) <sup>[1]</sup>. The first detailed report for construction of the project was submitted in 1984. However, the report was criticised for not conducting a proper environment impact assessment. In 1995, on the request of North- Eastern Council (NEC), Brahmaputra Flood Control Board prepared a detailed project report with an estimated cost of Rs. 2899 crores (Sethi, 2006) <sup>[20]</sup>. The present dam site is located 500 metres from the point where the rivers, Tuivai and Barak merge. As per findings of State Archaeological Department, there is no historically or religiously important sites in the areas to be sub- emerged (Singh, 2006) <sup>[21]</sup>. The implementing agencies were changed on multiple occasions too and North East Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) was entrusted with the project in 1999.

It is to be noted here that former Chief Minister, Rishang Keishing made a statement declaring that the Manipur Cabinet did not approve the Tipaimukh Project. Further the Manipur Assembly passed a resolution in 1998 not to implement the project. The project was approved during President's rule in 2001, without due consultation with the people of Manipur (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Manipur Government and NEEPCO on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2003 and notified on 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2003 to generate power from the project under section 2 of Electricity Act. The title of the project was subsequently changed from Tipaimukh High Dam (Multi-purpose Project) to Tipaimukh Power Project. The foundation stone for 1500 MW project was launched by then Union Minister Shushil Kumar Shinde on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2006 in a ceremony attended by then Chief Minister of Manipur, O. Ibobi Singh and other national and state level dignitaries, amidst protest and opposition (The Sangai Express, 17<sup>th</sup> December, 2006). The centre replaced NEEPCO, with National Hydro-electric Power Corporation (NHPC) as the implementing agency on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2009. The Tipaimukh Project became a joint venture of NHPC (69%), Shimla based Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Limited (26%) and Government of Manipur (5%) (The Telegraph, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2009). The project is designed at an estimated cost of Rs 81,380.79 million, including a net estimate cost of Rs 19,700.94 million (Arora & Kipgen, 'We Can Live Without Power, but We Can't Live Without our Land': Indigenous Hmar Oppose the Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. A number of organisations and civil bodies also protested against signing of MOU without taking the free, informed and prior consent of affected communities Environmental clearance for the project was given by the Ministry of Environment and Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008. Interestingly, the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) of MoEFCC rejected the 'Forest Clearance' for the project in its meeting on 11- 12<sup>th</sup> July and 13- 14<sup>th</sup> August 2013 for forest loss in Mizoram and Manipur (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. As per the final DPR, Tipaimukh Dam will have power generation capacity of 1500 MW. The dam site is located 500 metres downstream from confluence of rivers Barak and Tuivai. The structure is located at an altitude of 180 metres above sea level, with a height of 162.8 metres and a length of 390 metres. Reservoir of dam will be located in Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts of Manipur and Aizawl district of Mizoram and it will lead to sub-emergence of 286.20 sq. km ((AFCL), 2007) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### (3) Barak- Cultural and Historical Significance

The Barak river and its surrounding eco- system occupy a pivotal place in myths, belief- system history and culture of communities inhabiting along it, particularly Hmars and Zeliangrong Nagas. For the Hmars, the river not only shapes the economic, social and political life, but it is integral to their identity, culture and history as a Kuki- Chin group. Several sites of cultural and religious significance are located along the river and rituals play significant roles in re- establishing ancestral connections and re- affirming their collective memory as Hmars (Arora & Kipgen, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. The Hmar cosmology does not distinguish between nature and culture. The rivers Tuivai and Barak are considered holy by them. The centrality of Barak river and its natural environment in shaping traditional life of Hmar people was put forward by a retired school teacher and an activist in an interview as:

We have learned to live with the water and forests. We have maintained some of our traditions and customs, but we have survived because we have adapted. For the Hmar people, the land is part of us. We are sustained by what it provides. We can say that we are the land (quoted from Arora& Kipgen, 2012, p. 113) <sup>[5]</sup>.

The proposed Tipaimukh project is located 500 metres away from the confluence of rivers Tuivai and Barak, called *Rounglevaisuo*, which is a site considered sacred by Hmars. The site is of historical and anthropological importance not only for Hmars, but also for kindred tribes such as Unau-Suipuis, Hrangkhawl and Darlongs of Tripura, Beites of Meghalaya, Sakecheps of Assam and Komrem tribes of Manipur. According to folklores and legends, *rounglevaisuo* is the place where these different groups, during the course of their migration between South- east Asia and central Asia, parted to settle in different places, after making Hmars the guardian of this sacred and historically significant site (Hmar, 2003). On the Barak, there is a small river island called *Thiledam* (meaning life and death in Hmar), situated on the upstream, at a near distance from the dam structure. In Hmar mythology, the soul of a deceased person goes to this island from where the soul proceeds to paradise or hell or comes back to the earth for rebirth. The protruding structure of *Tawmlung* at Tuivai river and all the spots marking magical and mythical exploits of the mythical folk hero, *Lalroung*, the *Rawtaw* at *Taiithu* ghats, and his stone pillars just above the *Parbung* ghats are important sites of Hmar cultural history (Hmar, 2003) <sup>[12]</sup>. Hence, the Barak river and its surrounding eco- system are of great cultural, historical, cosmological and mythological importance for the Hmars. Importance of the river in the history and identity of Hmar people is stated by a villager during an interview as:

Our (Hmar) community is like this great river *Tuiroung* (Barak). It has been flowing before any of us can remember. We take our strength and our wisdom and our ways from the flow and direction that has been established for us by our ancestors, many years ago. Their wisdom flows through us to our children to generations we will never know. We will live out our lives as we must and we will die in peace because we will know that our people and this river will flow on after us (quoted from Arora& Kipgen, 2012, p. 113) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Important historical and cultural sites of Zeliangrong Nagas are also located along the Barak river. The Barak waterfalls and *Zeliad* lake which are important sites of Zeliangrong history will be sub- emerged by the dam, thereby destroying material evidences of folklores and legends, rendering them only make up stories (Kamei, Controversial Hydro Electric

(Multi-purpose) Project, 2006). The rising water level from the dam will destroy the five lakes located above the Ahu (Barak) water fall where the magical sword of Jadonang, national hero of Nagas is believed to be hidden. Regarding the importance of Barak in history, culture and communal life of Zeliangrongs, Pamei (2001) states:

The Zeliangrong people who live in these areas, like any other tribal people, do not lead an individualised, commodity-governed life, but live in a well-knit web of community life. Their ancestral emotional bonds to their land, the mother-earth, constitute their cultural and psychological frame of mind and they cannot be compromised or negotiated. The submergence of the Ahu (Barak) waterfalls, the biggest and the most beautiful natural gift in Manipur, will destroy an important aspect of their heritage – the innumerable myths and legends woven around the waterfalls, which are an inalienable part of their bank of memories, inherited through centuries.

#### **(4) Popular Opposition To Tipaimukh Dam- An Assessment**

The construction of the dam and installation of reservoir on the Barak river will have profound and large-scale impacts on natural environment/ ecology as well as social, economic and cultural life of people inhabiting the area. One reason for widespread popular opposition to the project is due to its drastic impacts. The negative impacts can broadly be categorised as loss of land and livelihood, ecological impacts and disaster proneness. Besides these, inefficient costs and benefit analysis, procedural lapses and lack of democratic process and participation are some reasons for popular opposition to the project. These are discussed below.

##### **A. Loss of land and Livelihood**

The dam will cause permanent sub-emergence of around 286.20 sq. km of land (Kamei, Controversial Hydro Electric (Multi-Purpose) Project, 2006). According to Environment Impact Assessment of AFCL (2007) <sup>[1]</sup>, there are 14 villages which will be under water, namely Saleng, Darlawn, New Vervek, Sailutar, Sakawrdai, Khawlek, Vaitin, Vanbawng, Khawpuar, Suanguilawn, Ratu, Phullen, North-East Tlangnuam and Lungsum. 2,027 persons from 12 villages will be displaced as these villages will be under water. Cultivable land of about 27,242 hectares and garden lands of 77 villages of Manipur and 14 villages of Mizoram will be affected. More than 40,000 people will be made landless. Eight villages in Barak Valley will sub-emerged. Flooding resulting from the dam will deteriorate natural resources, thereby destroying livelihood of local people who are dependent on them. The (subsistence) economy which is dependent upon resources derived from the environment will collapse leading to financial and economic crises (Kamei, Controversial Hydro Electric (Multi-Purpose) Project, 2006). The proposed project will sub-emerge forest areas used by indigenous Hmar and Zeliangrong communities, wetlands used for paddy cultivation, riverine and forest habitat, thereby destroying the livelihood of these communities (Arora & Kipgen, 'We Can Live Without Power, but We Can't Live Without our Land': Indigenous Hmar Oppose the Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. It will greatly affect the main source of livelihood of the indigenous people around, which is horticulture from forests and agriculture from land along the Barak river and its tributaries such as Irang, Makru, Leimatak and Tuivai rivers

as well as aquatic species of food from these rivers. Thus, the project will lead to undermining of food sovereignty and lead to dependency on external food sources as large tracts of arable land along these rivers will be submerged (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup> Pamei (2001) argues that the project, which aims to control flood in Cachar plain while causing sub-emergence in Churachandpur and Tamenglong districts of Manipur, is against National Land Use Policy. The dam will deprive the people of the area ancestral rights to land and forest, without any alternate source of livelihood. The people will be robbed of their natural heritage- forests, natural resources and land, which constitute mainstay of a tribal economy.

##### **B. Loss of Culture and Way of Life**

For the indigenous communities who are dependent on land, forest, river and surrounding eco-system for their livelihood and subsistence economy, sub-emergence of land and forest implies that their economic and social way of life will be severely disturbed. As with many other indigenous communities, cultural and customary practices of communities along the Barak river are constructed based on subsistence production which is dependent on surrounding eco-system. Thus, once displaced, these communities will not be able to practise their customary way of life in the newly rehabilitated land. Hence, the dam will create problem of resettlement, rehabilitation and repatriation development (Kamei, 2006). As mentioned earlier, many sites of historical and cultural significance of both Hmar and Zeliangrong communities are located along the Barak river. Loss of these sites will amount to destruction of history and identity for these communities. Pamei (2001) argues that the construction of dam and consequent displacement and destruction will pose a grave threat to people's democratic tradition of consensual decision making on decisions affecting their lives. She further argues that with the loss of forest, river and land and imminent collapse of traditional way of life, the dam will virtually cause a total destruction of the world of Zeliangrong people. Indigenous activists argue that migrant workers, employed in the project, will come and settle in their restricted access areas. This will lead to demographic change and the indigenous people will be denied access to the common property resources over time. Moreover, the government is unable to assure local population with an effective rehabilitation and resettlement package (Arora & Kipgen, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. The 162.80 metres long reservoir will divide the people on geo-administrative units, making them vulnerable to outside forces (Pamei, 2001). Kamei (2006) argues that the project totally disregards ancient Zeliangrong customs and heritage and reflects government partiality.

##### **C. Militarisation and human rights violation**

With the commencement of construction of the project, massive deployment of military and security personnel operating in Manipur under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 will be required in order to protect the key installations, infrastructures and the workers. Nearly Rs. 400 crores are earmarked as expenses for security deployment by project planners. Militarisation and securitisation of development activities is a vital factor for violation of human rights, apart from displacement from land for construction of military complexes and restriction of movements of indigenous communities for accessing their traditional sources of livelihood and sustenance. Further, militarisation will lead to intrusion into traditional ways of life and

traditional functioning of villages of the indigenous communities (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>.

#### D. Ecological cost and disaster proneness

The dam will lead to sub- emergence of 8,406 hectares of forest areas in Manipur and 1,600 hectares of forest areas in Mizoram (AFCL, 2007) <sup>[1]</sup>. As per the proposal submitted by Government of Manipur to MoEFFC, Government of India (dated 4<sup>th</sup> April, 2007), a total forest area of 25,882.14 hectares of forest area will be diverted for project purposes such as the reservoir area, project area, land for relocation of road communication system and land required for rehabilitation (File No. 8-63/2005-FC, 2006). The forest areas, particularly in Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts, that will be sub-emerged are home to rare species of flora, fauna and aquatic system as Manipur falls under bio-diversity hotspots of the world where endangered and exotic species are found (Arora & Kipgen, 'We Can Live Without Power, but We Can't Live Without our Land': Indigenous Hmar Oppose the Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. Instead of conducting an updated survey, the project authority, based on early botanical survey record of the region (*Flora of British India, 1872-1897*) maintain that no record of plant gathering and animal hunting with reference to Tipaimukh project (Pamei, 2001). The proposed project will sub- emerge Bunning Bird Sanctuary, Keilam Wild Life Sanctuary and Zeilad Wild Life Sanctuary (Yumnam, 2020). The dam will also affect natural flow of water, disturb aquatic life and induce ecological changes in downstream riparian communities. Over time, the water irrigated by dam through canals will become infertile due to alkalisation of soil. Salinity level of water will also increase making it unfit for domestic consumption. Worse, the raising water level will cause health hazard resulting from water- borne diseases, industrial pollution and environmental degradation (Kamei, 2006). Further, the settlement of workers and project staff will increase the pressure on natural habitats of these birds and endemic species in the form of tree felling, snarling and poaching (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>.

The Environment Impact Assessment Report of AFCL (2007) <sup>[1]</sup> acknowledges that the dam site falls under Zone V of Seismic Zoning of India meaning that the area falls under high seismic zone and prone to earthquakes. Hence, the construction of the dam and installing of huge reservoir will trigger earthquakes. As per statistics, the area had experienced twenty- one instances of earthquakes of more than 6.5 Richter scale (Abbasi, 2009). The site lies just in parallel to Taithu faults (Kamei, Controversial Hydro Electric (Multi- Purpose) Project, 2006). Thus, construction of the dam will make the region vulnerable to earthquakes and consequent disasters from dam wreckage which will be of unparalleled human and natural costs. A sudden dam breakage triggered by earthquake can result in sudden draining of reservoir causing severe floods leading to large scale devastations, has been a cause of concern for people of lower riparian areas of Assam and Bangladesh (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>.

Commencement of construction activities such as blasting for road construction and dam tunnelling will cause loosening of sedimentary layers and rock joints resulting in landslides. Further massive felling of trees of over 300 sq. kms will cause soil erosion with sediments filling up the reservoir, making the project unviable for long term energy generation. The project will also contribute to ecological instability in form of

landslides and soil erosion due to massive deforestation. As per the proposed project, nearly eight million trees and twenty- seven thousand bamboo groves are to be felled and a forest area of twenty thousand hectares will be sub- emerged. This will contribute to massive emission of greenhouse gases, resulting in climate change, thereby rendering all efforts to mitigate climate change in Manipur and North- East region redundant (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>.

#### E. Inefficient cost- benefit analysis

A critical analysis of MOU signed in April 2009 will reveal that the benefits from the projects are not clearly stated. Manipur will get only 5 % of the total power generated from the project (Pamei, 2009). As per estimates of revenue sharing, there are no substantial benefits allocated for indigenous communities who are on the receiving end of the project (Hmar, 2011) <sup>[11]</sup>. Moreover, corporatisation and privatisation of power sector will result in electricity rates which the project affected poor people will not be able to buy. Besides the rising water levels will sub- emerge already existing critical infrastructures such as the historic old Cachar Road (popularly known as Tongjei Maril) and a 20 km stretch of National Highway 53 (now NH- 37) including two bridges over Makru and Barak Rivers will be sub- emerged. Moreover, water ways along Barak river connecting to the state capital to upper Barak that will be dislocated and a diversion that will be needed for 60- 80 km of stretch of Imphal- Jiribam Road (AFCL, 2007; Pamei, 2009) <sup>[1]</sup>. These are substantial infrastructural (economic) costs associated with the project. The proposed project will uproot the economic lifeline of Hmar people living in the area as the Barak river serve as the only channel of transport for travelling as well as shipping agricultural products such as ginger, bamboo and other vegetables for trade to villages in Assam and Jiribam in Manipur (Yumnam, 2020.) <sup>[23]</sup>.

#### F. Procedural Lapses

There were several procedural and administrative lapses during the whole course of survey, designing and commencement of the project. Environmental impact assessments were not conducted properly and the information was not shared with the stakeholders which includes the affected villagers. Environmental regulations were flouted and clearances were given to the project before impact assessment studies were completed and public hearings for engendering public consent were convened (Arora & Kipgen, 'We Can Live Without Power, but We Can't Live Without our Land': Indigenous Hmar Oppose the Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. The Ministry of Forest and Environment cleared the project when downstream impact assessment in lower riparian areas of Assam and Bangladesh was still pending. Government of India issued notification inviting international bidders for the project before EIA, DPR and reliable information on the project were available (Yumnam, 2008). Even the forest department of Manipur state was not involved in preparation of the DPR and clearances from it were never sought. The Principal Chief Conservator of forest of the state S. Singit openly declared that the department was never consulted even when large areas of forest which are rich in bio- diversity will be sub- emerge as a result of the dam. He pointed out that 21, 952 hectares of land including 219 sq. km of forest area will be under water (The Sangai Express, 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2008).

As per EIA report, five public hearings were conducted with

representatives of affected villages. It declared that after these hearings, the State Pollution Control Board issued 'No Objection Certificate' after the village representatives and officials gave their consent to the project. However, activists argue that norms of prior and informed consent were violated and the public hearings were reduced to procedural ceremonies. Pamei (2009) states that these public hearings violated all norms of democratic process and public accountability. In its report published on 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2006, CORE argues that the public hearings were conducted in presence of heavily armed personnel of Assam Rifles and Manipur Police. According to some villagers, who participated in a public hearing conducted on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008, villagers were promised with jobs, contracts, compensation and vague promises in order to make them participate and circulation of information was done hastily through words of mouth. A preliminary study of the five public hearings show that affected villagers have rejected construction of the project. The first public hearing held at Darlawm Community Hall, Darlawm in Mizoram on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2004 was heavily criticised by indigenous people due to its lack of transparency and failure to produce critical documents like Detailed Project Report (DPR) and Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) by NEEPCO. In the public hearing held at Churachandpur (as a part of second hearing), it was held closed doors inside the office of Deputy Commissioner in presence of heavy security forces on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2006. The Deputy Commissioner, Churachandpur, Sumant Singh chaired the hearing where representatives from Manipur Control Board, NEEPCO and chiefs of 8- 10 villages participated. But the representatives of over thirty villages, environmentalists and the media were denied entry where the public hearing was held. Rejection and protests against public hearings in Tamenglong and Churachandpur led to rescheduling of subsequent public hearings at Keimai Village (Tamenglong district) and the Tipaimukh Dam site (Churachandpur district). The public hearing at Keimai village could not be held as affected people from Keimai, Nungba and many other villages from across Tamenglong district boycotted it, arguing that public hearings are a fraud process with negligible space to accommodate the aspirations of affected people (Yumnam, 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. As per norms of World Commission on Dams, public hearings should be inclusive, fair, representative, culturally sensitive and held in participatory forums where diverse agencies, interest groups and individuals can articulate their opinions and grievances as inputs in the decision- making process. Thus, these public hearings failed to meet the benchmarks set by WCD. During an interview an elderly village of Lungthulien Village stated about the public hearings:

The Deputy Commissioner of Churachandpur district who arrived with a good number of security forces displayed a patronising and dictatorial attitude. Majority of us did not understand what they were lecturing as they spoke in a language that was foreign to us. If the authorities thought they were conducting consultation, I must say that was a big lie. None of were given an opportunity to speak. They handpicked few pro-dam speakers and that was how it vainly ended (quoted from Arora & Kipgen, 2012, p. 120) <sup>[5]</sup>.

#### **G. Lack of consultation and democratic process**

As mentioned in the preceding section, design and implementation of the project was commenced without prior

and informed discussion or public hearings to seek the consent of affected villages. The five public hearings resemble stage managed events where few dam supporters were made to speak, on promise of jobs and other benefits. Detailed information of the project, environment impact assessment report, survey of land to be sub- emerged, funding of the project and cost- benefit analysis were not shared with the public. The MoU that was signed between Government of Manipur and NEEPCO on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2003, was done without taking into account the consent of affected villagers. And the foundation stone for the project was laid on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2006 amidst widespread protest and opposition. Manipur people's constitutional rights were violated by secret approval of the project during central (President's) rule as per statement of L. Chandramani Singh, Minister of Irrigation and Flood Control, on the floor of state Assembly. Authorities involved in design and implementation of the project- Brahmaputra Board, Guwahati, Central Water Commission, New Delhi, North Eastern Electric Power Corporation, Shillong and North Eastern Council, Shillong have undermined fair procedures and democratic norms. This can be gauged from their secretive manner of planning and implementation, holding back every information, their rejection of local participation and disregard for tribal people's right natural and cultural heritage (Pamei, 2001). Forceful commencement of the project, without taking into account voices of indigenous communities, implies violation of democratic norms and traditions (Kamei, 2006).

#### **H. Movement against Tipaimukh dam**

Government's decision to implement the Tipaimukh power project despite opposition from affected communities and concerned civil society organisations have given rise to an organised movement where different organisations sharing same concern have come together under a broad platform. It is the Action Committee Against Tipaimukh Project (ACTIP), an umbrella group of twenty five organisations in Manipur, which spearheaded movement against the project in Manipur. Some of the organisations who have been vocal against the dam and pro-actively involved in the movement are Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD), Centre for Organisation Research and Education (CORE), Citizens Concern for Dams and Development (CCDD), Committee On Land and Natural Resources (COLNAR) {which is a body constituted by United Naga Council (UNC), Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Naga Women Union, Manipur (NWUM) and All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM)}, Hmar Students Association (HSA), Sinlung Indigenous People's Human Rights Organisation (SIPHRO), among others (Arora & Kipgen, 2012). The project is also opposed by several national liberation (insurgent) groups terming it as India's sinister effort to exercise control and hegemony over natural resources of Manipur (Yumnam, 2014) <sup>[22]</sup>. HSA asserts that Tipaimukh project is solely a power generating project and not a development project. It is critical of lack of consultation with the people, improper estimate of land to be sub-emerged, absence of precise calculation of economic viability and environmental costs, ambiguity about sources of funding and sharing of benefits with the locals (Arora & Kipgen, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. CCDD has expressed concern on the lack of consultation and overriding democratic processes in approving the Tipaimukh project during President's rule in 2001. The signing of MOUs for the project in 2010 and 2011

were criticised by different organisations (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>.

Activists and movement organisations have employed various tactics and forms of collective action such as sending representations, petitions and organising protest events. Members and activists of CORE and CCDD had procured valuable information and documents through Right to Information Act. And several petitions and legal notices have also been filed. On 26<sup>th</sup> January 2003, a protest rally was organised at Tamenglong Headquarters denouncing the signing of MoU on the project by Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD). Protestors at the rally carried placards and banners which read, “We Condemn MoU”, “Tipaimukh Dam is against the wish of People”, “Nature is our cultural heritage- Preserve it”. (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>. The Sixth International Day Against Dam and For River, Water and Life was observed by tribal people in all the hill districts of Manipur from 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2003, wherein they declared that ‘newly proposed dams and such like river projects in Manipur must only be implemented with free, prior and informed consent of indigenous people of Manipur’ (Arora & Kipgen, ‘We Can Live Without Power, but We Can’t Live Without our Land’: Indigenous Hmar Oppose the Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, 2012)<sup>[5]</sup>.

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 2003, village authorities, several indigenous organisations and civil society organisations raised their objection, under section 29 of the Electricity (Supply) Act to Tipaimukh Hydro- electric Multi- purpose Project by making formal submissions to NEEPCO. The major arguments raised by the people, against the project in these submissions include loss of rich ancestral land and its natural resources, flora and fauna and source of livelihood which can never be compensated by money. The submissions stressed rich lands which were under sustained agricultural and horticultural cultivation will be sub- emerged, thereby forcing the people (who are self- reliant) to beg for survival. It was further asserted that the project is an imposed and unwelcome development plan of the government on the people providing them what they don’t need and taking away from them what they value. Tribal lands are an important part of culture, history and constitution of villages. And loss of land as a result of the project will result in chaos and conflict among the communities, it was argued. CCDD expressed that no dam should be built without prior consent of affected communities. It further asserted that a comprehensive study of people’s water and energy needs and viable options of meeting those should be conducted before commissioning any energy project. There is no mention of alternative use of the acquired land if the project is abandoned mid way, or alternative means of sustainable livelihood for affected people or a disaster management plan in the proposed project, it further argued (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>.

HSA criticised the MoU for falsely depicting the reality of Manipur and giving major concession to the project at the cost of Manipur and her people. It questioned the concept which views land as a commodity which can be alienated from its indigenous owners. NWUM objected the project on the ground that indigenous women who have strong attachment to land and their organisations were not taken into account in decision making process of the project. It further argued that women would be adversely affected by sudden and abrupt changes in the occupational and livelihood patterns. It also stressed that women are preservers and protectors of indigenous values and dislocation of the

existing system will disable their decision making capabilities. In its objection, CATD emphasized on the issue of cultural rights of indigenous communities and loss of their sacred sites due to sub- emersion. It also stressed on the impending loss of biodiversity due to loss of forest and on the fact that environmental clearance for the project was rejected in 1987, further asserting that no substantial changes in project planning have been effected so as to warrant environmental clearance. In its submission, it argued that construction of large dams is an outdated concept by asserting that indigenous people and communities have sovereign rights over their land and natural resources. On 19<sup>th</sup> September 2003, a memorandum was submitted to the Prime Minister of India by the indigenous people of Manipur represented by CATD, NWU, NPHR, UNC and ANSAM. It highlighted issues associated with the project such as loss of land (forest and agricultural), loss of sacred and historical sites, displacement of villages among others which are discussed above (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>.

A protest rally was held in Imphal on 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2006 where thousands participated against government decision to follow through the Tipaimukh Project (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>. On 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2006, a massive rally was organised by ACTIP on the theme *Say No to Tipaimukh Dam* against NEEPCO’s move to issue tender seeking for international competitive bidding for work on the project, even before necessary environmental clearance has been obtained. Several placards and banners were displayed which read, ‘NEEPCO’s Move is Against People’s Wish’, ‘Never and Ever Tipaimukh Dam’, ‘We can Live without power, but can’t without Land’. A memorandum demanding scrapping of the project was also submitted to the Chief Minister of Manipur (Arora & Kipgen, 2012)<sup>[5]</sup>.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2006, a peaceful cycle rally was organised by ACTIP in Imphal where thousands protestors from different communities participated. The rally took off from Rising Athletic Ground near Khuman Lampak at around 1 pm and concluded at Thangmeiband Athletics Union ground. Speakers at the event demanded that the construction of dam to be halted immediately and urged NEEPCO to take consent of the people first. They argued that damages caused by the dam will far outweigh its benefits. Notable among the speakers were Dr. S. Ibotombi Singh of Department of Earth Sciences, Manipur University and Dr. Laiphungbam Debarata Roy, President of Committee for Organisation Research and Education (CORE). Dr. Singh highlighted the extensive damage that will be caused to environment and disruptions in social life. Dr. Roy stated that the movement has started at the right time and demanded that no work should start before taking consent of the people, which NEEPCO had not bothered to do. In response to the widespread opposition, Ph. Ibomcha Singh, a senior NEEPCO official in Imphal had stated the previous day that public hearings to draw mass opinion on the issue will be held soon. The cycle rallyists carried placards which read ‘No to Tipaimukh Dam’, ‘Santosh Mohan Dev, Stop Interfering’. The organisers blamed Union Minister Santosh Mohan Dev for lobbying for construction of dam for political gains (Rally against Tipaimukh dam, 2006).

On 7<sup>th</sup> June 2006, a massive rally was organised in New Delhi with the support and collaboration of Naga Students’ Union Delhi (NSUD), Manipur Students’ Association Delhi (MSAD), Assam Students’ Association Delhi and Meghalaya Students’ Association Delhi and memorandum was

submitted to the Prime Minister, demanding that the project be scrapped. Action Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam Project (ACTDP) along with other organisations launched called a general strike on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2006 to protest against the project. A state wide 12 hours chakka bandh was called from 6 am of 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2008 by COLNAR against the government's persistent attempts to proceed with Tipaimukh Hydro- electric (Multi- purpose project) and Mapithel (Thoubal Multi- purpose Project), despite strong opposition from the people. The band was supported by United Naga Council, Naga Women Union Manipur, All Naga Students' Association, Manipur and Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (South). In a press release, it was stated that the government have been undermining genuine concerns and sentiment of affected people and had been attempting to proceed with construction of project with deployment of enhanced security forces. The committee also accused the government of violating agreements and assurances provided earlier that every aspect will be look into, before construction of project commences (The Sangai Express, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2008). On 14<sup>th</sup> March 2011, massive rallies were organised in Imphal and Tipaimukh areas on the occasion of celebrating International Day Against Dam and For River, Water and Life as done in previous years. Press releases were issued reiterating their commitment to protect their rights over rivers and land. Thus, the movement has created a strong network of ethnic associations of indigenous people and civil society organisations of not only north- east India but those of Bangladesh.

Public meetings, press conferences were also conducted as part of campaign against the dam. A joint meeting of anti-dam leaders was organised in the indoor stadium of Tamenglong district headquarters on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2006. The joint session as a part of campaign against the dam, was jointly organised by Action Committee Against Tipaimukh Project and Zeliangrong Union (Assam, Manipur, Nagaland) with Tamenglong ADM RH Gonmei, ACTIP convenor Nanda Kamei and Vice President ZU, Adi Remei as Chief Guest, President and Guest of Honour respectively. During the meeting ACTIP co- convenor O. Bikramjit highlighted various drawbacks of the project. He also mentioned that the proposal for the project was rejected by the state cabinet in 1995 and 1997. Addressing the meeting Nanda Kamei observed that intensity of popular opposition to the project was increasing and that organisations concerned with plight of people are working towards building a mass movement under the banner of ACTIP. He also called upon the leaders to devise plans to intensify the anti- dam movement in coming days (The Sangai Express, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2006)<sup>[3]</sup>. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009, COLNAR which is a joint body of Naga organisations on the issue release a statement which questioned the insensitivity of both the state and central governments in refusing to recognise the rights of indigenous people over their land and resources. It stated that the project procedure violated all established national and international norms of environmental regulations, human rights and legality. It reminded that the desires and aspirations of people to control their land and natural resources and follow their own ways of development have been established in the five public hearings that were held and through hundreds of representations to the government (Newmai News Network, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009)<sup>[16]</sup>.

Earlier protest demonstrations were also held against the

undemocratic, exclusive and coercive manner in which public hearings for the project were conducted. The five public hearings held from 2004 to 2008 were objected strongly by affected communities, particularly in Churachandpur and Tamenglong districts. On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2006, representatives of twenty six different organisations including Zeliangrong Union (Assam, Manipur, Nagaland) and Zeliangrong Students' Union boycotted the public hearing held at Tamenglong Town and organised a protest rally through the town, marching towards the DC office. Kadicham Pamei, Chairman of Zeliangrong Union, Tamenglong said, "We have been demanding our government to develop the Zeilat Lake and Barak Waterfalls as tourist spots, but they never listen and now they are all set to submerge them by Tipaimukh Multi- purpose Hydro- electric Project". The protestors raised slogans like, "Don't divide our people", "Don't take away our land; save our biodiversity", "Dam destroys our land", "We are strongly opposed to the Tipaimukh Dam", "Don't make us refugees", "No land, no identity; our land is our life", "Where will we go if the dam sub- emerges our own land?" (Yumnam, 2020, p. 150)<sup>[23]</sup>.

Several organisations also sent memoranda to the government appealing not to grant environmental clearance for the project. Aizawl based Centre for Environment Protection (CEP) demanded Government of Mizoram and NEEPCO to withdraw their petition to Government of India seeking for diversion of forest land for use of non- forest purpose to pave way for implementation of the project on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2005. In Manipur, organisations such as SIPHRO, HSA, Zeliangrong Students' Union, Manipur, Committee on Protection of Natural Resources in Manipur (CPNRM) and CCDD petitioned Prime Minister of India and the Minister, MoEFCC, Government of India (GOI) not to grant forest clearance for the project during May and June of 2013. A public consultative meeting on the theme "Tipaimukh Dam and Forest Clearance" was organised on 9<sup>th</sup> July, 2013 by CCDD, COLNAR and CPNRM where concern was expressed at forest clearance given by Forest Department, Government of Manipur. The participants in the meeting appealed to MoEFCC to revoke the environmental clearance granted for the project. Many organisations had earlier expressed similar concern at the forest clearance granted despite opposition from affected communities. Civil societies of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam had demanded revocation of MoU signed for the project without consent of indigenous people who are to be affected (Yumnam, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>.

On 4<sup>th</sup> March February 2010, a joint press conference was held at CCDD office, Paona Keithel where COLNAR convenor Kinderson Pamei, HSA vice- president Joseph Hmar, CCDD co- chairperson Aram Pamei, ACTIP co- convenor O. Bikramjit and Ramananda representing affected villagers of Nungba demanded that the matter be discussed in the state Assembly and consent of people, particularly those who are affected be sought before commencement of the project. They questioned the Secular Progressive Front (SPF) government for attempting to implement the project without discussion in the assembly when the project had already been rejected by the state assembly twice. It was highlighted that Manipur will get only 40 MW of electricity while 192 sq kms of land rich in flora, fauna and medicinal plants will be permanently sub- emerged. The press also demanded that proposed meeting between state government, NHPC and SJVNL be scrapped and that merits and demerits be debated



before implementing project (The Sangai Express, 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2010) [7]. On 8<sup>th</sup> September 2010, Committee On Peoples and Environment (COPE) constituted by 38 organisations of Cachar, Karimganj and Halikandi districts of Assam, submitted a memorandum to then Chief Minister of Manipur, voicing their opposition against the dam. In the memorandum, it was highlighted that the lives of about 38 lakhs people will be affected, water shortage will arise destroying agricultural practice and disturbing eco- system of lower riparian areas. A press conference was also held at Manipur Press Club where various impacts of the dam were addressed (The Sangai Express, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2010) [7].

The issue of Tipaimukh project has also been raised in human rights forums of the United Nations such as UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous People, UN Human Rights Council and other UN Treaty Bodies. The Chairperson of the UN Committee on Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination wrote to GOI on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011 recommending to respect free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous People before commencement of Tipaimukh project. However, GOI had not honoured this recommendation as it had proceeded to seek forest clearance for the project in July and August 2013 (Yumnam, 2020, p. 152) [23].

The Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) of MoEFCC conducted hearings for forest clearance on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> July and 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August 2013 during which many affected communities and many human rights and environmental organisations submitted to the Prime Minister and concerned officials of GoI to deny forest clearance to the Tipaimukh Project. FAC denied forest clearance to the project observing that the area of forest land to be sub- emerged is disproportionately large, per megawatt requirement of 16 hectares of forest land is extremely high and 7.8 million trees and 0.27 million column of bamboos will be felled which would constitute an irreplaceable loss. The decision of FAC was based on two grounds, first ecological value- unique biodiversity and wildlife resources of the area and secondly, displacement of 12 villages consisting of 557 villages of indigenous people. It further observed that the Tipaimukh project is one of the most destructive projects in India and its forest sub- emergence will be equivalent to 497 other hydel projects across the country. The recommendations of FAC reaffirms the long standing concern of indigenous communities that loss of around 300 sq. kms of forest land and another 600 sq. kms of land required for compensatory afforestation will not only threaten their subsistence but also destroy a rich ecosystem. Jiten Yumnam (2020) [23] argues that the rejection of forest clearance by FAC laid bare the contradictions in development decision making in Manipur.

### Conclusion

The movement against Tipaimukh project presents a classic case of conflict between the state exercising its power of eminent domain to coercively control natural resources to maximise their use for 'national' ends and the indigenous communities who will be displaced from their ancestral land and its ecosystem, on which their economic, cultural and political life is dependent. In the context of Manipur, there has been a history of hydro- power projects destroying ecosystem and livelihood of people, without getting any benefits from these projects. Popular opposition to the project should be understood in this context. Besides the Barak river (on which the dam is being built) and its surrounding eco- system

occupy a pivotal place in myth, history and culture of indigenous communities inhabiting along it. The sub- emergence caused by the project will destroy these material objects embodying cultural memories, hence the strong resistance from the people. Other reasons for opposition are loss of land and livelihood and concomitant threat on cultural way of life, ecological impacts, procedural lapses and violation of democratic norms. In this context, where elected government disregards the aspirations and voices of indigenous people and forcefully proceeds to implement project, social movements become the only vehicle to articulate their voices and make government accountable. Affected communities in association with larger organisations have been organising a sustained movement against dam with varied forms of collective action such as petitioning, representations, public meetings and protests events among others.

Drawing on political process model, it can be argued that existence of prior organisations among affected communities such as Sinlung Indigenous People's Human Rights Organisation (SIPHRO), Hmar Students' Association (HSA), Zeliangrong Union (ZU), Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Naga Women Union, Manipur (NWUM) among others provided the required organisational network and resources for organisation of campaign and action against the dam. It is the existence of these organisations which enabled formation of larger coalitional groups like Action Committee Against Tipaimukh Project (ACTIP), Committee On Land and Natural Resources (COLNAR) or alliance and joint action with other anti- dam groups like Centre for Organisation, Research and Education (CORE), Citizens' Concern for Dams and Development (CCDD) among others. It also enabled organisation of large scale protests in Delhi, Imphal and other places. The indigenous organisations also function as ties of inter- personal network which facilitated diffusion of information and rise of insurgent consciousness or cognitive liberation, required for mass political action. The various public meetings, press releases and protest gatherings also help raise consciousness among larger public. However, movement emergence in this case can better be explained by political factor (decision of government to implement project despite opposition) rather than shifts in power relationships in the polity as these organised groups have already been in existence.

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