

# INDIGENOUS CONCERNS ON DAM PROJECT OVER SIANG RIVER: A LANDMARK EFFORT TO SAVE ANCESTRAL LANDS AND RIVERS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

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**Abstract:** This research paper describes the deeply felt needs and views of the aggrieved indigenous population of the Siang belt regarding the dam project over Siang-river and the possible outcomes of the forceful execution of the dam project. The movement against the dam project started in 1980 and till today the majority of the people of the region are against the dam project over Siang-river. At present the movement is led under the banner of the Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum. The paper also discusses the perspective and popular narrative of indigenous people on the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project over Siang river. It also intends to discuss about the conflicting narratives of the people and the public establishment. This paper also analyses whether the dam project over Siang River is going to be carried out due to India's national security concern or it is just one of the propagandas of the governments to execute the dam project. This paper also talks about the disastrous consequences of the dam if ever built on Siang River. The govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and the govt. of India should give heed to the voices of the aggrieved local indigenous people of the Adi tribe in order to maintain peace and tranquility in the region. The researcher collected and analysed the data through indigenous perspective and field survey. In this backdrop, the paper also underlines implications for future research and practice.

**Keywords:** Anti Dam Movement, Dam, Ecology, Indigenous, National Security, Protest.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Siang River is a major tributary of the Brahmaputra that flows through Arunachal Pradesh. The river enters India in Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh and flows through Siang District and East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The region where the river flows through is known for its pristine ecosystem, rich biodiversity, and cultural significance to indigenous communities. However, the proposal to construct large dams on the Siang River has sparked strong opposition from the local communities, environmentalists and activists. The local indigenous people are against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project. The proposed dam project on Siang-river poses significant-risks due to the region's high seismic activity and susceptibility to landslides. Located in Seismic Zone V, the area is prone to powerful earthquakes, which could compromise the dam's structural integrity and lead to catastrophic flooding. Additionally, the fragile mountainous terrain increases the likelihood of landslides, which can cause sedimentation, disrupt river ecosystems, and threaten local communities. Beyond geological hazards, the project also risks displacing indigenous populations and causing severe ecological damage. Given these concerns, alternative and sustainable energy solutions should be explored to balance development with environmental and social stability.

The anti dam movement in the region is driven by concerns over ecological destruction, displacement of indigenous tribes, seismic risks, and the potential alteration of the rivers's natural flow, which could have severe consequences to

downstream also. The Siang is not just a river but a lifeline for the Adi community and other indigenous groups who depend on it for their livelihoods, traditions, and identity. Opponents of the dam argue that large –scale hydroelectric project threatens fragile Himalayan ecosystems, disrupts fish migration patterns, submerge fertile lands, and increase the risk of landslides and floods. Furthermore, they fear that the projects could undermine India's water security by altering the natural hydrology of the Brahmaputra, which is crucial for Assam state as well.

Mega Dam issue in the Siang River is not a new issue and the movement has started since 1980. The movement against the mega dam project started with Siang Bachao Andolan. During the movement, protests and strikes took place. The Dam project on Siang river was first supposed to be carried out by Brahmaputra Flood Control Company (BFCC) later renamed as Brahmaputra Board Company (BBC) and later on the project was handed over to National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), followed by Jay Pee Company. (JP). At present the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) has taken up the project again to build a Mega dam on Siang river. The name of the project is Siang Upper Multipurpose Project. The local people were totally against the dam project and they were not ready to compromise during the initial stage of their protest i.e during 1980s and to this day their stand is same. In 1980s the people protested against the Mega Dam project under the banner of Siang Bachao Andolan. Later in 2002, the movements of the aggrieved indigenous people were carried out under the banner of Siang People's Forum. Many committees and forums were formed during 2003 to 2013 to stop the damming projects on Siang River. From 2013 onward to till date the movements against the execution of Mega Dam project on Siang River are carried out under the banner of Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum.

The anti –dam movement has gained momentum through protests, legal battles, and advocacy efforts, with activists calling for sustainable alternatives that prioritize environmental conservation and respect for indigenous rights. The struggle against the Siang River dam project is not just about development but it is about protecting a way of life, preserving nature, and ensuring a balanced approach to progress.

## II. THE BACKGROUND AND THE ANTI- DAM MOVEMENT

Mega damming project in the Siang River is not a new issue. The movement against the dam project started in 1980 and till today the majority of the people of the region are against the dam project over Siang-river. The movement against the mega dam project started with Siang Bachao Andolan later became Siang Bachao Federation. During the movement, protests and strikes took place. The Dam project on Siang river was first supposed to be carried out by Brahmaputra Flood Control Company (BFCC) later renamed as Brahmaputra Board Company (BBC) and later on the project was handed over to National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), followed by Jay Pee Company (JP). At present the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) has taken up the project again to build a Mega dam on Siang river in the name of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project. The local people were totally against the dam project and they were not ready to compromise during the initial stage of their protest i.e during 1980s and to this day their stand is same. In 1980s the people protested against the mega dam project under the banner of Siang Bachao Andolan. Later in 2002, the movements of the aggrieved indigenous people were carried out under the banner of Siang People's Forum. Many committees and forums were formed during 2003 to 2013 such as Lower Siang Project Affected People Action Committee, Dam Affected People's Forum, Dam Affected People's Forum of Siyom- Sirit Banggo, Mebo Area Bachao Committee, Siang Bachao Federation (former Siang Bachao Andolan), so on to stop the damming projects on Siang River. From 2013 onward to till date the movements against the execution of mega dam project on Siang River are carried out under the banner of Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum. At present the movement is led under the banner of the Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum.

In 2017, under the government think tank NITI Aayog, the Siang Upper Multipurpose project of 11.2-gigawatt (GW)/ 11000 Mega Watt was proposed to be executed in Upper Siang District. The Centre also directed the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation in April 2022 to carry out pre-feasibility survey to comprehend the all the required feasibility of the project.

According to the indigenous local people, some political leaders of Arunachal Pradesh are trying their best to convince the local people to let the dam be built on Siang River. They are persuading people and are giving conflicting false narration to the media with their propagandas that the majority of the local people wants the dam. But in reality majority of the local people are against the Siang Dam proposal. The political leaders also told the local aggrieved people in the meeting held at Yingkiong on 19 /10/ 2024 that the Govt. of India wants the Mega Dam to be built on Siang river and the govt. might deploy Central Armed Police Force to carry out the pre-feasibility report survey for damming project. On 19/10/2024 a public consultative meeting on Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) was held at Yingkiong, Upper Siang District by local students' union named as All Upper Siang District Students' Union (AUSDSU). The meeting was attended by Honourable MP Shri Tapir Gao, HMLA 34<sup>th</sup> Tuting-Yingkiong Shri AloLibang, HMLA 37<sup>th</sup> Pasighat West

Shri NinnongEring , HMLA 35<sup>th</sup>Pangin- Boleng cum Minister Shri OjingTasing, HMLA 40<sup>th</sup>Mariyang – Geku Shri Oni Panyang , SIFF Chief Advisor AnongJongkey , SIFF President Shri GegongJijong , ABK President Shri TadumLibang , AAWS GS Shri AllekPerme, Retired Chief Engineer Shri Atop Lego, Chief Engineer Shri AtekMiyu, Deputy Commissioner , Yingkiong , Shri TaloJerang , SP Shri Token Saring, AdiSU President Shri JirboJamoh , HGBs, HGBs, GBs and Families who will get affected if the dam is ever built on Siang River. And also the public of Sitang, Parong, Geku, Rieu, Pangkang, Simong, Riga, Gosang,Ramsing, Karko, Likor, Pugging, Gette, Komkar and others also attended the meeting. So, in total about 38 villages attended the meeting. In the meeting, all the attendees including head gaon burahs, head gaon buris, gaon burahs, gaon buris and public were against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project except the politicians and the govt. officials/servants. The Adi Bane Kebang leaders had neutral stand towards the project but the President of Adi Student Union was against the project. According to the masses, the project will have a disastrous impact on the region. The elderly old aged people also narrated the old histories that their ancestors fought battles among the tribes to occupy the lands and rivers they are possessing now. They told them that they did not get those lands and rivers easily, in fact their ancestors fought for it. So, for them letting those lands and rivers getting submerged into water is an act of dishonoring their ancestors and at the same time they also have strong attachment towards lands and rivers.

#### ***Methods adopted by the movement:***

Fully non co-operation tactics were adopted since the very beginning of the movement to till today. Rallies, foot march, peaceful protests, strikes/ bandh calls, legal battles and meetings were continuously held and till today same way of movements are carried out. The women groups from Parong village of Siang district even guards the bank of the river Siang batch by batch every night in order to stop the pre- feasibility surveyors from coming to the bank of the river for survey. Many traditional indigenous local rituals (ipak) were carried out for the divine intervention of the spiritual entities whom the locals consider as their gods and protectors of the forests and rivers and almost all the villages have performed such the traditional rituals (ipak). Curses (pelik) were also put on the pro dam leaders of the state government through local rituals (ipak) invoking their nature god's anger with the help of the local priests so that the project will not get executed.

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

There are numbers of objectives behind the study, such as

- To know the opinions/views of the people on Siang Upper Multipurpose Project
- To know the impact of the Dam if ever built
- To know / investigate whether the dam which is going to get build on Siang River is due to national security threat or not

### **IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the opinions/views of the people who are going to get affected by the dam if ever built on Siang river?
2. What could be the impact of the Mega Dam if ever built on Siang river?
3. Is there any national security threat because of which dam is going to get constructed over Siang River?

### **V. METHODOLOGY**

The researchers used the following methodology in order to answer the objectives and research questions of the study.

#### ***Methods***

In this study, the researcher collected and analysed the data through indigenous perspective and field survey. The researcher also adopted a qualitative method of research and descriptive method of research to interpret and examine the data gathered from the respondents. The primary data were collected through informal interviews, field visits, observations and telephonic interviews. The researcher also personally attended some of the anti-dam meetings conducted by the aggrieved indigenous people. The secondary data were collected from the records of the anti dam meetings, memorandums, letters written to Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and to Govt. of India, legal battle documents, new and old videos of the movement and photos.

#### ***Populations***

The target population of the study consisted of indigenous people of the Siang District and Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh, North East India. Yingkiong,Karko, Geku, Simong, Sitang, Riga, Parong, Ramsing, Gosang, Likor, Pugging, Gette, Komkar,Pangkang, Rieu, Ugeng and Beging of Siang District and Upper Siang District are the places which were covered for the study.

**Sample**

Local respondents were selected in the sample for the present study. The respondents included village gaon buras, gaon buris, youths, women, social activists, common people, etc.

**Tools Used in the Study**

For the collection of data and information about the dam issue, the study used the 3 types of research tools such as face to face informal interviews with prior consent from the respondents, telephonic interviews and created google forms sent through WhatsApp, Email, and other messaging online formats. The process of data collection adhered all the research ethics of data collection and after completion of the field study, the researchers interpreted the data with the help of descriptive analysis.

**VI. PARTICIPATION IN THE MOVEMENT**

Many are participating in the movement against Siang Dam project. Participants from all age groups can be seen. Indigenous people from Yingkiong, Karko, Geku, Simong, Sitang, Riga, Boleng, Parong, Ramsing, Gosang, Likor, Pugging, Gette, Komkar Pangkang, Rieu, Ugeng, Beging, so on are the active partakers of the movement. People from atleast more than 30 villages are actively participating in the movement. Both men and women are playing important role in the movement. Even old aged women of 90 years and above are participating in the foot march and peaceful protests.

**Role of Leaders:**

While discussing about the role of the leaders, we must admit the leadership given by Shri Oyar Gao, Shri Orat Panyang, Shri Tagang Taki, Shri Tahung Tatak, Shri Tamin Taki, Shri Kaling Jerang, Shri Okom Megu, Dr. Egul Padung, Shri Ojing Tasing (now pro dam), Mr. Okep Jamoh, Mr. Ogam Mengu, Shri Tanya Dabi, Denong Tamuk, Shri Tatin Tamuk, Shri Taku Gao, Shri Duter Sitang, Shri Vijay Taram, Shri Gegoong Jijong, Mr. Dunggo Libang, legal advisor Ms. Bhanu Tatak, social activist advocate Ebo Mili and many more have very much contributed towards the anti dam movement. Moreover, AdiSU leaders of the 1990's also played very important role against the dam project over Siang river.

**Government response towards the movement:**

The state government responses towards the movement are not very positive. Almost every government that came to power wanted the dam to get build over Siang river. They let the protesters get arrested and in some cases Head gaonburas and gaonburis were given orders not to take part in the protests. The government has even requisition a team of Central Armed Police Force to be deployed in the Siang district of to carry out pre feasibility report for the above said project Siang Upper Multipurpose Project because the project faces lot of opposition and protests from aggrieved local indigenous people. The govt. is trying to silenced the indigenous voices of the region. On 06/12/2024, the Siang District Administration issued an order to the Rebo-Perging Circle Officer to engage Rieu village's local Panchayat leaders and gaon buras and gaon buris to help repair the Rieu Govt. Primary School for the accommodation of the CAPF team.

**VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The researchers described the opinion of the stakeholders who are going to get affected if dam is built on Siang river and analyzed the gathered information qualitatively. The sample and tools used in this study permit analysis for the present study. In tune with the responses received from respondents, the following illustrations convey the findings of the study and data analysis are as follows.

Objective 1. To know the opinions of the people who can get affected due to building of Dam over Siang river which is known as Siang Upper Multipurpose Project

**Research Question**

What are the opinions of the people who are going to get affected by the dam if ever built on Siang river?

**Interpretation:**

To answer objective 1 and as per the opinion of the local indigenous people, the majority of the people are completely against the construction of dam over Siang River. Their concerns are rooted in environment, cultural, and socio-economic issues. The fear of getting displaced from their homes and ancestral lands and rivers is a big psychological and emotional stress for them. Their primary arguments are that the communities living along the Siang river, particularly indigenous tribe, depend heavily on the river for agriculture, fishing and other daily sustenance. A dam would likely lead to the submergence of vast areas, resulting in the displacement of thousands of families and loss of traditional livelihoods. For many indigenous groups, the Siang River holds cultural and spiritual significance. Altering its natural flow or submerging sacred sites would lead to the erosion of their heritage and traditions. Aggrieved indigenous people fears that the dam

once constructed will disrupt the river's ecosystem, leading to loss of biodiversity, destruction of forests, and adverse effects on wildlife. The Siang River basin is home to unique flora and fauna and any large-scale construction could threaten their survival. The dam construction may also lead to mass landslides and siltation leading to more damage to their ancestral lands, the environment and cause natural disasters. The Siang River basin is located in a seismically active zone. Local people argue that constructing a large dam in this region increases the risk of catastrophic disasters in the event of an earthquake. Downstream populations may face altered water flow, increased flooding risks, or reduced water availability, which would disrupt their way of life and agricultural activities. They also fear that if dam once built and ever get damage because of any means there could be a huge disaster which can wipe out the entire population of Adi belt region. The downstream populations also fear that the dam can disrupt the water supply of the nearby small streams, underground water, spring water and can dry up the entire land.

In essence, those opposing the dam emphasize that the irreversible damage to their environment, culture, and livelihoods outweighs any promised benefits. They advocate for sustainable and inclusive development that respects their rights and ensures long-term ecological balance. Hence, majority of the people are against proposed dam over Siang River. People are against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project.

Objective 2 To know the impact of the Dam if ever built

Research Question

What could be the impact of the Dam if ever built?

Interpretation

This study has revealed various contents on the impacts of the Dam if built on Siang River. The construction of dam over Siang River would have significant impacts. The communities could feel excluded from decision-making that may lead to large scale riots or protests. The indigenous people may perceive that their voices are ignored and rights are curtailed which may lead to frustration and anger that could further escalate into large-scale protests or riots leading to regional disturbances in the region. Also loss of agricultural land, fishing grounds, or access to natural resources may push affected people to resort to protests if their survival is threatened. The dam could submerged sacred sites or disrupts traditional practices, leading to strong opposition from the indigenous communities who view such actions as a violation of their identity. Riots are not inevitable, ignoring the concerns of affected populations who could get affected by dam could create fertile ground for unrest.

Objective 3 To know / investigate whether the dam which is going to get build on Siang River is due to national security threat or not

Research Question

Is there any national security threat because of which dam is going to get constructed over Siang River?

Interpretation

No, there is no national security threat because of which Siang dam is proposed and in fact the construction of Dam over Siang river could trigger the national security threat from China and regional disturbances from the indigenous people. The construction of a dam on the Siang River, especially in Arunachal Pradesh can led to potential national security threat. These concerns are both strategic and geopolitical due to the sensitive location and transboundary nature of the river. The Siang River is the downstream part of the YarlungTsangpo, originating in Tibet. China has been constructing dams on the YarlungTsangpo. India's construction of dam on the Siang river could escalate tensions over water – sharing issue and resource management. If not handled diplomatically, disputes over river usage could exacerbate already strained relations between India and China. From the strategic concerns point of view the northeastern region of India is strategically important, with its proximity to China and the narrow "Chicken's Neck" Siliguri Corridor connecting the region to the rest of India. A large dam project could become a target in the event of a conflict, either through direct attacks or sabotage, posing a risk to infrastructure and population centers downstream. There is also risk of Chinese actions. If India builds a large dam, China might retaliate by increasing its own dam-building or water diversion projects upstream on the YarlungTsangpo. This could reduce the flow of water into India, impacting agriculture, ecology, and livelihoods in downstream areas. Such actions could also lead to diplomatic standoffs. A dam failure or intentional release of water (as water bomb) by China upstream during a conflict could lead to catastrophic flooding, affecting both the region's population and India's security preparedness. The region is seismically active, and the construction of a large dam could increase the risk of disasters in case of an earthquake. The northeast region have witnessed many internal security



concerns over the years. The northeastern region has a history of insurgency and unrest. Northeast region have already witnessed Bodoland issue in Assam, riots in Manipur, militancy in Nagaland, secessionist movement from Mizoram, so on. If the dam displaces large populations and disrupts their livelihoods, it could fuel local grievances, potentially being exploited by insurgent groups and could bring unrest over the region and destabilize the region, creating challenges for national security forces already active in the area. Large-scale dam construction could alter the flow of the Brahmaputra basin, impacting water availability for downstream states like Assam also. This could lead to internal tensions between states, affecting tensions between states, affecting India's internal stability. Reduced water flow due to geopolitical disputes or environmental changes could compromise India's ability to meet domestic water demands, thereby affecting food and energy security.

**Future outcomes:** There is also possibility of riots taking place in the region if dam is built over Siang River without the consent of the aggrieved indigenous people. Indigenous people may resort to violence and militancy may take place in order to protect their ancestral lands and rivers because resorting to violence and militancy will become their only hope and way to protect themselves and their ancestral lands and rivers.

### VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS:

1. A water sharing treaty on Siang river should be proposed between the govt. of India and the govt. of China.
2. Alternative solutions like small hydel projects like former Yembung Hydel can be proposed.
3. Solar energy conservation project should be encouraged in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

### IX. FUTURE RESEARCH PROSPECT

The next researcher can do a detail research on the role of political leaders in the movement.

### X. CONCLUSION

Anti – dam movements represents the collective resistance of indigenous communities, environmentalists, and activists against the large – scale exploitation of rivers and natural resources. These movements highlight critical issues such as displacement of indigenous people, ecological destruction, seismic risks, and corporate – driven development. The Siang Anti – Dam Movement in Arunachal Pradesh is a powerful example of how local communities can challenge policies that threaten their environment and livelihoods. While hydropower is often promoted as a clean energy source, these protests emphasize the need for sustainable and community –centric development that balances energy needs with ecological preservation and social justice. The success of such movements in delaying or halting destructive projects demonstrates the growing awareness of environmental rights and the strength of grassroots activism. Moving forward, it is crucial for governments and policy makers to adopt alternative energy solutions, conduct transparent consultations, and prioritize ecological sustainability over short-term economic gains. And as majority of the indigenous people are against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project, the govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and the Govt. of India should take into consideration the consent of the local aggrieved people and should roll back the proposal of Siang Upper Multipurpose Project or else the peace and tranquility of the region may get disturbed.

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