

# Case Study

Working Paper – March 2012

Reporting dams and development: Strengthening media's capacity to report research in Northeast India



Lower Subansiri dam and power station  
in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India/  
Tania Ghosh - Panos London



## Foreword

In Northeast India the media actively reports issues of social and political importance, but often these media reports are not informed by relevant research and data. Media houses sometimes lack specialist journalists and journalists lack skills in reporting research findings. Northeast India is a conflict zone and journalists have long worked in a very challenging environment. In such a situation, strengthening the media's capacity to report research remains challenging but it is crucial to do this in order to widen public debate.

Through the Relay Programme, Panos South Asia has been engaged in research communication through media since 2005. Based on this experience, Panos designed a fellowship programme that connected both researchers and journalists and encouraged journalists to undertake field trips to improve their reporting. The project focused on the theme of "Dams and Development".

This case study aims to provide readers with an understanding of the various processes of the Dams and Development project, which has become a successful model in Northeast India.

### 1. The debate on mega dams in Northeast India

India's thirst for development means the government must find a way to provide the energy to power this. Supplies of fossil fuels are diminishing and India along with China is under pressure to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate the global impact of climate change. In this context alternative fuels such as hydropower are increasingly attractive. The construction of huge dams, known as 'mega dams' is a result of these pressures. The dams will produce hydropower to serve the whole of India but will be constructed primarily in the country's Northeast region.

Hydropower is clean, efficient, dependable and largely renewable. According to the Kyoto Protocol Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), hydropower is an energy source with low greenhouse emissions.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the world over, there have been protests about this type of energy resource and Northeast India is no exception.

Northeast India, an ethnically and ecological diverse region, is earmarked for several mega-dam projects. More than 300 dams are scheduled to be built in the region in upcoming years.

However, these large infrastructure projects have provoked controversy due to a public perception that local inhabitants will not share the benefits, and instead will suffer threats to their livelihoods, environment and culture.

The Northeast, especially the state of Arunachal Pradesh, where the majority of the dams are due to be built, is a biodiversity hotspot; ecologically sensitive and prone to earthquakes. It is classed as a seismic Zone V – "most dangerous" - by India's seismologists.

Similar dam projects have already provoked controversy. For example, the 405 MW Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project built by North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) in Arunachal

---

<sup>1</sup>Pitcock, J. (2010) *Better management of hydropower in the era of climate change*, published by Water Alternatives

Pradesh caused heavy floods during 2004, 2008 and 2011 in downstream Assam. These resulted in a loss of agricultural land, which in turn led to the displacement of residents. In January, 2011, the influential All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) threatened to halt the project saying it had changed the whole topography of Yazali and its adjoining areas.

### **1.1 Polarised media coverage**

Coverage of dam building in Northeast India is polarised in the press. The articles tend to reflect the views of either the government, which supports the construction of the dams, or civil society and community-based organisations opposing their construction.

A media scan conducted by Panos in 2011 demonstrated how polarised coverage of the issue had become. The scan captured two months' coverage in each of three leading daily newspapers<sup>2</sup> in the region and found the issue widely reported in the popular press, with 86 articles in the monsoon-heavy month of July alone when flooding is of particular concern to the public.

Anti-dam protests were the most widely covered subject. These are public events, which make them attractive to the media and are easy to cover. Construction and engineering of the dams was the second most-reported subject. Further discussions related to energy, economic growth and business issues.

In this volatile region, characterised by ethnic tensions and which has a troubled history of natural resource extraction, dam building has the potential to fuel discontent and even spark violence<sup>3</sup>.

This region is particularly volatile due to its history of armed conflict (both state and non-state). This conflict is often attributed to ethnic differences, but is also deeply influenced by inequality. Many citizens perceive they are not receiving a fair share of natural resources and other economic assets, which are instead benefitting the rest of India, and feel they lack a political voice. The region has sought more political and territorial autonomy, which has resulted in conflicts<sup>4</sup>.

The ruling government has publicly linked anti-dam activism with armed rebel groups in an effort to discredit them. According to Keshoba Krishna Chatradhara, a prominent anti-dam activist and writer, "The government has always tried to link the democratic anti-dam movement with armed groups, particularly Maoists, so that they can term this movement of civil society as terrorist activity and stamp on the movement by force."<sup>5</sup>

Many civil society leaders opposed to the construction of the large dams, including prominent activist Akhil Gogoi, have been harassed by the Assamese police. Akhil was arrested several times

---

<sup>2</sup> The three newspapers were the Asomiya Pratidin (Assamese), Eastern Chronicle (English), and Pknapham Daily (Manipuri).

<sup>3</sup> Seen IDMC, (2011), *This is our land: Ethnic violence and internal displacement in north-east India*, available at <http://bit.ly/GYaLfd> and Panos South Asia, (2011), *Dams and Development: A media guide for journalists*, available at <http://tinyurl.com/c56576y>

<sup>4</sup> Neogi, Debasis, (2010). Disparity in Socio-Economic Development and Its Implications on Communal Conflicts: A Study on India's North-Eastern Region *International Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, 5(5), pp. 303 . 310 and Acharya, Amitav, ed. (2010). *Human Security: from concept to practice: case studies from Northeast India*, p. 4-5

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Keshoba Krishna Chatradhara by Arup Jyoti Das on March 17, 2012

and was in police custody for 15 days in June and July, 2011. People fear becoming a victim of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act<sup>6</sup>, which grants extraordinary powers to the security forces to detain people using lethal force and allows them to enter and search premises without a warrant. These powers are very much indiscriminate in nature.

This contributes to polarised and highly politicised media coverage of mega dams. However the issues surrounding mega-dams are more nuanced than simply reporting on either the 'pro-dam' or 'anti-dam' line can do justice to.

A more even-handed debate in which dam projects are critically examined could open dialogue for policy solutions to mitigate the negative effects of dams, which include earthquakes and floods, and the potential for stoking renewed violence in this volatile region.

### **1.2 Research examines the impact of dams**

A substantial and growing body of international research has emerged in the last decade that seeks to better understand the benefits and consequences of mega dams. In Northeast India local researchers have produced a number of new studies. Much of this research investigates the environmental impact of dams and their effects on livelihoods. Researchers have also carried out risk assessments – an area lacking in current media coverage.

A leading example is a major interdisciplinary report, *Downstream Impact Study of the Ongoing Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Power Project*, published in early 2011 by an expert committee made up of the eight lead researchers from three prominent research universities in Assam: Guahati University, IIT Guwahati, Dibrugarh University.

This comprehensive report covered issues ranging from the socio-economic status of downstream inhabitants, land use, water quality, climate and ecology, and dam break simulation and scenario studies. It also included recommendations to help improve safety, mitigate risk and minimise the negative impacts on the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people and wildlife.

Yet Panos found that most of this research never leaves the academic circle.

#### **Examples of other locally published research:**

- Fernandez, Walter & Bharali, Gita (2011), *Uprooted for Whose Benefit? Development-Induced Displacement in Assam 1947-2000*, published by North Eastern Social Research Council, Guwahati, India
- Vagholikar, N., (2011), *Are big dams leaving India high and dry?*, published by Sanctuary Asia
- Rahman M Z., (2010), *Dams on the Brahmaputra: Concerns in Northeast India*, published by Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies
- Vagholikar, N., and Das, P., (2010), *Damming Northeast India: Juggernaut of hydropower projects threatens social and environmental security of the region*, published by Kalpavriksh, Aaranyak and ActionAid India
- Maitra, S., (2009) *Development Induced Displacement: Issues of compensation and resettlement – Experiences from the Narmada Valley and Sadar Sarovar project*, published in the Japanese Journal of Political Sciences. Abstract can be found here

<sup>6</sup> The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, or AFSPA, has been in force since 1958.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5889748>

- Dharmadhikar, D., (2008) *Mountains of concrete: Dam building in the Himalayas*, published by the International Rivers Network, can be found at:  
[http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/IR\\_Himalayas\\_rev.pdf](http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/IR_Himalayas_rev.pdf)

**Available Government Reports:**

- Central Electricity Authority, (2010) Annual Report 2010 can be downloaded at:  
[http://www.cea.nic.in/reports/yearly/annual\\_rep/2009-10/ar\\_09\\_10.pdf](http://www.cea.nic.in/reports/yearly/annual_rep/2009-10/ar_09_10.pdf)
- NHPC Limited website  
[http://www.nhpcindia.com/Projects/english/Scripts/Prj\\_Introduction.aspx?vid=23](http://www.nhpcindia.com/Projects/english/Scripts/Prj_Introduction.aspx?vid=23)
- Government of Arunachal Pradesh <http://www.arunachalpradesh.nic.in/>

Despite the potential for these research findings to inform a more nuanced and critical debate on the mega dams issue in Northeast India, the content assessment carried out by Panos found little mention of these studies in the existing press coverage.

Interviews carried out by Panos in March and April 2011 revealed researchers were frustrated that their findings were not being taken more seriously by policymakers and were not widely known about by the public.

**Quotes from researchers:**

“There [is] little awareness about the big dams. Although awareness has increased there is still a lot to be done on the front of knowledge-induced debate. But so far the media and public are only repeating the same things and don’t know much about the nuance of the facts. For example, they say dams would create floods but people don’t know the details of how the silt and sediment patterns will change and affect livelihoods. Even the middle class is not aware of this and many other issues.” - Dr. Partha J. Das, Programme Head, Water, Climate and Hazard (WATCH) Programme, Aaranyak (a scientific and industrial research organisation)

“There is very little authentic study while constructing the dam. What I am concerned most about is the dam-induced displacement of the people. The government often gives nothing to very little compensation to the people who lose their livelihoods forever.” - Dr. Walter Fernandes, Director, North Eastern Social Research Centre

After working with journalists and researchers for more than five years in Northeast India as part of the Relay Programme, Panos South Asia recognised it could help to improve media coverage and contribute to the public debate on the controversial mega dam issue.

**2. Relay’s fellowship approach**

Following the preliminary project scoping, it became clear that some of the problems were beyond the scope of Panos. For example, Panos could do little to prevent the pressure that journalists come under from the government. Nor could Panos directly alter the securitised political environment.

However Panos was well placed, through its Relay programme experience, to help with the following problems:

- Journalists' lack of information resources
- Journalists' lack of knowledge of wider issues and their context (focus on individual events)
- Journalists' lack of training and lack of opportunities to specialise
- Journalists' lack of resources including time to read and research and funds to travel to sites
- Journalists receiving limited support from editors for the above
- The lack of communication between journalists and researchers
- Researchers' limited experience in communicating research more widely (e.g. writing op-eds, holding press conferences)

Panos South Asia took a two-pronged approach. On the one hand the project provided strategies to improve the skills of journalists by giving them hands-on experience of reporting research on dams. On the other, Panos provided journalists with the knowledge and contacts to continue to produce well-informed, trustworthy and accurate reporting beyond the fellowship period.

The resulting Relay project was centred around a six-month fellowship programme, which included the production of resource materials, an orientation workshop, contact building, field visits, multiple outputs and feedback, publishing, reflection reports, and a roundtable learning forum. Journalistic fellowships were offered to help improve journalists' interaction with researchers and encourage them to draw on research as a valuable source for their articles.

### ***2.1 Strategies to build skills and experience***

The fellowship programme was a six-month initiative targeting print and TV journalists interested in the issue. The objectives are outlined below:

- To draw on science and social science research findings and/or use researchers as a source
- To include a variety of views and voices, particularly of those affected by the issue
- To demonstrate an understanding of the issue and context by asking questions and providing analysis.

Following a selection process, six journalists were selected from print media and one from electronic media. The selection was made primarily on the strength of the individual proposals of the applicants. Also taken into consideration was the need to represent a variety of locations in Northeast India, both in terms of selecting fellows and the subjects they covered. Interviews, phone calls and informal discussion were conducted to get an idea of the dedication and commitment of the candidates. Their previous articles were examined, as well as gathering the views of referees. Their ability to publish their reports was also scrutinised including the support of their editor.



The journalists received editorial support and brokering support from Panos to make contacts and plan field visits.

The field visits were designed to provide an enriching hands-on experience and to promote better understanding of the issue.

## **2.2 Strategies to build knowledge and contacts**

Resource materials, including a user-friendly guide to recent research, were designed to address information gaps. Panos South Asia produced a media brief, *Dams and Development: A media guide for journalists*. The purpose of the brief was to give context, based on research reports, on the mega dam phenomenon. It identified research and researchers working on this issue in the region. It also provided tips and questions for journalists to help them write about the dams issue.

Panos had also produced a series of publications called *Ishan* (meaning Northeast corner in Sanskrit), which brought together research articles on topics including land, conflict and identity. The series was translated into Assamese so it could be more effectively taken up and debated by local CSOs and the media. As Sukanya Shamra, a professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati in Assam said:

"When [research] articles are written in English, maintaining an international standard, it is very hard even for the English-knowing Assamese to get the actual feel of it. But when these articles have been translated and made available in their mother tongue, the ideas and thoughts penetrate the hearts and minds of the readers."

The issue of *Ishan* compiling and translating research on the dams issue was distributed to journalist fellows and more widely in the region.

An orientation workshop was organised to bring together key researchers to share their knowledge and recent findings on the impacts of dams with the group of journalist fellows. A key aim was for journalists and researchers to meet one another in person so journalists could ask questions and get in-depth responses, as well as to develop new contacts with these expert sources. The two-day workshop consisted of several sessions.

- A full session was devoted to the fellows to present their story ideas to resource persons.
- Research experts presented their recent work and findings on different elements of the dam issue including climate change, displacement, livelihoods, and geology.
- A dedicated time slot for discussion between fellows and researchers helped the fellows hone their story ideas and gave them access to information relevant to their work.

Valuable points discussed during the workshop, included:

- The importance of engaging with editors to ensure quality reporting on dams
- The influence of civil society organisations in contributing to media coverage
- The need for institutional support and capacity-building such as that being provided by Panos South Asia

- The presence of security forces and heavy militarisation of the Northeast India as an obstacle to good reporting. One exception to this is Manipur State, where, despite conflict, there is little political pressure exerted over the media, which opens up an opportunity for journalists to provide quality, impartial coverage of dams.

Some of the expected outcomes identified as goals for journalists involved in the project are listed below. Researchers and editors were also expected to benefit from the project, as key stakeholders who could contribute to improved reporting on the issue.

| <b><i>Expected Outcomes – Journalists</i></b>  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read more widely around the subject</li> <li>- Write a story (especially after study trips)</li> <li>- Complete commitments to deadlines</li> <li>- Use Panos media brief</li> <li>- Include diverse voices in their reporting</li> <li>- Attend (academic) conferences</li> <li>- Use multiple sources</li> <li>- Positioned (but not partisan) reporting</li> <li>- Write stories based on facts</li> <li>- Talk to researchers</li> <li>- Stop relying only on press releases</li> </ul> |

### **3. Results**

As a result of Relay’s interventions, marked improvements were noted in journalists’ skills, and an increase in their desire to use research as a source for their stories. In addition, stories were based on a stronger understanding of the issue and included interviews with people affected by the dams and with researchers from local universities.

The coverage produced by the journalists highlighted new angles and new issues such as the impacts of dams on environment and livelihoods. For example, the impact on fisherfolk due to reduced fish supply, the effects on agriculture due to changed silt and sediment deposits in downstream areas, and threats to security in terms of risk of flooding.

In a number of cases it was clear that these articles struck a nerve with local audiences – and in one case in particular, with authorities as well.

#### ***3.1 Improved skills and knowledge to report research on dams***

Each of the journalist fellows said the fellowship activities had helped them develop their reporting skills.

One fellow highlighted three unique elements as follows: “Systematic re-evaluation in relation to professional development, conscious goal-setting and definition of the competencies that are



needed, and the opportunity to meet peers and learn from them in a practical sense on critically analysing various aspects of the dam issue.”

A content assessment carried out by Panos South Asia of the articles produced by the fellows scored an average of 87 per cent against a set of predetermined quality criteria, compared to an average score of only 46 per cent for a sample of non-fellowship articles on dams that also used research and were published in a similar time period<sup>7</sup>.

The journalists attributed this improvement to their hands-on experience, which included field visits, attending conferences and reading more widely around the subject.

All the journalists were supported to travel to dam sites and downstream locations to investigate the issue in more depth and talk to a range of people. Each fellow visited between two and four sites as part of their programme. Altogether, they visited a wide spread of geographical locations and dam sites including Subansiri (Assam-Arunachal border), Ronganadi, downstream areas of Kurishu Dam, Ithai (Manipur), Mapitel (Manipur) and Pagalia (Indo-Bhutan border).

As well as the Panos-organised orientation meeting, Panos supported the fellows to identify further opportunities to engage with researchers, civil society, and community groups. For example, one fellow said he attended three additional workshops: one bringing together more than twenty community organisations, one organised by the NGO ‘Northeast Affected Area Development Society (NEADS)’ and one organised by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development.

Other fellows noted how widely they had read during the fellowship period, going beyond the media briefing and *Ishan*, to tackle full research papers.

Fellow Nibhan Rani Roy mentioned the following research papers and books:

- *Towards Water Wisdom (Limits, Justice, Harmony)* by Ramaswamy R Iyer
- *Brihat nadibandh aru Axomar biparjay*, a collection of articles on big dams by Dr. Hiren Gohain
- *Brihat bamdh aru Axom*, a collection of articles on dams, edited by Mrinal Talukdar and Kishor Kumar Kalita
- *Bidirna Baghjai*, the Assamese translation of Viswas Patil’s Sahitya Akademi award-winning Marathi novel entitled *Jhadajhadati* on impact of dams in society.

“I have also gone through some articles on big dams written by eminent experts, researchers and academicians, which helped me to find out various aspects of dam issues,” Nibha said.

During evaluation the fellows highlighted the orientation workshop as having been a unique opportunity to meet researchers and gain new knowledge and contacts.

---

<sup>7</sup> Quality criteria included attribution of research findings to researcher, institute or study, whether a researcher was directly quoted, and inclusion of voices and views of people most affected.

Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan of the leading Assamese language daily Asomiya Pratidin said: “Really those two days were very thought provoking. That workshop assembled journalist fellows and researchers and exchanged their ideas on the issue. We could meet the very renowned researchers of dam issues from various aspects like earthquake, environment, displacement, livelihood, etc. It was a pleasure. The researchers pointed out that the big dam will increase the natural calamities like floods and erosions. The issues of livelihood and displacement come the scenario through these natural calamities.”

Azing Pretidin, who writes for the Echo of Arunachal, the local newspaper for the Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, said: “The direct interaction and discussions with the researchers and subject experts was enriching and facts which I was not aware of were learned and gained.”

Through the fellowship process, the fellows listed over a dozen new research contacts gained, above and beyond those present at the orientation.

***New contacts made included researchers from the following local research institutes:***

- Department of Geology, Dibrugarh University
- Department of Botany, Lakhimpur Girls College
- North Eastern Social Research Centre
- Department of Bio Technology, Guwahati University
- College Development Council , Manipur University
- Tata Institute for Social Science
- Aaranyak, non-profit organisation focusing on applied research in the biological and social field

Meeting the people most affected by the dam issue was also widely cited as significant, with fellows meeting scores of people across the region, from Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, as part of their field visits.

“I met more than 50 affected people, as well as a local leader,” said Dhanabanta Loukrakpam, a staff reporter for Poknapham Daily in Manipur. “I met around 20 people [who were going] to be affected by the 2700MW Lower Siang Hydro Electric Project as the dam has yet not come up. I also met a youth leader... a lawyer... and the village headman,” said Azing Pertin, reporter, for the Echo of Arunachal, Arunachal Pradesh.

Another journalist fellow was able to demonstrate the use of a wide range of sources, saying he met 15 individuals representing affected families downstream from the dams, and spoke to representatives of local organisations who oppose the big dams as well as the Executive Director of the NHPC and other high officials engaged in the construction of the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project.

Dhanabanta Loukrakpam, a staff reporter for Poknapham Daily in Manipur, summarises his fellowship experience as follows:

“I have learnt many issues that I was unaware of earlier and also got a chance to become familiar with new researchers. The fellowship really inspired me to know about dams, to read more, to study more and to publish it as news articles too. I went on many field visits to grassroots level for the discussion on impacts of dams, to listen to the woe stories of affected people. There’s so much difference in my knowledge in comparison between pre and post fellowship.”

Another fellow said: “I must have to share it that the study offered by Panos South Asia really enlightened me in a big way and made me competent to work on big dam issue in future. Though it was a study of short duration, I proceed in a precise way to reach the backgrounds of the key issues and got the prompt response from the various parts involved in this issue.”

Through the experience, the journalists also came to appreciate research, unanimously stating they “strongly agreed” research was a valuable source for reporting on the dam issue.

“I firmly believe that research can be the affective tool in authenticating the news reporting in every social issue,” said Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan. “Research [can] enlighten the key issues of a particular subject, and the reporting based on the research becomes a vital document.”

Dhanbhanta Loukrakpam said: “[Research is] the product of tremendous interview, field visit, fact findings and enquiry. It is worth it as a source.”

Many of the journalists also pointed out to us and their new research contacts the remaining gaps in research studies in the region.

“Downstream studies are not conducted in the Northeast,” said Dhanbhanta Loukrakpam. This is a subject that cannot be easily found in documentation centres and university libraries. Thankfully there has been some work around the lower Subansiri dam. More work is required here.”

Azing Pertin said: “There is an absence of research institutes, experts and studies done at the periphery of the proposed Lower Sian Hydro Electric Project, which was a handicap as one has to rely on comparisons of facts with other dam projects elsewhere in the region.”

### **3.2 Media coverage highlights new angles**

*“The fellowship has really helped me in disseminating and flagging issues on dams through the reports which otherwise could have been never written” – Azing Pertin, Echo of Arunachal, Arunachal Pradesh*

*“The findings were published in a series to my media firm, Poknapham Daily, in different editions” – Dhanbhanta Loukrakpam, Poknapham Daily, Manipur*

In total, the fellows produced 17 in-depth articles on the dam issue between July 2011 and January 2012. In addition, one documentary film was made by independent filmmaker Sandeep Patil.

Dams and Development in North East India – Downstream Impacts of Dam: The Untold Story, 30 July

2011, *Poknapham Daily*, by Dhanabanta Loukrakpam

Plot for Conflict Constructed in the Name of Development, 9 August 2011, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

Study of Ithai Dam Downstream: Many Fish Varieties Extinct including “Meitei Sareng”, 29 August 2011, *Poknapham Daily*, by Dhanabanta Loukrakpam

Will Bhutan Dam overrun lower Assam?, 5 September 2011, *The Eastern Chronicle*, by Sanjay Mazumder

Juggernaut of HE project in NE: For whose benefit, 5 September 2011, *The Sentinel*, by Sanjay Mazumder

Mass Disillusioned by Government’s Unclear Statement. 20 September 2011, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

A View on Mapithel Dam Downstream: The Fate of sand-stone quarries?, 26 September 2011, *Poknapham Daily*, by Dhanabanta Loukrakpam

Whither Pagladia Dam conflict? Resistance Continues, 26 September 2011, *The Sentinel*, by Sanjay Mazumder

Hydropower from Siang – a cost to pay?, 8 October 2011, *Echo of Arunachal*. Azing Pertin

Influx of mega dam in NE: A threat to native land. 12 October 2011, *The Sentinel*, by Sanjay Mazumder

Big Dams: Is it a cold process of creating deserts?, 28 October 2011, *Asom Bani*, by Nibha Rani Roy

2700 MW LSHEP; an uprising in making?, 29 October 2011, *Echo of Arunachal*, by Azing Pertin

The Curse of Kurichu Hydro-Electric Project: Dams destroying the dreams of Sabita and all, 18 November 2011, *Asom Bani*, by Nibha Rani Roy

Big Dam: Politician from Arunachal Pradesh under control of Multinational companies, 5 February 2012, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

Arunachal Government has taken Rs.1,32,031.31 Lacks as advance payment for construction of 168 dams, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

Threat of Big Dam: River Dolphins are in danger, 20 November 2011, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

Protection of Dolphin will be a subject of challenge, 15 January 2012, *Asomiya Pratidin*, by Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan

The articles and film highlight many new angles and ‘missing’ issues based on findings from research studies and interviews.

**After completing their fellowship, the journalists highlighted the following aspects as the most important dam-related issues in Northeast India:**

- **Public awareness** - public opinion is not being sought by the state governments and the hydro-power companies. Journalists felt that the lack of consultation among the local inhabitants would prove a major source of discontent that could lead to conflict as it would result in disruption of fragile livelihoods and local self-sufficient economies
- **Displacement and livelihoods:** displacement, livelihood security of the downstream area, the downstream impact of dams which affected livelihoods and security, as well as the upstream impact of direct displacement
- **Environmental impacts:** the impact on ecosystems, irregular floods, fish supply and variety, environmental degradation, threats to flora and fauna, loss of wetlands, loss of forest space for living of indigenous people, water user rights

The journalists fed back that the orientation workshop had initially shone the light on many of these new issues.

One fellow said, “The sessions of Dr. Partho Das, Neeraj Vaghlikar, Dr. Walter Fernandes and other experts helped in understanding the whole issue with different approaches and elements like global warming and its effects, geological disturbances like earthquakes, indigenous land rights and social costs etc. attached to dams.” Another, Arzing Pretidin of *Echo of Arunachal*, found, “The session of Dr. Walter Fernandes which dealt with indigenous rights and social impacts helped in framing pointed questions which directly affected the people’s livelihoods. This enabled (me) to have a better picture of the issue after meeting the locals of the project area which ultimately shaped the story.”

**Research cited in fellowship articles included:**

- Expert Group from Guahati University, IIT Guwahati, Dibrugarh University (2011), *Downstream Impact Study of the Ongoing Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Power Project*
- Rahman M Z. (2010), *Dams on the Brahmaputra: Concerns in Northeast India*, published by Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies
- Vaghlikar, Neeraj and Partha J. Das (2010), *Damming Northeast India: Juggernaut of hydropower projects threatens social and environmental security of region*, published by Kalpavriksh
- Central Water Commission, Government of India (2007), *Environmental Impact Assessment and Environmental and Social Management Framework, Final Report*  
[http://www.cwc.gov.in/main/downloads/ESMF\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.cwc.gov.in/main/downloads/ESMF_Full_Report.pdf)
- World Commission on Dams (2000), *The Report of the World Commission on Dams*  
<http://dmans.org/report>

- Vaghlikar, Neeraj (2011), *Are Big Dams Leaving India High And Dry?* Blog by researcher from Kalpavriksh
- Central Electricity Authority Hydro Planning & Investigation Division (2008), *Hydro Development Plan for 12th Five Year Plan 2012-2017*

In their articles, the journalists included the voices of those most affected by the dams, having spoken to people in communities downstream from these developments.

“I visited the river bank area of the Subansiri and Ronganodi and discussed the issues with the common villagers of the area,” said Nayan Jyoti Buyan. “I observed that the common people engaged in agricultural activities are badly affected by the floods of Rongandoi River. They have the common perception that the huge amount of water released from the Ronganodi HEP has been affecting them, which should not happen. This type of flood affected not only the paddy fields but smashed their shelters and livestock. And undoubtedly it impacted the livelihood of the common people. I always tried to make the bridge between researcher’s views and the common perception on the issues relating with big dam. Nowadays, the subject “big dam” is not only a subject of the researcher but the common interpretation made the people aware at the grassroots.”

The resulting articles blended research and evidence with the voices and views of those affected:

**Excerpt from article *The Curse of Kurichu Hydro-Electric Project*, by freelance journalist Nibha Rani Roy, published November 18, 2011 in *Asom Bani* (a weekly publication of the Assam Tribune Group)**

“Sabita Medhi’s house used to be at Kaomari in Borpeta District. Yes, it used to be. Now, it is no longer there. That house, which had a productive backyard, belonging to Sabita, is now just a painful memory. In 2004, the water released from Kurichu dam, situated in Bhutan, kept Sabit’s village under water for almost a month. The betel nut trees, fruit-bearing plants and other kinds of vegetation, were washed away by that flood.

“According to government reports, 134 people died due to the water released from the Kurichu project in Bhutan. Among them 31 died in the Barpeta district. Almost 50,000 acres of agricultural land became an uncultivable sandy area and innumerable cattle died in the flood. Has anything been done in the last eight years to rehabilitate the families who lost almost everything?”

### ***3.3 Media coverage strikes a nerve with the public and officials***

One of the journalist fellows, Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan, of the Assamese daily newspaper *Asomiya Pratidin*, shared that he had considerable audience response to his fellowship articles. He was also aware that the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) had discussed his articles in one of their regular review meetings.



***Nayan's story, by Wahida Rohman, Panos South Asia Relay Programme Associate***

We have seen many success stories in our fellowship programme on dams and development in Northeast India, but Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan's performance should be considered as the most significant change story.

Nayan is a staff reporter at *Asomiya Pratidin*, the largest circulated Assamese daily in Northeast India. He has a significant importance in the journalist community, since he has been invited to accompany the Prime Minister of India in some of his foreign visits. Before he became a part of the Relay fellowship programme, he covered issues related to the environment and social and ethnic issues. Nayan's reporting used up-to-date information. However, in his earlier articles, there was hardly any mention of research.

With support from the Relay fellowship programme, his reporting improved significantly, as he started using research findings from studies on the impacts of dams and government reports as sources for his stories.

- In his first article 'Conflict will be created in the name of development', produced as a part of the fellowship programme, he quoted a significant amount of research and highlighted issues of displacement and livelihoods of people.
- In his second article, 'Public disillusioned by government's unclear statement', Nayan quoted, among other sources, the expert committee report prepared by Dibrugarh University, Guwahati University and IIT Guwahati. This story also focused on displacement and livelihoods as well as development, construction and engineering.
- Then in his third published article, 'Threat of big dam: river dolphins are in danger', he introduced the report of the International Union of Conservation of Nature, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and government data. In the second part of the article Nayan captured stories of the dam affected people, their displacement and a loss of livelihoods.

Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan's articles introduced new aspects of the dams issue, which until then had not been present in media coverage: displacement, livelihood, biodiversity, construction and engineering. Another important element of Nayan's articles is that he interviewed the people most affected by dams during his field trips and these perspectives were included in the coverage.

"After publishing the stories as a part of this fellowship, I got good responses from the citizens, community leaders and researchers concerned in the dam issue from a long back," Nayan said. "I got more than 20 phone calls from the readers of the articles and the news reporting published as the outcome of this study."

Nayan also discovered that his articles were discussed in the review meeting of the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), who were concerned about the public attention being raised by the series of articles. As a result he was invited to visit the project site at the end of October, 2011.

It should be noted that the fellowship programme ended on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2011, but Nayan Jyoti Bhuyan is carrying on his work on the issue and trying to publish more data and research. One of the most significant examples is his recent article, titled 'Arunachal Government has taken Rs.1,32,031.31 lakhs as advance payment for construction of 168 dams', in which he has drawn on a

significant amount of data.

In this case, Nayan not only used research, but undertook his own investigative reporting to discover details of financial transactions with receipt numbers and dates which is very rare in such reporting and brings new information to the public's attention, as it shows the government's financial gain from the deal.

His other article, 'Big dam: politician from Arunachal Pradesh under control of multinational companies. Part-2', printed on February 5, 2012, also cites research and field visits, highlighting possible corruption.

In our region, we don't have a reporter assigned for development issues. Despite that Nayan is following the issue beyond Relay's support: he has gone on many field trips, and produced more articles that have had a response from the public and from government officials. Therefore, we found Nayan Jyoti Buyan's story to be the most significant among all.

#### **4. Lessons learned**

Based on learning and reflection from the project team in Northeast India and feedback from beneficiaries, a number of practical recommendations emerged that may be useful for others who want to support journalists to report research on a variety of critical development issues in the region and more widely.

- **Fellowship programme**

Create a structure where fellows can build their knowledge, relationships, skills and portfolio of articles over a longer time period – a minimum of five months is ideal. The extra time will result in a number of important benefits:

- Journalists can build their knowledge over time using resource materials (how-to guides, topic guides), attending orientation workshops, and through the experience of investigating the stories with the help of researchers and other experts
- Multiple interactions between journalists and researchers over a longer period will facilitate the development of relationships. Developing lasting relationships takes time!
- Having several months in which to publish a feature gives editors some flexibility. It means they can schedule publication at a time when the feature can be given sufficient space in the newspaper, and is less likely to be displaced by a major news event.
- Journalists will have more time to sustain and build up on their stories by exploring an issue in-depth and looking for newsworthy angles
- Extra time will allow for reflection reporting, preparing journalists to share their experiences from the fellowship with wider audiences.

- **Multiple articles per journalist**

Have fellows produce multiple outputs. It will provide them with opportunities to develop a story, get feedback and use this learning to improve their subsequent articles.

- **Mentoring and Brokering**

Identify one focal person who has the contacts, knowledge, and skills to support fellows, provide advice and feedback on draft stories, and facilitate new relationships with other key stakeholders. This will keep journalists engaged and informed.

- **Orientation workshop**

Create an event for groups of researchers who want to communicate their findings and journalists interested in gaining a better understanding of the development issues. This event will establish a relationship between different stakeholders, keeping the participants engaged, cooperative and interested.

- **Media scan and content analysis**

Undertake a media scan early on in the project to log media coverage in target newspapers (or other media) and assess quantity and quality of coverage on the issue. Use this to identify potential fellow journalists. Share the findings of the content analysis and media scan more widely to give an idea of what is happening in the media, what the quality of reporting on a particular issue is, and whether research and voices of the most affected people are being included. This useful tool can help to inform a wider debate.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of mega dams deserves greater attention particularly keeping in mind that more than 300 dams are proposed and the impacts are already visible. More fellowship programmes to report research, programmes to help take research into the public domain, larger public debate for awareness through stakeholder meetings, strategies to raise the issue at global level are much needed in the future.

Organisation like Panos, which implement innovative projects such as Relay, are not influenced by the government, activists or media houses, and can therefore bridge the gap between these three, winning and building trust, and contributing to more informed debate.

*This case study was written by Arup Jyoti Das of Panos South Asia with editorial support from Panos London. It is based on a Relay project undertaken by Panos South Asia in 2011-2012. The Relay programme brings researchers and journalists together to improve media coverage of critical development issues. For more information on the project: [www.panosrelay.org.uk](http://www.panosrelay.org.uk)*

Text by Arup Jyoti Das, Panos South Asia [www.panossouthasia.org](http://www.panossouthasia.org) ▪ Editing by Panos London ▪ March 2012 ▪ [www.panosrelay.org.uk](http://www.panosrelay.org.uk)