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Community perceptions and responses
to Infrastructure Development along the
Sino-Indian Border in Arunachal Pradesh**

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Territory, Tribes, Turbines: Local Community perceptions and responses to Infrastructure Development along the Sino-Indian Border in Arunachal Pradesh

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Territory, Tribes, Turbines: Local Community perceptions and responses to Infrastructure Development along the Sino-Indian Border in Arunachal Pradesh¹

This paper offers a primary research-based analysis of local tribal community perceptions and responses towards Indian infrastructure building in the border state of Arunachal Pradesh along the three broad themes, territory, tribes and turbines. Several infrastructure projects undertaken by New Delhi in Arunachal Pradesh have picked up pace in the past decade; these have been seen as a concerted effort to strengthen the war preparedness of the armed forces given that China contests India's claim over the *territory* of Arunachal Pradesh. These projects are often politically portrayed within Arunachal Pradesh as priorities, addressing on a fast-track basis the huge developmental gap that the various *tribes* in Arunachal Pradesh live with. Simultaneously, the road building infrastructure is directed at creating enabling conditions for government and private dam-building companies to carry heavy machinery, including *turbines*, to dam project sites; the construction of these dams will, apart from providing economic benefits, also allow India to stake its riparian rights over trans-boundary river waters with China. This paper takes the help of specific examples in Arunachal Pradesh of community perceptions on critical infrastructure projects along the Sino-Indian border; interviews were conducted during field trips over a period of two years from 2012 to 2014 in various districts of Arunachal Pradesh including Changlang, Anjaw, Lohit, Upper and Lower Dibang Valley, Upper, West and East Siang, Upper and Lower Subansiri, Papum Pare, West Kameng and Tawang.²

Introduction

The state of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Northeast has often been described as the land of the rising sun. Echoing the theme, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had, during a rally in Itanagar on a 2-day visit to the state in January 2008, referred to it as 'our land of the rising sun', going on to saying, 'the sun kisses India first in Arunachal Pradesh' (Kashyap 2008). The Chinese government, for its part, has always been quick to contest any Indian government statement on the status of Arunachal Pradesh (Guha 2008). This visit by Prime Minister Singh was the first by any Indian Prime Minister in over nine years, in contrast to two visits to China by Indian Prime Ministers in the same period. This reflects the overall lack of attention and importance accorded at the very highest level of the Indian government towards the Northeastern states in general, and to Arunachal Pradesh in particular, ever since India's independence from British rule in 1947. However, there has been a marked improvement in the attitude of the central government towards Arunachal Pradesh over the past 5 years; significantly, this has happened when New Delhi is improving its overall relations with Beijing.

The Indian Prime Minister did not visit Tawang, the high point of the territorial contestation between Beijing and New Delhi, thereby giving a diplomatic soft signal, especially since he had just returned from a state visit to Beijing. Arunachal Pradesh has in recent times been selectively given importance, depending on changing strategic calculations in the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. There have been visible signs of diplomatic caution that India seems to exercise in the matter of Arunachal Pradesh. China continues to make regular protests to India, especially when some important

¹ This paper is the outcome of a research project funded by the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

² The author was accompanied on several of these field trips by Jabin T. Jacob of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

official visit by either side is due, while India asserts its sovereign rights over Arunachal Pradesh (*The Hindu* 2008).

This paper offers a primary research-based analysis of local tribal community perceptions and responses towards Indian infrastructure building in the border state of Arunachal Pradesh along the three broad themes, territory, tribes and turbines. Several infrastructure projects undertaken by New Delhi in Arunachal Pradesh have picked up pace in the past decade and have been seen as part of a concerted effort to strengthen the war preparedness of the armed forces, given the disputed nature of the Sino-Indian boundary and Arunachal Pradesh. These projects are often politically portrayed within the state as priorities, addressing on a fast-track basis the huge developmental deficit that the various *tribes* in Arunachal Pradesh live with.

The road building appears directed at creating enabling conditions for government and private infrastructure companies, including dam building companies, to carry heavy machinery and *turbines* to dam project sites which, apart from economic benefits, will allow New Delhi to stake its riparian rights over trans-boundary river waters with Beijing. China has faced similar questions over its infrastructure projects in the Tibet Autonomous Region that, apart from their economic uses, also ensure war preparedness and strategic advantage along the Sino-Indian border. Against this backdrop of competitive infrastructure development on both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China, this paper will focus on understanding what the combined security, social development and economic agenda of infrastructure building that New Delhi is pursuing in Arunachal Pradesh means for local tribal stakeholders. This paper analyses local community views, interests, initiatives and responses; the communities are important stakeholders and are likely to be affected/displaced by the building of dams, roads and military bases along the Sino-Indian border.

In the first section, the paper will discuss developments relating to Northeast India's borders in general, which will help contextualise the themes discussed in the following sections. The second section will assess the importance of the strategically located border state of Arunachal Pradesh in the overall context of Northeast India's borders. The third section will highlight local perceptions on the territory question in Arunachal Pradesh, and examine the dynamics of the Sino-Indian contestations over territory in the recent past. The fourth section will bring out local tribal perceptions on the 'development' debate and how this aspect has played out in the politics of development in Arunachal Pradesh. The fifth section will look at local perceptions on the issue of infrastructure development, relating to big and small dams in Arunachal Pradesh and the issue of sharing trans-boundary water resources of the Siang and Brahmaputra rivers, and how these issues have played out at the community level, at the intra-state level, at the inter-state level between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and at the international level between Beijing and New Delhi.

As part of the research, field visits were conducted and interviews carried out between 2012 and 2014 in Miao, Mahadevpur, Roing, Anini, Tezu, Walong, Kibithoo, Kahao, Hawaii, Jairampur, Nampong, Bhalukpong, Rupa, Bomdila, Dirang, Jang, Tawang, Ziro and Itanagar. The field visits covered the Singpho community of Miao; Tai-Khamti community of Mahadevpur and Namsai; Deori community of Mahadevpur and Namsai; Adi community of Mahadevpur and Namsai; Idu-Mishmi, Miju-Mishmi and Digaru-Mishmi community of Tezu, Roing, Anini, Walong and Hawaii; Meyor community of Kibithoo and Kahao; and Apatani community of Ziro. Informal discussions were held with community and youth leaders, religious heads of monasteries and civil society. The districts covered in Arunachal Pradesh were Changlang, Anjaw, Lohit, Upper and Lower Dibang Valley,

Upper, West and East Siang, Upper and Lower Subansiri, Papum Pare, West Kameng and Tawang.

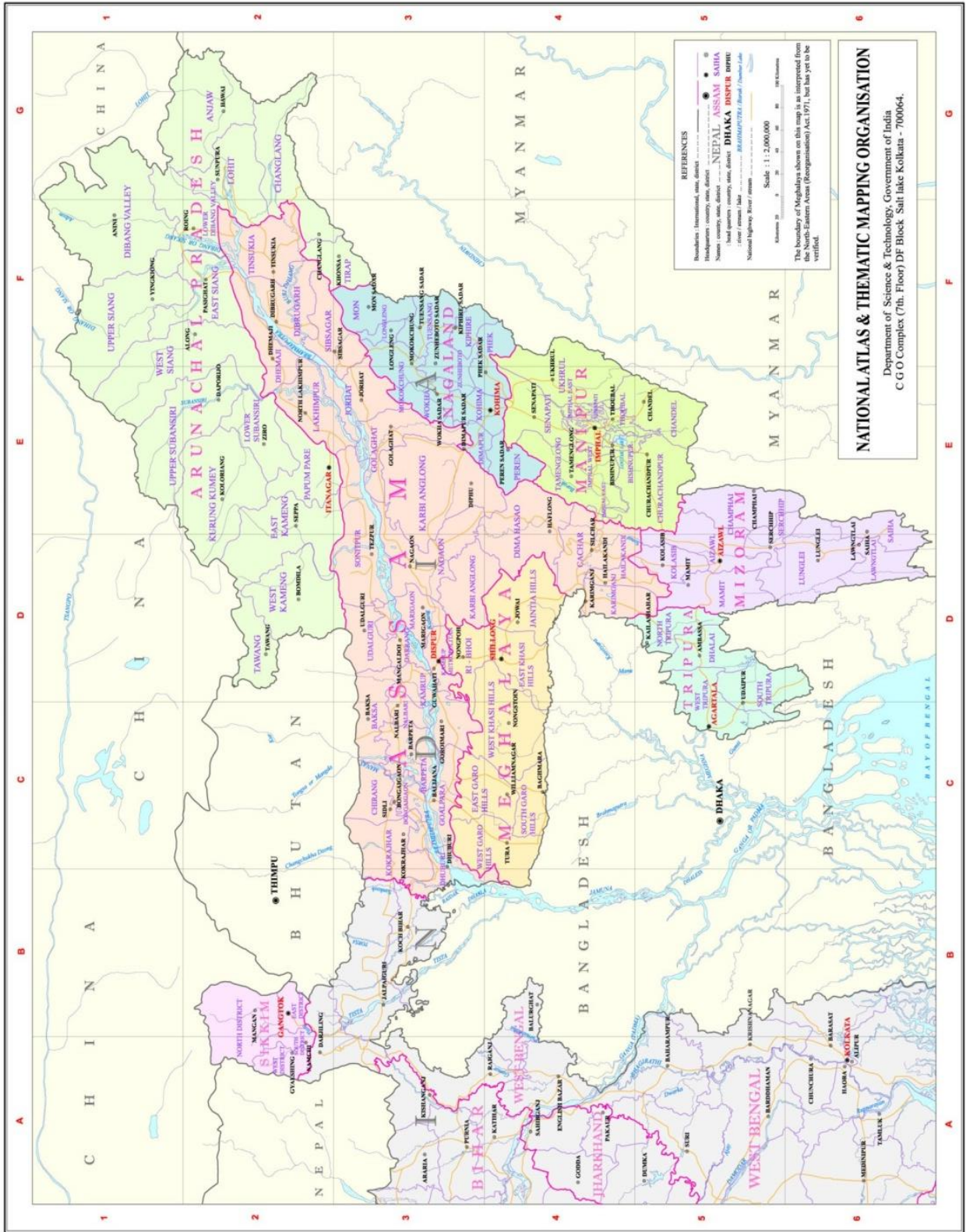
Borders and Development of Road Infrastructure in Northeast India

It was the conflict with China in 1962 that forced India to take greater notice of the significance of the Northeast as a critical frontier in its national security calculations. Chinese troops had advanced as far as Tezpur and India was clearly on the defensive regarding critical infrastructure required for faster troop deployment. After the war was over, India pushed towards building a basic level artery system of roads and military bases along critical areas in which it was vulnerable vis-à-vis China. At the same time, however, New Delhi was wary of developing a strong infrastructural presence in Arunachal Pradesh and, till the end of the past decade, followed a deliberate policy of continuing to neglect the development of Arunachal Pradesh and parts of the upper banks of the Brahmaputra in Assam, lest Chinese troops roll down the hills again (Verghese 2012).

The roads built immediately after the 1962 war and in subsequent times were only targeted at cosmetic development and geared towards meeting India's troop deployment needs. It was never going to be enough for the genuine development of the people of Northeast India, and it was not meant for purposes of cross-border trade. Even for the targeted troop deployment purpose, India clearly lagged China (Pandit 2009) as the latter made rapid strides in building infrastructure all along the critical border areas, especially in Tibet (Chansoria 2011), in accordance with the Western Development Strategy begun in the 1990s. China has improved its ability to mobilise troops along the Sino-Indian border at short notice due to such infrastructure development (Chansoria 2011).

The effective use of border road infrastructure has made China strategically dominant. India needs to accelerate its border roads project in order to meet the growing Chinese threat. The Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for the Northeast (SARDP-NE) has three parts, including a part wholly dedicated to Arunachal Pradesh known as the 'Arunachal Pradesh Package for Roads and Highways'. The critical and strategic fronts on the eastern face of the Sino-Indian border are Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, and the road networks there are being strengthened by the Department of Border Management. New Delhi has identified 27 border roads in Arunachal Pradesh and six border roads in Sikkim for development. By February 2012, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) had completed work on 10 roads; work is going on in 13 roads in Arunachal Pradesh and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) is involved in constructing eight border roads in the state (MDoNER 2012). The policy emphasis on the development of border roads infrastructure and progress of work has come about in the past 5 years, after Prime Minister Singh's visit in 2008.

Map 1
Northeast India



Source: MDoNER n.d.

India has been concerned about the growing threat to internal security due to the many insurgent movements that have been raging and simmering over many decades in various parts of Northeast India. The people of Northeast India have been demanding greater connectivity with China and countries of Southeast Asia, which they see as a way for their region to develop (Baruah 2007). India has for all these years been focusing its Look East Policy through Kolkata and not through the Northeast. There have been some gestures towards opening up the borders for greater connectivity with Southeast Asia and China, such as the Indo-ASEAN car rally in the years 2004 and 2012 and the Kolkata to Kunming car rally in 2013. But these have not been followed up and much more needs to be done.

The Trans-Arunachal Highway Project: Connecting Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh has appeared quite regularly in the Indian national security and strategic discourse for some years now—more strident Chinese territorial claims, particularly over the Tawang hill tract, have managed to unsettle New Delhi and the Indian strategic community. Against this backdrop, and given that Arunachal is the largest state in India's Northeastern region in terms of territory, it becomes important to assess the border roads infrastructure and connectivity in this strategically crucial state which shares its borders with China, Bhutan and Myanmar.

Arunachal Pradesh was a theatre in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, which India fought with almost no proper road connectivity and lost. While Indian forces managed to resist strongly at several border points, Tawang and Bomdi La towns fell without resistance as there was no proper supply and road infrastructure to maintain Indian army positions—air dropped supplies fell into the hands of the Chinese who had occupied Tawang town. This was more than 50 years ago, but the road infrastructure and overall connectivity in Arunachal Pradesh still leaves a lot to be desired in terms of strategic war preparedness for the Indian Army³ and for the general economic development and communication for people of the border state.⁴

Following the 1962 defeat, the first round of road works in Arunachal only fed specific sectors such as Bhalukpong-Bomdi La-Tawang, Itanagar-Ziro-Along-Mechuka, and the eastern areas of Tezu-Roing-Anini, Hawaii-Walong-Kibithoo and Jairampur-Nampong-Miao which included a maze of roads with no inter-connectivity. The following decades saw minimal progress in building proper road connectivity to Arunachal Pradesh from Assam on the one hand, and almost no efforts for trans-Arunachal Pradesh connectivity. However, it has to be noted in this context that the road conditions in Gohpur-Lakhimpur-Dhemaji-Jonai section on the north bank of the Brahmaputra remained in abysmal conditions, partly due to annual ravaging floods and partly due to sheer neglect of these districts by the Assam government, which significantly added to the burden of road connectivity problems for Arunachal Pradesh. The Assam government opened a four-lane highway leading to Pangsau Pass on the Stilwell Road on its side only in 2008, but as it entered Arunachal Pradesh, most of the road remained quite bad until recently and there are still stretches under construction.

Internal connectivity within Arunachal Pradesh remains one of the pressing problems which needs urgent attention—to travel to five different towns in Arunachal Pradesh, one has to cross back into Assam as many times. Air dropping of essential civil and military supplies in remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh is the prevailing norm, and a

³ Interviews with Indian Army officers at Tawang and Bum La.

⁴ Interviews with businessmen, civil society members in border areas of Arunachal Pradesh.

number of AN-32 transport aircraft are used on a daily basis from the Guwahati, Jorhat and Dibrugarh supply bases in Assam as the road infrastructure is insufficient. The road that leads to the central part of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly to its capital Itanagar, falls mostly in Assam and has been ill-maintained and ravaged by annual floods. The BRO which is in charge of maintaining these crucial border roads has done a commendable job, keeping in mind the difficult terrain, high rainfall and frequent landslides which sweep entire stretches of roads away.⁵ Land acquisition hurdles, corruption among local contractors, state Public Works Department (PWD) and BRO staff at the ground level, and among politicians and bureaucrats at the state level have resulted in poor road connectivity over the years.

The Trans-Arunachal Highway project, which was announced by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008, is still at its initial stages, with preliminary feasibility studies still being conducted in many parts of the state. Some progress has been made in some stretches built in eastern Arunachal Pradesh; however, these remain unusable due to slow progress on connecting bridges, particularly where new road alignments have been approved.⁶ The Trans-Arunachal Highway project has come a bit too late as the pressure on the existing road infrastructure has already increased manifold, given the burden of civil supplies as also the massive convoys of army supplies and movement, which has become necessary due to the current policy of trying to match Chinese infrastructure development across the border. It has been noted that in many parts of Northeast India the second layer of road connectivity and infrastructure development has begun only when the pressure on the current infrastructure has become enormously high, often compounding implementation woes; the consistent and painful delays in project implementation can be attributed to a clear policy planning failure of the central government and Arunachal Pradesh state government.⁷

Similarly, the Bogibeel project for a bridge over the river Brahmaputra in Dibrugarh in Assam was sanctioned in 1997-8 and work began in 2002. But the construction of pillars gained impetus only after 2008 when it was included as a critical component in the Trans-Arunachal Highway Project. This bridge has the potential to connect the middle and eastern parts of Arunachal Pradesh better and save travelling time; these areas depend on the Kaliabhoomora Bridge across the Brahmaputra river in Tezpur, Assam which is 400-500 km downstream from major towns of eastern Arunachal Pradesh on the south bank of the river, and Itanagar is located 170 km in the upstream direction of Tezpur in the north bank of the river.

The 'Territory' Angle: Local Community Perceptions in Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh has been at the centre of Sino-Indian contestations over territory. China claims over 90,000 sq. km. of territory in the eastern sector of its boundary dispute with India. The Sino-Indian boundary dispute, which has been simmering for decades, has proven to be a thorn in overall Sino-Indian bilateral relations, and this has captured the imagination of the local tribal population of Arunachal Pradesh in varying degrees, especially after China started making objections and statements on the issue.

The continuing Special Representatives-level dialogues between India and China on the unresolved boundary dispute, completed 17 rounds in February 2014. It has managed to

⁵ Interviews with BRO officials and private road builders/contractors in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh

⁶ Observations from visits along sections of the Trans-Arunachal Highway Project, particularly in Tezu-Roing sector where the new alignment stretch has been completed, with the bridge still unfinished.

⁷ Interviews with BRO officials, state PWD official, local contractors in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

keep the LAC relatively stable and tranquil, but has been seen as a prolonged process for the resolution of the dispute. The 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles on resolving the boundary dispute and the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement of 2013 are seen as significant milestones in the boundary talks (*The Economic Times* 2014). The Chinese incursions along the LAC in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh in 2013 (Singh 2013a) has concerned India (*The Hindu* 2013a). The All Arunachal Pradesh Student's Union (AAPSU) and the All Mishmi Student's Union (AMSU) carried out protests in Lohit and Anjaw districts over the Chinese Army incursion in Chaglagam in August 2013 (*The Times of India* 2013a). Local villagers say incursions are a regular affair in their area (Loiwal 2013).

The ground situation regarding the repeated incursions along the Sino-Indian border in Anjaw and Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh has to be read in the light of the long-range patrols conducted on both sides. The Indian Army and intelligence agencies operating along the border have to rely heavily upon the local Mishmi tribals for routes and logistical purposes.⁸ Since there is no clear demarcation of the LAC, and given the difficult mountainous terrain and alpine forests, long-range patrol parties often tread into each other's perceived areas.⁹

Mishmi villagers are known to cross the LAC while grazing their animals and hunting and there have been instances when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has apprehended them. They are often left alone, except when found with cameras or mobile phones to take pictures on behalf of the Indian Army; in one case, a Mishmi villager reportedly returned after spending 5 years in a Chinese jail.¹⁰ The local and state level politicians, especially those belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have tried to use the Chaglagam incursion to play on the minds of the Mishmi community and create a sense of fear of China, and at the same time attack the Indian government for the neglect of border security preparations in Arunachal Pradesh. However, such political activism means little to the daily lives of Mishmi villagers along the LAC as such villages are widely scattered along the LAC, with no proper roads and disconnected for many months from their nearest district or sub-divisional headquarters due to flood-induced landslides.¹¹

The 90,000 sq. km. Sino-Indian Tangle in Arunachal Pradesh

China has been asserting its claims over 90,000 sq. km. in Northeast India through various official and state-run media statements, particularly gaining momentum after Prime Minister Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh in early 2008. China's attempts to block an Asian Development Bank loan to India, which involved development projects in the state of Arunachal Pradesh (Samanta 2009), managed to unsettle India, so much so that it dropped Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim from a subsequent proposal in 2013 for a World Bank loan aimed at strengthening power infrastructure in India, to avoid a possible Chinese objection to the loan (Rao and Bhaskar 2013). China has also raised objections to the building of mega hydroelectricity projects in Arunachal Pradesh.

We need to understand the implications of the Chinese claim of over 90,000 sq. km. of territory in Northeast India. The official website of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh gives the total area of the state as being 83,743 sq. km., with 1,080 km boundary with China on the north and northeast of the state. The question is about the

⁸ Interviews with Indian Army officials and Mishmi tribals.

⁹ Interviews with Indian Army officials.

¹⁰ Interviews with Indian Army officials.

¹¹ Interviews with state-level political leaders and local Mishmi community members.

remaining 6,000-odd sq. km., which may be a part of the state of Assam. This makes the Chinese claim on the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian boundary much more complicated, and which has not been much discussed in the media and strategic policy circles in India. The actual line which the Chinese claim and which constitutes over 90,000 sq. km. is the river Brahmaputra, and thereby involves two populous plains districts north of the river in Assam, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, with an area of 2,277 sq. km. (Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur n.d.) and 3,237 sq. km. (District Administration, Dhemaji n.d.), respectively and possibly more.

The Brahmaputra holds strategic significance for China as reports about its possible diversion plans in upstream Tibet gain prominence. This links two of the most contentious and strategic issues in Sino-Indian relations in recent times, one being the issue of territoriality and the other over concerns of water-sharing and river diversion, which supposes that China wants this river to serve as a strategic natural boundary, not the state of Arunachal Pradesh only. India must take concrete steps to move ahead and clear the strategic ambiguity over Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh, and confront China on its claims on overall quantum of territory.

India needs to come up with solutions to the decades-long boundary dispute and this will require stepping ahead of strategic and military considerations alone. Some strategies could include improving basic governance indicators in the state, improving connectivity and infrastructure within the state, and even considering breaking this large border state into two or three separate states within the Indian Union comprising the western, central and eastern sections of present day-Arunachal Pradesh. The erstwhile North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT) under the British rule had three distinct administrative divisions, the Balipara, Lakhimpur and Sadiya Frontier Tracts in 1919, which later became North-East Frontier Agency under Assam after Indian independence. The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh was created in 1972, before gaining full statehood in 1987. There have been demands by the Monpa for a separate autonomous council, and the Greater Nagalim movement, which claims the three districts of Changlang, Tirap and Longding in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Assam, which is another big state in the region, has been broken up into Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya over the years, and demands for statehood for Bodoland, Dima Hasao, Karbiland and Kamatapur continue to persist.

Half a Century after the Sino-Indian War of 1962

In October 2012, a large political contingent of the youth brigade of the BJP, media in tow, made a road trip to Tawang, the most well-known and contentious area of Arunachal Pradesh in the context of Chinese territorial claims, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Sino-Indian war of 1962.¹² Community members across Arunachal Pradesh, from the west to the east, speak of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, and how they had faced it and remember it. But it is Tawang that remains the most discussed in media and academic circles in India and beyond. As the political brigade lit lamps at the Tawang War Memorial, the discussion among the 30-odd drivers of the cars waiting outside revolved around how to make it to Bum La without damaging the axles of their vehicles. Some refused to go to the border and after a lot of hectic negotiations, and extra payment promises for any car repair work, they agreed to move on the treacherous road to Bum La. This situation is a marker of the border infrastructure in the region after 50 years.

¹² Observations from visit to Tawang and Bum La on the 50th anniversary of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, and interactions with local community members, student leaders and political leaders in October 2012.

Local people contend that the roads are the same since 1962 and nothing much has changed; in fact, the roads have become far worse in the past 5 years due to the Trans-Arunachal Highway Project work. The road to Bum La is scattered with the remains of road construction machinery, which are either not working or waiting to be repaired for several months; due to the high altitude, diesel gets frozen often and the operating capability of the machines is extremely poor.¹³ The Chinese side has excellent paved roads and the stark difference can be noted immediately from the last border pillar in the LAC. The Sona Dzong is visible just 40 km away with its rail line.¹⁴

The roads on the Indian side have been perennially under repair for the past 60 years, particularly on the section from Bhalukpung, Tenga, Bomdi La, Dirang, Se La, Jang, Tawang, Bum La to Zimithang area near the India-Bhutan-China axis. There is a sense of frustration in the minds of the people of Tawang, as one local government contractor frantically tries to connect to the Eastern Air Command headquarters from the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Tawang, to request for a helicopter to ferry his ailing mother to Guwahati for emergency medical treatment, and the phone lines do not work. Due to the lack of proper connectivity infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh, and the extremely bad condition of roads leading up to Tawang particularly, people suffering and most critical patients do not make it to any proper medical facility.¹⁵ They point out that that their cars do not survive the road and need frequent repairs, and therefore there seems no chance for medical emergencies to survive the road, except through helicopters, which can be accessed only by a few people, such as influential politicians, contractors or senior government officers.¹⁶

In one particular case, a local man who was busy helping cut away at the trunk of a tree which had crashed right in the middle of the main road in Tenga, a major military station, was frustrated because no one from the military came to help the people engaged in clearing the tree from the road. to allow traffic to move. He walked up to a military personnel standing by and told him in broken Hindi, 'the Chinese are coming and will have you for breakfast.'¹⁷ This reflects the frustration of the local people and is not an isolated incident of one person venting his frustration at the Indian Army; such incidents and discussions have been noted in other parts of the state. Another case reflecting the interaction between local tribal people and the Indian Army is regarding land acquisition for setting up of a Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) telephone tower in Kibithoo circle of Anjaw district. The district administration, the BSNL authorities and the local army unit in Kibithoo are in negotiations with a local Meyor tribal family over the compensation for land required to set up the BSNL tower. It will benefit the local people as well as the local army unit, which does not have access to public telecommunications facilities. The landowner's family is seen as demanding an unreasonable compensation for the land, and thereby is stalling the BSNL tower; while the landowner claims that successive army units in Kibithoo have taken advantage of them and other villagers, denying them adequate compensation for land acquired from them to build roads, military staff housing, offices and bunkers¹⁸.

The landowner's family does not want to sell their land and instead wishes for a regular rent; the army unit offered the landowner what according to him was far too low a monthly rent. The landowner claims that the local army units have been unreliable in their dealings and think only of their tenure of a few years.¹⁹ Locals say that when a new

¹³ Interviews with BRO staff and Indian Army officers in Bum La.

¹⁴ Interviews with BRO staff and Indian Army officers in Bum La.

¹⁵ Interview with Deputy Commissioner of Tawang District, October 2012.

¹⁶ Interactions with locals in Tawang.

¹⁷ The author witnessed this incident at Tenga; many vehicles were stuck for over two hours.

¹⁸ Interactions with the local army unit and the landowner's family in Kibithoo, Lohit District

¹⁹ Interactions with members of the landowner's family in Kibithoo, Lohit District.

army unit moves in, they do not pay heed to promises made by the previous unit. They say that falling into unused bunkers while grazing injures their cattle and sheep. However, the army unit maintains that they always try their best to offer an honourable solution to such land issues and are sensitive to the people's needs.

The Mishmi Shepherds and Hunters along the Sino-Indian Border

The Mishmi tribe consists of the Idu Mishmis who are most numerous, followed by the Digaru Mishmis and the Miju Mishmis who collectively inhabit the Mishmi Hills of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, consisting of the districts of Lohit, Anjaw, Lower Dibang Valley and Upper Dibang Valley. There are Mishmi villages across the LAC in Medog and Zayu (Chayu) county of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, who belong mostly to the Miju Mishmi sub-group and are known as the Deng people. There is no interaction between the Mishmi villages in India and China except for the Mishmi shepherds and hunters who frequent the hills and forests close to the border. Meyors, who are Buddhists, inhabit some villages along the LAC in Anjaw district, live by farming and hunting, and also have relatives across the border in China.²⁰

The Mishmi community along the Sino-Indian border in Walong and Kibithoo speak about their meetings and exchanges with Mishmi people across the LAC in the grasslands where they regularly take their sheep to graze. They say that their brethren living in Chinese territory across Kibithoo are prosperous. They note that the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side enjoy better living conditions, housing and sanitation facilities mostly made up of pre-fabricated structures.²¹ They can see the Chinese villages across the border and wonder why India cannot open the borders and allow them to travel to the other side. They say that the Chinese cannot take away their lands, and the Indian Army need not be there to protect their lands for they can take care of their own.²² They say that they do not feel threatened by China and will want to visit their relatives across the border as and when such opportunity comes.²³

Hunting is common amongst the Mishmi as it is connected to their animist religion and traditions, which require wild meat to appease the spirits and protecting deities in their festivals and family offerings.²⁴ The Mishmi hunters often spend weeks in the forests along the Sino-Indian border, and come in contact with Chinese hunters who often cross into the Indian side.²⁵ Apart from consumption and religious needs, hunting in the Mishmi hills is also done for commercial purposes, where musk deer and black bears are hunted for their pods and gall bladders, respectively; these are sold to businessmen from mainland India or across the border in China for the traditional medicine market (Aiyadurai 2011).

The number of Mishmi traditional priests who conduct the animist customs in community festivals and family ritual offerings has fallen significantly, and there are almost none in the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side. As a result, Mishmi villagers from the Chinese side pay Mishmi priests from the Indian side to conduct such rituals.²⁶ This points towards a unique international border exchange of rituals, offerings and animist belief systems between the Mishmi tribal people living in China and India.

²⁰ Interactions with Meyor villagers in Anjaw District.

²¹ Interactions with Mishmi villagers in Anjaw District.

²² Interactions with local Mishmi villagers in Anjaw District.

²³ Interactions with local Mishmi villagers in Anjaw and Lohit Districts.

²⁴ Interview with Jibi Pulu, civil society activist, Roing, Lower Dibang Valley District.

²⁵ Interaction with a Mishmi hunter in Roing.

²⁶ Interviews with Mishmi civil society members in Roing.

Mishmi villagers in Arunachal Pradesh say that they know that their Mishmi brethren cannot openly follow their animist religious rituals and practices on the Chinese side due to the prevailing communist ideology. Therefore they accord a high value to cross-border interactions between shepherds, hunters and traditional priests, in order to preserve their common Mishmi animist religion, culture and identity.²⁷

The annual fair held at Parasuram Kund in Lohit district, near the confluence where the Lohit river enters the Assam plains and joins the Brahmaputra, sees Mishmi villagers come down from the hills to sell musk deer pods, which are bought by Marwari businessmen and subsequently used in the perfume industry in mainland India.²⁸ Locally known as 'kasturi', these musk deer pods, believed to have therapeutic properties, are used by Mishmi villagers to stuff pillows and blankets, and are smuggled by train or air in the same manner, as security personnel at railway stations and airports are not adequately trained to identify such items.²⁹

There is evidence of tigers being hunted in the forests of Arunachal Pradesh by Mishmi hunters, both belonging to the Indian side and the Chinese side, who frequent these large swathes of forests along the LAC.³⁰ According to their folklore, the Mishmi people believe that the tiger is their own brother and therefore should not be hunted. There are specific rituals and restrictions that a Mishmi hunter should observe in case he kills a tiger.

The villagers believe that the forests, which are part of their grazing and hunting activities and are closely attached to their culture and animist beliefs, are likely to be destroyed by the impact of the big dams that are being planned in the Dibang Valley region.³¹ The Mishmi people maintain that their hunting activities are in accordance with their knowledge of the hills and the need to keep the balance in nature, but they fear that big dams will severely deplete forests. The 3,000MW Lower Dibang Multipurpose Hydroelectric project alone has an impact assessment involving the clearing of nearly 300,000 trees.³²

The 'Tribes' Angle: Local Community Perceptions in Arunachal Pradesh

Various tribes inhabiting Arunachal Pradesh have, over the past decades, been introduced to the processes of integration to the Indian nation and it can be termed as largely successful. The emotional component associated with national integration in a large nation such as India has been very strong in some parts and very weak in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh. The challenge for New Delhi in its attempts to integrate Arunachal Pradesh into the national mainstream is two-pronged, first the pulls and pressures of development priorities within the seven states of Northeast India, and then the ability to integrate Northeast India into the national mainstream.

The varying degree of integration within Arunachal Pradesh can be attributed to the aspects of language, education, local perceptions of development in the state, the development of roads and connectivity. The western, central and eastern parts of

²⁷ Interviews with Mishmi civil society members in Roing.

²⁸ Interview with Ambika Aiyadurai, currently researching on hunting practices in the Mishmi Hills of Arunachal Pradesh, PhD Candidate of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

²⁹ Interview with Ambika Aiyadurai.

³⁰ Interview with Ambika Aiyadurai.

³¹ Interactions with civil society members and local hunters in Roing.

³² Interview with Jibi Pulu and Raju Mimi, civil society activists in Roing.

Arunachal Pradesh are connected in disparate ways to the rest of India, thereby creating disparity also in terms of national integration among the tribes of the state. While none of these parts can claim to be better connected to India, they are also not mutually connected within Arunachal Pradesh due to the lack of proper intra-Arunachal connectivity, which the Trans-Arunachal Highway Project, when completed, will be able to remedy. Two decades ago, Arunachal Pradesh was described as a region which had not awakened to modern civilisation. There has been relatively more development in the other Northeastern states, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura, except Arunachal Pradesh. The people of Arunachal Pradesh did not get the level of developmental attention from the Indian government which they deserved all along.

New Delhi now wants to assert its legitimacy in Arunachal Pradesh by the initiation of developmental projects, and thereby integrate it better into the national mainstream or at least into the Northeast India mainstream. This is termed as coming a bit too late, but it is nevertheless encouraging for the future of the state and its people. However, New Delhi has demonstrated over time that it seeks to conduct its policy in Arunachal Pradesh with a considerable amount of diplomatic caution, and that it does not take even symbolic postures on the most controversial issue in Sino-Indian relations.

Developmental measures announced by New Delhi hold some promise but it has to be seen if the big power projects really benefit the local people. The many hydroelectric power projects in Arunachal Pradesh include some which would be India's highest capacity projects in terms of actual output projected and its overall potential, such as the ones on the main channels of the Subansiri, Siang and Dibang rivers. The increased frequency of helicopter services for civilian use is also in the offing and several disused airfields in the state are being revived, both for civilian and military use. Only two states in Northeast India, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, do not have a proper functioning airport. The only available option is the skeletal helicopter services provided by the state government, which have seen accidents in recent years (Kashyap 2011), leading to serious safety concerns among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The upgradation of the Lilabari Airport in Lakhimpur, Assam, which was active in the 1980s, can cater to the people of central Arunachal Pradesh and connect the capital city of Itanagar better with the rest of India; this must be put on the fast track by the government. Itanagar was linked with the railway network in Assam in April 2014, with the 20km-long Harmuty-Naharlagun railway track completed and the start of the first passenger train service (*IndiaTimes* 2014).

Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai: Countering China's Claim on Arunachal through Hindi

The link language between the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, who have their own distinct tribal languages/dialects, is Hindi, and this puts India in an advantageous position vis-à-vis the Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh. All tribes speak Hindi fluently in Arunachal Pradesh; the Tibetan language is spoken by some monks from the Monpa area in western Arunachal Pradesh, members of the Memba community in Mechuka area of central Arunachal Pradesh, and the people settled in the Tibetan Refugee Settlements in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh. It can be said the common aspect that binds the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh today is the link language of Hindi, which is the source of 'Arunachalee' identity.³³

³³ Interviews with civil society members, student leaders, politicians in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Hindi has been taught in schools in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh for over four decades now, especially by the Ramakrishna Mission Schools, the Vivekananda Kendriya Vidyalyas. New Delhi's support part of a conscious policy, especially during Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister of India, to disseminate the learning of Hindi, the national language of India, in this strategic Sino-Indian border state.³⁴ Over the past three decades, this policy has demonstrated its benefits in the shape of the people of Arunachal Pradesh talking in Hindi, not only with the people of rest of India, but also with the people of other Northeast Indian states. Prior to the setting up of these schools which promoted Hindi in a big way, Assamese was both the medium of instruction in schools and the link language between the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh and their nearest neighbours in Assam, with whom they conducted barter trade. Now, only a few elderly people are fluent in Assamese.

The strong presence of Indian Army, BRO and other paramilitary forces in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh has also spread the Hindi language among the local people in remote areas which have few schools. Most of the tribal people in parts along the LAC depend on the Indian Army for their supplies and connectivity, and the local economy revolves around labour requirements and odd jobs for the Indian Army and the BRO. This also has negative implications for the tribal society and economy, in the form of the rise in sex work involving local tribal women which needs attention. The increased availability of satellite television and its penetration capability to remote places in Arunachal Pradesh has helped the spread of Hindi as a link language.

For the youth, emerging middle class and politicians of Arunachal Pradesh who have a natural affinity to the national language of India, the attempts made at national integration will have a greater resonance, and effectively counter Chinese claims on the state. Some local people say that they are troubled and annoyed by the prevailing notion that they have to prove that they are Indian, almost as if they should wear a badge announcing that they are Indian, and not pro-Chinese; but the very fact that they can speak fluent Hindi, much better than any other state of Northeast India, must be adequate testimony.³⁵ The local perception of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute oscillates between a strong support for India's claim over Arunachal Pradesh, and a strong sense of disapproval of the attitude which questions the patriotism of local tribal people. Arunachal Pradesh is avowedly Indian and predominantly Hindi speaking with the feeling that India should diplomatically position the state towards restarting *Hindi-Chini bhai bhai*.

The China *meherbaani* Effect in Arunachal Pradesh

Discussions with community leaders and student leaders, particularly in parts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, have this statement of 'China *meherbaani*'.³⁶ The word *meherbaani* in Hindi means 'courtesy' or 'favour'. In this context, the local people use 'China *meherbaani*' to term the development in the state as being only 'courtesy' the China factor in New Delhi's strategic calculations, and not out of New Delhi's considerations for the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. People term the road infrastructure development in the region as driven by the surge in territorial claims by China on

³⁴ Interview with the Principal of Ramakrishna Mission School, Aalo, West Siang District, March 2011, and letter from Indira Gandhi to the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, on 21 July 1965, full text of which can be accessed at the website of the Ramakrishna Mission Aalo, Viveknagar, www.ramakrishnamissionaalo.org.

³⁵ Interviews with civil society members, student leaders and politicians in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

³⁶ Interviews with community and student leaders in Lower Dibang and Lohit Districts.

Arunachal Pradesh over the past decade, and it is not difficult for the local people living near the border to perceive this aspect. Mishmi community leaders in Lohit district point out that they have been waiting for the development of their areas for the past 60 years after Indian independence. This has failed to happen even with one of their tribesmen occupying the highest office in the state government in the past.³⁷ The community leaders point out that development is taking place now because India needs to build the security infrastructure to bolster its strategic and military preparedness vis-à-vis China, and also cater to the dam companies. It is definitely not only for the tribal people living in the Mishmi Hills.

Leaders from the Tai-Khamti community in Chowkham point out that if the road infrastructure projects were really for the tribal people, they would have been consulted before such projects were implemented; currently, however, they are only brought into the picture when there are issues of land acquisition or any trouble in the project areas.³⁸ They ask why they are not allowed to use and develop resources in their own community areas, and question the significance of the roads for their development. The travel time has decreased and they do acknowledge that it will benefit their community in many ways, but there needs to be commensurate capacity-building activities to allow the communities to gain from such connectivity. The community leaders question the commitment of the state and central governments towards actual long-term sustainable development of the region.

The Tai-Khamti community leaders are happy that because of ‘China *meherbaani*’ they see some amount of development in their areas. But they point out that it is of no significance if this is not well connected with other parts of Northeast India, and question the closed borders with northern Myanmar, with whom they have long-standing cultural connections. They speak about their extended family connections in Myanmar and their inability to visit them, and point out that these connectivity projects do not serve their cultural connectivity aspirations, until it also links them with northern Myanmar through the Stilwell Road. The community leaders express that they never feel part of China, nor do they accept any threats or claims by China on Arunachal Pradesh. They realise the power of China and know how well it has developed the regions on its side of the border, such development having long eluded them. The community leaders contend that they have a different view of China from that of the state government in Itanagar or the central government in New Delhi. They point out that the manner in which the Indian Army interacts with them, or how the BRO goes about its road building activities reflects the trust deficit that their community has faced from the central and state government agencies for decades now. They say that this deficit is growing and is creating a lot of problems within their own community, dividing them along the lines of individual aspirations amidst incidents of corruption in road building projects.

The local people’s perception in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh is that their state has come into national focus and importance due to the China factor. It is only at particular instances when either China stakes claim on the territory of Arunachal Pradesh or when the Chinese embassy issues stapled visas to people belonging to Arunachal Pradesh, that people in the rest of India start discussing about Arunachal Pradesh.³⁹ The stapled visas issued by China to the people of Arunachal Pradesh has been strongly opposed by the diplomatic establishment in New Delhi, but the local perception is that they have become pawns in the political game between New Delhi and Beijing. The issuance of stapled visa to two young archers from Arunachal Pradesh

³⁷ Interviews with community leaders in Roing. The political leader is former Chief Minister Mukut Mithi, who is a Idu-Mishmi from Roing, Lower Dibang Valley.

³⁸ Interviews with Tai-Khamti community leaders in Chowkham, Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh.

³⁹ Interviews with civil society members and student activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

prevented them from participating in the World Archery Championship in China in 2013, and Beijing defended the move by asserting that it reflected its flexibility until the boundary question remains unsolved (Krishnan 2013).

Some local people in Arunachal Pradesh feel that India should either allow its citizens to travel on such stapled visas or solve the boundary question, so that common people from the state do not suffer; they think New Delhi create some mechanism to ensure that this does not happen again.⁴⁰ The dignity of people from Arunachal Pradesh is at stake and they have aspirations to visit China. People feel that it is New Delhi's stance that is creating problems and it must demonstrate some amount of flexibility, and some sincerity in resolving the boundary question permanently with China. The local perception is that India must stop treating Arunachal Pradesh from the sole prism of strategic political relations with China, and demonstrate that development and opportunities for Arunachal Pradesh are not triggered by 'China *meherbaani*', but to fulfil the aspirations of the local people.

Arunachal Pradesh Development Debate: Upstream Tribes, Downstream Tribes

The lack of proper road connectivity in Arunachal Pradesh does contribute to the lack of connectivity in the developmental vision amongst the tribes inhabiting the state. In spite of the link language of Hindi and the evolving 'Arunachalee' identity, several underlying issues need to be addressed in order to ensure that developmental gains reach every community in a uniform manner. The dividends of resource inflow in Arunachal Pradesh has benefitted only a few and the disparity in relatively sparsely populated tribal societies is especially stark. With the recent spate of infrastructure development being undertaken by New Delhi and the multitude of dams being constructed in various parts of the state, some local community perceptions are very critical of the manner in which such important infrastructure and resource use is implemented without their consent or involvement.

The lack of inter-community interaction within the state has the potential of creating inter-community conflict, given their varied perceptions on the development projects and the varying benefits of such development on communities, depending on which combination of communities holds sway in the political capital Itanagar. The former Chief Minister Dorjee Khandu was from the Monpa tribe and held enormous political power in the state. After his death in a helicopter crash, Jarbom Gamlin from the Galo tribe became Chief Minister for a brief period, and the current Chief Minister Nabam Tuki belongs to the Nyishi tribe, all from the same political party, the Indian National Congress. The power struggles and divisive politics within the ruling Congress Party, fought intensely on ethnic lines, were reflected in the group clashes in the capital city of Itanagar in late 2011 (Das 2011).

The Mishmi, Singpho, Deori and Tai-Khamti communities find themselves pitted against the Monpa, Nyishi, Apatani and Adi tribes for access to development benefits. Communities such as the Tai-Khamti, Singpho, Deori and Misings are politically at a disadvantage as they are considered to be tribes from neighbouring Assam. There have been unsuccessful demands in the past by the larger tribes of Arunachal that these minority tribes should not enjoy tribal status in Arunachal Pradesh as they do in Assam.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Interviews with civil society members and student activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁴¹ Interviews with community leaders of Deori, Tai-Khamti and Singpho tribes in Arunachal. See also *North East Blog* 2010.

The Naga tribes inhabit Arunachal Pradesh in the three districts of Changlang, Tirap and Longding, which are also the most backward areas of the state. This is due to the perception in the rest of Arunachal Pradesh that the people of the three districts actively support the division of the state, under the Greater Nagalim, which also includes parts of Assam and Manipur. The Nagaland Peoples Front (NPF), led by Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, announced that they would contest the parliamentary elections in the eastern Arunachal Pradesh seat, in order to ensure the development of Naga and other minority tribal communities in the state (Times of India 2012). The resolution for Mon Autonomous Council comprising Tawang and West Kameng districts, and Patkai Autonomous Council comprising the districts of Tirap, Changlang and Longding was passed by the Arunachal Pradesh Assembly in 2004, but New Delhi has been reluctant to create any autonomous districts along the Sino-Indian border (*The Times of India* 2013b). The Mon Autonomous Region Demand Committee (MARDC), led by Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, former Congress legislator from Lumla in Tawang district, intensified pressure on the central government and the Congress party before the 2014 parliamentary elections (ANI 2013).

The Tibetan refugee settlements of Arunachal Pradesh in Bomdi La, Miao and Tezu are directly administered by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in India, and have a good social and economic relationship with the local tribal population in these areas, especially in Bomdi La and Tuting areas where there are local Monpa and Memba tribals, respectively, who also follow Buddhism. Most of the development funds for the Tibetan settlements come from the CTA, foreign donors or from outside Arunachal Pradesh. There have been some isolated incidents of conflict and economic boycott between locals and Tibetan people in Tezu and Miao, but these have been easily resolved. Canada granted 1,000 visas in 2013 to Tibetan refugees in Arunachal Pradesh to migrate to Canada, and the process of selection of about 900 people has taken place.⁴²

The local perception regarding the Chakma tribal population, which were settled by New Delhi in Arunachal Pradesh, has tones of strong resentment, often portraying the Chakma tribals as being responsible for the rise in criminal activities. The Chakma tribals are the most vulnerable in terms of social and economic discrimination by the other tribes inhabiting Arunachal Pradesh, and this has been a raging political issue in the state for many years now, especially given the high rate of population growth amongst the Chakma community. Locals speak of unruly behaviour by Chakma youth and the involvement of people from the community in criminal gangs which were responsible for several cases of kidnappings and extortion in the Chowkham area.⁴³ The Tai-Khamti community gave land to the government to settle the Chakma community, and welcomed them because they were also Buddhists. However, the Tai-Khamti community leaders maintain that it is only a few people within the Chakma community who are in conflict with the local Tai-Khamti and Singpho villagers, but which sullies their reputation in the state.⁴⁴

The 'Turbines' Angle: Local Community Perceptions in Arunachal Pradesh

The legendary Assamese singer and composer, Bhupen Hazarika, in one of his popular compositions, asks the mighty Brahmaputra river the reason for its quiet and unbounded flow, amidst the suffering and pain of the people living by its banks.⁴⁵ This song can be

⁴² Interviews with Tibetan Settlement Officers at Miao and Tezu. See also Parliament of Canada 2013.

⁴³ Interactions with community leaders in Chowkham, Lohit District.

⁴⁴ Interactions with community leaders in Chowkham.

⁴⁵ Bhupen Hazarika's Assamese song, 'Bistirno Parore' which talks about the Brahmaputra river was influenced by a song about the Mississippi river, 'Ol' Man River' (Show Boat, 1936), by African-American

re-contextualised in the backdrop of the great uncertainty and fears among the communities living in the Brahmaputra river basin, especially the downstream communities, over plans of mega-dams construction and water diversion infrastructure projects on the river system in the past decade by both China and India.

The sharing of hydrological data on the flow of the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river system between China, which is the upper riparian country, and India, which is the middle riparian country, has proved to be a somewhat thorny issue in bilateral relations between the two countries, being discussed at the highest levels of diplomacy. Wirsing (2008) discusses China's South-North Water Diversion Project which has been envisioned in three geographic parts, the Eastern, Middle, and Western routes. The Western route is divided into two sub-parts, the Western and the Greater Western routes, and it is the Greater Western route, which might extract waters from as far south on the Tibetan plateau as the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river system, that directly concerns the lower riparian states of India and Bangladesh. This project has captured the attention of communities in Northeast India, especially in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and speculations are rife in activist and media circles given the lack of bilateral information sharing on such grand diversion projects. There is almost hysteria because of China initiating work on dam projects to divert the water of the Brahmaputra river upstream; student-led civil society activism and the local political atmosphere in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have been charged with such media speculations (*Hindustan Times* 2013b).

The hydrological data on the Brahmaputra has been shared between India and China from 2002 onwards, when New Delhi negotiated a memorandum of understanding with Beijing on information sharing about the Brahmaputra's water flow into downstream Assam during peak flood season. This was offered by China free of cost to India for the period 2002-8; later reports suggested that Beijing conveyed to New Delhi that this hydrological information sharing on the Brahmaputra would no longer come for free and demanded payment for the period 2008-12 (*The Assam Tribune* 2008). This demand was perceived in India as a signal that China would proceed with its ambitious water diversion project on the Brahmaputra, and allegations that China was trying to deliberately stop such data sharing, which may point towards its manipulations upstream. On closer analysis, this apprehension seemed somewhat misplaced. The Sutlej river's hydrological data sharing between India and China has been paid for by India over the years at the rate of INR 10 lakh per flood season (*The Assam Tribune* 2008), and this development is therefore not out of context, as such hydrological data collection facilities have to be maintained by the upper riparian country, that is China, in extremely inhospitable terrain in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Cooperation towards sharing of flood season hydrological data between China and India on shared trans-boundary rivers will require significant economic investments by both countries.

Hydropower Development in Arunachal Pradesh: India's 'New Forward Policy'

India appears to be following a policy of trying to legitimise its sovereignty claims over Arunachal Pradesh through huge hydroelectricity projects in this critical biodiversity hotspot—this may not go down well with Beijing. This forward policy of hydropower development in Arunachal Pradesh by India could send the wrong signals to Beijing, and this would have an adverse impact on cordial bilateral relations, necessary for the success of any future negotiations to resolve the sensitive trans-boundary water sharing

singer Paul Leroy Robeson who was also involved in the American civil rights movement. Bhupen Hazarika's song was later translated into Hindi in which the reference was to the Ganga.

issues and extending cooperation on water issues. This forward policy by New Delhi, however, continues to be pursued, so much so that it has shifted the attention, fears and concerns of local communities in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam to the rampant dam building projects by India, significantly overriding their concerns of upstream dam building projects by China.⁴⁶

Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) discuss an isolated example of the 'lack of engagement' between Indian and Chinese politicians and scientists involving sensitive international relations between the two countries. In 2000, severe flash floods because of the bursting of upstream artificial lakes was reported in the Sotlej and Siang rivers that flow from Tibet through the states of Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. The issue brought up by Indian officials was the alleged culpability of the Chinese army in breaching temporary lakes created by landslides without adequate warning to the Indian side, causing loss of life and damage to infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and hydroelectric plants. The charges were denied by the Chinese officials, although the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), through the help of satellite imagery, claimed to have identified the lakes that were breached. This nature of local contingencies and bilateral interaction illustrates the potential international implications of upstream-downstream discourses on water use between China and India, which is characterised by the lack of proper information sharing processes and advocates the case for a bilateral water use treaty framework.

Weiluo (2006) discusses stage one of the Upper Siang hydroelectric power project in Arunachal Pradesh, and points out the domestic opposition by local residents and environmental rights and protection groups, on the one hand, and Chinese opposition to the hydroelectric power project, on the other, given that the reservoir formed by this dam project will extend well within China's borders. China has demanded that India reduce the height and water storage level of the dam and reduce hydroelectric output of the project by half of what has been originally planned; otherwise, it is argued, a large portion of Chinese territory in Tibet will be submerged, and the threat of flooding would greatly increase. China considers the Upper Siang hydroelectric power project reservoir in Arunachal Pradesh to be an 'inclined lake' that will inundate a portion of Tibet Autonomous Region, entirely different from the 'level lake' of the Three Gorges dam reservoir (Weiluo 2006). China has registered its opposition to the project by declining fundamental hydrological and meteorological data on the upper reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, impacting feasibility studies by India (Weiluo 2006). Stage two of the Upper Siang hydroelectric power project has been initiated with a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO) in May 2013.

Hydropower Development in Arunachal Pradesh: Pro-Dam and Anti-Dam Voices

The objectives of the hydropower development plans of the state government of Arunachal Pradesh, actively backed by New Delhi, are to harness the over 57,000 MW hydro-energy potential of the border state, and to stake first-user riparian rights over waters flowing from the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The state government of Arunachal Pradesh has entered into as many as 162 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) allotting hydroelectric projects to public sector and private companies between the

⁴⁶ Interviews with anti-big dam activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

years 2005 and 2014, with a total revenue of INR 14,428.15 million accrued in application money, processing fees and upfront premium alone.⁴⁷

The government of Arunachal Pradesh has projected the benefits from the massive scale of hydropower development to the various tribes of the state, as enabling factors for the state to be energy sufficient and meet the growing energy needs of the rest of Northeast and mainland India, and raise revenue for the overall development of the people of Arunachal Pradesh without depending on the central government. The pro-big dams shift in the policies of the government of Arunachal Pradesh emerged during Chief Minister Gegong Apang's term in 2005, and picked momentum during the tenure of his former power minister and successor, Dorjee Khandu, who initiated as many as 126 MoUs allocating hydroelectric power projects between 2007 and 11.⁴⁸ There have been allegations of large-scale corruption and kickbacks in the allocation of these power projects by the Congress government in Arunachal Pradesh and the emergence of a powerful pro-dam lobby engaging in speculative project allocation.⁴⁹ However, only a few of these hydro projects have been able to begin construction, with many of them awaiting public hearings and environmental clearances. The Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project, built at Gerukamukh along the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam border by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), has completed about 50 per cent of its total construction work. But work at the project site has been stalled since December 2011 due to anti-dam protests in downstream areas of the Subansiri River in Assam, which have prevented the passage of turbines and other critical dam construction machinery to the project site (*The Times of India* 2013c). The NHPC hopes that the government will be able to resolve the matter and the remaining construction, which is suffering due to huge project overrun costs, would begin soon.⁵⁰

Arunachal Pradesh has seen large-scale anti-dam protests by student unions, civil society activist groups and even Buddhist monks across Kameng, Subansiri, Siang and Dibang valleys. Public hearings for the Lower Dibang Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project were cancelled over 10 times due to local anti-dam protests, before it was finally completed in March 2013.⁵¹ The repeated calls for the public hearing for the Lower Siang Hydroelectric Project has been opposed by anti-dam activists and the local Adi tribal councils known as 'kebangs', who are in favour of 33 small and medium dams in the tributaries of the Siang, but oppose the three mega-dams on the main channel of the river.⁵² Monks and locals in Tawang, birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, held protests against proposed dams in the district in March 2013, which they feel will threaten the over 450-year old Galden Namgyel Lhatse monastery and local people's livelihood (Mitra 2013).

The elders and the youth of the local tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh seem to be clearly divided along the lines of pro-dam and anti-dam voices. Some community elders are of the view that the future generations must benefit from the developmental changes that are being ushered in Arunachal Pradesh through large infrastructure projects, such as mega-dams and road connectivity projects and that there must be no

⁴⁷ Information obtained from Assistant Public Information Officer, Office of the Chief Engineer (Monitoring), Department of Hydropower Development, Itanagar, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, through Right to Information Act application, by a civil society activist group in Arunachal Pradesh.

⁴⁸ Information obtained from Assistant Public Information Officer, Office of the Chief Engineer (Monitoring), Department of Hydropower Development, Itanagar, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, through Right to Information Act application, by a civil society activist group in Arunachal Pradesh.

⁴⁹ Interviews with local politicians and civil society members in Itanagar.

⁵⁰ Interview with Deputy Manager, Environment of NHPC Ltd at Guwahati, Assam.

⁵¹ Interviews with Raju Mimi and Jibi Pulu, civil society activists in Roing.

⁵² Interviews with Vijay Taram and Igul Padung, anti-dam activists in Pasighat, East Siang District.

opposition to such projects.⁵³ The elders say that they themselves have lived a life of relative deprivation compared to the rest of Northeast and mainland India, and the time has arrived for the people of Arunachal Pradesh to partake in the benefits accruing from the development projects.

Many youth, on the other hand, particularly student activists, who are seen to be leading the anti-dam protests in Arunachal Pradesh, term the development discourse in the state as overtly dependent on hydropower, which need not be the only way for the state to develop and progress in the future.⁵⁴ The student leaders maintain that while the elders are supporting dams based on their own understanding of life, it is upon the youth of Arunachal Pradesh to chart a sustainable and secure development path for the state in the coming years. They point out that there are several avenues to generate employment for the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, and the state government must discard its obsession with hydropower development and take steps to promote other sectors for the overall economic development of the state (Choudhury 2013). The student activists say that the path of hydropower development will only mean more jobs for people from outside Arunachal Pradesh, and the local youth will not benefit due to the lack of proper capacity building and skill development opportunities in the state.⁵⁵

‘Run-of-the-River’ Dams or ‘Run Away with the River’ Dams?

The dams proposed and being built in Arunachal Pradesh are termed as Run-of-the-River dams, and given the debates of environmental flow (e-flow)⁵⁶ and free flow of the rivers forwarded by the pro-dam lobbyists and the anti-dam activists, respectively, the perceptions of various stakeholders need to be assessed comprehensively. The 405MW Ranganadi Hydroelectric Project built by NEEPCO in Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, was commissioned in 2002, and remains the only functioning medium-scale concrete-gravity diversion dam in the state. The dam has created the Ranganadi reservoir, and the water is diverted through a penstock tunnel to the Dikrong powerhouse, and the diverted water ultimately falls into the Dikrong River (*The Economic Times* 2013).⁵⁷

The ‘run-of-the-river’ terminology does not make sense to the local people—they see the entire water of the Ranganadi river flow to the Dikrong river, the former become almost a dry river bed with the increased deposition of silt and boulders, and all e-flow considerations become irrelevant in the lean winter months. The Dikrong gets flooded and the Ranganadi is merely a trickle. The problems are evident in the downstream areas of the Ranganadi of Assam, where local people see that the river no longer supports the biota that it used to before the dam was built and when it was free flowing. They term the use of the terminology ‘run-of-the-river’ as a ploy by the power companies to mislead and elicit support for the dam amongst local people, and a misnomer according to their local indigenous understanding of the river system.⁵⁸ The periodic flushing of the accumulated silt at the Ranganadi project has created flash floods, gradually increased the riverbed of the Brahmaputra which is yet to be technically assessed, resulting in the increase of erosion in the downstream areas. The

⁵³ Interviews with community elders in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁵⁴ Interviews with youth and student leaders in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁵⁵ Interviews with youth and student leaders in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁵⁶ Environmental flow (e-flow) refers to water within a river, wetland or coastal zone that serves to maintain the ecosystem and provides benefits to the local people, in the context of overall dam impact.

⁵⁷ Also observations from visit to the Ranganadi Hydroelectric Project and interactions with local people, anti-dam activists and civil society members in Ziro, Lower Subansiri District.

⁵⁸ Interviews with local people and civil society activists in Lakhimpur District, Assam.

e-flow assessment of the Ranganadi project was not done properly and the lack of standard guidelines, framework and methods for environmental impact assessment, collection of data for all seasonal flows of the river, public hearings for both upstream and downstream affected communities have led to a sense of mistrust among the local communities.⁵⁹

The Ranganadi project is being seen as the manifestation of the fears and concerns that local communities and anti-dam activists have for other dam projects, the argument being that if a 405MW 'run-of-the-river' project which has still not achieved its peak capacity has created so much of ecological damage to the Ranganadi and Dikrong river systems, what will the 2,700MW Lower Subansiri project and the 3,000MW Lower Dibang project entail for the rivers? The 2,700MW Lower Siang project public hearing was stalled by the local anti-dam movements for the fifth time in January 2014, as the same date was declared for simultaneous public hearings in the Lower Siang, West Siang and Upper Siang districts, and many villages directly affected were as far as 170 km away from the public hearing site⁶⁰. The 1,200MW Kalai II project public hearing was conducted amidst alleged suppression of local protests by local politicians and police in Anjaw district, even as the environmental impact assessment report was incomplete and there was ambiguity about whether the dam was to be a storage dam or a run-of-the-river project (*The Times of India* 2014). The validity of environmental and social impact assessment of the dam projects in Arunachal Pradesh, including downstream impact assessment on communities, remains intensely contested between the dam companies and the state government, on the one hand, and the anti-dam activist networks and local communities, on the other.

There have been allegations of opium being distributed by dam companies in villages belonging to the Adi community in the Siang valley, which are likely to be submerged by the proposed dams, so that the villagers are not able to participate actively in anti-dam protests.⁶¹ Other allegations of subversive tactics by dam companies to local anti-dam activist leaders include death threats and lucrative offers of monetary gain.⁶² The local perception regarding the various dam companies have been influenced by such allegations and, given the active support by the state government to dam companies, has ensured that the overall political situation in the state has turned murky and tense.

The allocation of dam projects to travel companies such as Patel Tours and Travels Private Limited from Mumbai, which got the Poma Hydroelectric Project and Papum Hydroelectric Project in the year 2008-9, and other obscure real estate, steel fabrication companies, and new companies which have no prior experience in hydroelectric projects, has led to the perception that a huge scam is underway in Arunachal Pradesh associated with hydropower speculation by the state government. There have been allegations that many dubious private companies are raising huge capital in the stock market, increasing their market profile and bagging infrastructure projects in other under-developed countries on the back of such hydroelectric project allocations, which have been allocated by a state government of the Indian Union.⁶³ The local perception is that many of these small and medium dam projects are 'paper dams' or 'MoU dams' and will not see any construction on the ground, as there have been no signs of urgency in ground assessment and feasibility studies, except for the mega-dams

⁵⁹ Interviews with civil society activists, anti-dam activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁶⁰ Letter to Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, by Siang anti-dam activists, 31 January 2014 and 19 February 2014, by Forum for Siang Dialogue.

⁶¹ Interviews with Vijay Taram, other anti-dam activists and student activists in Pasighat.

⁶² Interviews with anti-dam activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁶³ Interviews with civil society members and anti-dam activists in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

in the main channels of the Kameng, Subansiri, Siang and Dibang, built by large public sector and private dam companies, actively backed by New Delhi.

Territory, Tribes and Turbines: A turbulent future for Arunachal Pradesh?

Arunachal Pradesh stands today at a crossroads of sorts, in the background of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute, development imperatives of the various local tribal communities and huge infrastructure projects linked to roads, dams and the military. The strategic imperatives of New Delhi; the pulls and pressures of internal development debates between the state government and civil society; the development aspirations, fears and concerns of local tribal communities relating to culture, livelihood and environment have to be woven into an inclusive developmental strategy. The prevailing sense of disconnect and lack of inclusive development among various local tribal communities, ambiguity in developmental imperatives and strategy has led to corruption, anarchy and growing mistrust among the stakeholders.

The perception of local tribal communities on what is happening in Arunachal Pradesh in relation to the various angles discussed earlier is important to chart the future developmental course of the state. A cursory look at social media interaction forums in Arunachal Pradesh shows that much of the debate revolves around large infrastructure projects especially related to dams, with Facebook groups such as Stop Dams on Siang, Forum for Siang Dialogue, Lohit Basin People's Forum, Save Dibang Valley, Stop Death Dam Projects in Monyul dominating. An old villager in Roing, who has never used a landline telephone, radio or television in his life, eagerly asked a young activist checking his mobile phone, 'Facebook pe kya chal raha hai?' ('what is happening in the Facebook forums on dams?')⁶⁴ The leap for the local tribal communities in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh is huge, as they have to grapple with many aspects within a short period of their lifetime, from public hearings, environmental impact assessment, road alignments, compensation issues, dam height, land inundation, protest rallies, religion, culture and traditional symbols. The development of military infrastructure, especially near big dam sites in Arunachal Pradesh, and the allegations of Maoist influence and support in anti-dam protests by the state governments of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have led to fears and concerns among local communities and anti-dam activists that the Armed Forces Special Power's Act (AFSPA), used in many parts of Northeast India which are declared to be conflict-affected, may also be deployed to suppress anti-dam protests.⁶⁵ At present the AFSPA has only been used in Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, primarily against the Naga nationalist insurgent groups.

Article 371 (H) of the Constitution of India, which is related to special provisions with respect to the state of Arunachal Pradesh, is a short description of the special responsibility and discretionary powers of the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, appointed by the President of India on the advice of the central government. It deals with maintaining law and order in the border state, her/his exercise of individual judgment, and the aspect of the minimum strength of the state legislative assembly (Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India 2007). Nothing in Article 371 (H) mentions the religious and social practices of local tribal communities, administration of civil and criminal justice according to customary law and procedure, or ownership, transfer or development of land and resources of Arunachal Pradesh or any of its part, as has been the case of Article 371 (A) for Nagaland. This is seen as a major loophole which can be

⁶⁴ Interview with Raju Mimi, civil society activist and journalist in Roing.

⁶⁵ Interviews with anti-dam activists and civil society members in Pasighat and Roing.

used against the local tribes in Arunachal Pradesh by the central government in respect of big dams.⁶⁶ As has been the case in other states of Northeast India, successive Governors in Arunachal Pradesh have been retired senior Indian Army generals, including Indian Army Chief JJ Singh and the present Governor, Lt Gen. Nirbhay Sharma, which is a reflection of New Delhi's strategy to have a politico-strategic control over the legislature of Arunachal Pradesh. The local community perception is of a conflict scenario building within Arunachal Pradesh, which is generally considered a 'peaceful' state in the larger context of insurgency in Northeast India, especially after the anti-dam protests and activists have been 'branded' as being Maoist in ideology by the government and security agencies, and the growing use of police forces in public hearings for dam projects.⁶⁷

Most local youth across Arunachal Pradesh do not possess the specific skills required for the technical work in the proposed hydropower projects. They have been involved as security officers in dam sites, manual labour in road building projects and such related unskilled jobs. Given the obsession of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh to raise state revenue and invest in hydropower development in the state, it will require the inflow of a large number of skilled and semi-skilled technicians and labourers from outside the state. This will create a demographic change in many dam project sites, as the population in many of these areas is very small, for example, in the Dibang Valley hydropower projects alone, it is estimated that between 10,000 to 12,000 workers will be needed from outside the state, while the total population of the majority Idu-Mishmi tribe is about 12,000 in all.⁶⁸ Some young Mishmi students from Roing and Pasighat mention that their ambition in life is to become a heavy earth moving vehicle driver, as they see in their villages that the existing drivers from outside have a lot of money and lead a luxurious lifestyle. Some of them have already taken money from their parents and gone to Gujarat to train to be drivers.

The Sino-Indian international boundary in Arunachal Pradesh is a strategic one, but equally important is its international boundary with Bhutan and Myanmar, and the internal state boundaries with Assam and Nagaland. Woven into this context are many trends that are emerging in Arunachal Pradesh—of the promotion of eco-tourism within the state and Buddhist tourism between western Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan; questions of the Stilwell Road opening and the significance of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Look East Policy calculations, collaboration with Myanmar on the development of border trade and areas in Arunachal Pradesh and its Kachin areas. At the same time, the growing unrest along the Arunachal-Assam state border, which is partly due to the activism related to the downstream impact in Assam of mega-dams in Arunachal Pradesh, and partly due to the unresolved border between the two states (*The Telegraph* 2014). If the stapled visa issue with China is affecting Arunachalis, frequent economic blockades by Assam makes Arunachal plan for an alternative road through Bhutan (*The Economic Times* 2012).

New Delhi will have to address local fears and concerns in Arunachal in a sustained manner, and not just have one eye on dams and the other on roads to facilitate dams (Press Trust of India 2014). The Government of Arunachal Pradesh needs to have discussions and address the concerns of lower-riparian stakeholders Assam and Bangladesh (*The Hindu* 2013b), over the huge number of dams being built in the state. Arunachal Pradesh can easily get engulfed in conflict over big dams, land acquisition, resource exploitation aspects of large infrastructure projects, inter-tribal rivalries,

⁶⁶ Interviews with civil society members and anti-dam activists in Pasighat and Roing.

⁶⁷ Interviews with civil society members and anti-dam activists in Pasighat and Roing.

⁶⁸ Interview with Raju Mimi, community leader of the Idu-Mishmi tribe, civil society activist and journalist in Roing.

internal border contestations with Assam and Nagaland, and autonomous district demands in the backdrop of an already known past of hosting Naga, Bodo and Assamese insurgent organisations and rise in local criminal gangs.

Conclusion

The shift from New Delhi's 'scorched-earth' policy in Arunachal Pradesh in the decades following the Sino-Indian war of 1962 has given way to a policy of massive and rapid development of infrastructure in the form of roads and small, medium and mega dams. This can be likened to a 'scorch the rivers policy', which is already making river beds in some parts of the state run dry and seem lifeless. The local perception regarding the building of all the 168-odd dams in Arunachal Pradesh is one of a change that will definitely bring hydropower and revenue for the state government, but at the same time spell misfortune for the ecological balance and diversity of its flora and fauna and the rivers as they have known them for centuries. The local people contend that they have been dependent on the rivers and have co-existed with them, moving with the changing courses of rivers and not trying to move the river around their settlements.⁶⁹

The largely superficial mechanisms of public hearings and dialogue between the community stakeholders and the state government on the various infrastructure development projects are a troubling aspect for most of the community leaders across Arunachal Pradesh, which is leading to large-scale resource appropriation and exploitation by vested interests without heeding the basic rights of the stakeholders.⁷⁰ Various community leaders point out that the existing situation in the state is leading to a divergence of views on development between tribal communities within Arunachal Pradesh and also between communities of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, thereby contributing to a trust deficit and putting pressure on traditional inter-community dialogue platforms and dispute resolution mechanisms.

The social infrastructure requirements for the various tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, along the basic developmental indicators of public health and hygiene, sanitation, education facilities across all levels, access to safe drinking water, banking institutions, markets and job opportunities, have to be strengthened in order to enable the people of the state to absorb the economic benefits in a sustainable manner. Community leaders are negotiating for increased social sector compensation from dam building companies during public hearings in their areas, and demanding that the state government of Arunachal Pradesh spend part of the processing fees and upfront premium money that has been collected while allocating the dam projects to the public and private dam companies. The NHPC had paid INR270 million to the state government in 2010-11 to set up a law college and convention centre; private companies such as Jindal Power have technical skill enhancement training schemes for local youth belonging to their project sites at the various OP Jindal Community Colleges spread across India. The Border Area Development Programme (BADP), completely funded by the central government, has taken up several projects in districts along the international border in Arunachal Pradesh, which are directed towards addressing key gaps in essential social infrastructure needs of border villages.

There is a sense of disconnect on the development discourse on dams amongst community stakeholders and anti-dam activists views, government/political views, and technical/scientific views, which is evident from the editorials in leading English and

⁶⁹ Interactions with civil society members and villagers in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

⁷⁰ Interview with Raju Mimi.

vernacular newspapers in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The anti-dam advocacy groups have little trust in institutions and the government and often blame the local and national technical and scientific community for the prevailing situation in the state, alleging collusion with the state government towards pro-big dams advocacy.⁷¹ New Delhi's military infrastructure strengthening in Arunachal Pradesh, for instance the clearing of proposals for new infantry battalions and a new mountain strike corps directed at enhancing its strategic preparations vis-à-vis China (Pandit 2014), is seen locally as being directed against the anti-dam movements in the state. The increased use of the Indian Army and paramilitary forces by the local administration in internal security, controlling inter-community clashes, during public hearings for dams especially in the Siang and Dibang valley dam projects (Press Trust of India 2012), branding of anti-dam activists as Maoists by the security agencies and the state government of Arunachal Pradesh has strengthened such perceptions in the state.

Arunachal Pradesh is witnessing a rapid rise in infrastructure development and economic investments on a scale which is unprecedented in the entire Northeast India. New Delhi will not want domestic unrest and conflict along its international borders with China, and therefore it must seek a balanced approach towards various emerging issues and local people's aspirations and demands in Arunachal Pradesh. It is true that Arunachal Pradesh, or for that matter all the states of Northeast India, need to develop and contribute to the prosperity of India, and not continue to be dependent only on central funds as has been the case in the past six-and-a-half decades. This, however, does not mean that the government can ignore the fears of local communities about the manner and method of infrastructure development that is being conducted in Arunachal Pradesh. The region can contribute to India's prosperity in genuine terms when New Delhi stops looking at it through the strategic prism of national security alone, be able to build trust and sustain a process of participative development, which is in harmony with local communities' socio-cultural and economic aspirations and their knowledge of the region's ecology.

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