

Indian policymakers join Rio+20; anti-dam supporters languishing in jail



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Mubina Akhtar 22 June 2012 8179 views

While policy makers, experts , activists are converging on Rio for the UN conference Rio + 20 thousands of miles away in Assam (India)—22 farmers are languishing in the Lakhimpur jail for taking up cudgels to protect the environment. These poor farmers, supporters of the anti mega dam movement of Lakhimpur district, were arrested on the night of May 11, 2012 from the temporary camp of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (the organization spearheading the anti big dam movement in northeast India) from Ghagarmukh nearing the dam site. While the traumatized families of these activists await their early release, the bail process seem complicated as they are being implicated on various false charges to dampen the spirit of the anti big dam movement that is gaining momentum in the region.

Unfortunate still, these people fighting for the protection of the environment, are being treated as petty criminals with hand cuffs on whenever they are out of jail for medical test or even in their hospital beds. It has been alleged and the irony lies in the fact that the arrests were made at the behest of the deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur Dr Anuwaruddin Chaudhary, himself a renowned ornithologist and environmentalist.

There is a total lack of transparency in implementing the 2000-MW Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project that is the cause of all the turmoil. Not only the Lower Subansiri Project, but the whole affair of setting up of mega hydel projects in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh has been mired in controversy. It is important to note that a series of mega dam projects are in the pipeline including 3000MW Dibang, 1630 MW Demwe Lower, 900 MW Nyamjang Chhu, 2400MW Siang Lower, and 700MW Tato project. But these mega dam projects are not inspiring being located in a highly seismic zone and for a flood-prone state like Assam the plans for these mega projects are not at all inspiring. The projects only pose threat to magnify the flood problem of the state. The two districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji have borne the burnt of flash flood problems. Already hundreds have lost their lives and lakhs become homeless in these two districts. The dam-induced flood created havoc in Lakhimpur district on last year's Independence Day. A family trying to take shelter on a tree top were washed away (helpless onlookers including the administration only looked on) spoke eloquently about the hazards of flash floods and these dams.

Alongwith the local communities, environmentalists are opposing these mega dams as no serious attempts have been made to prepare a comprehensive environment impact assessment report for these projects.

When the Rio+20 discusses Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication---the question that bugs those living in the far nooks of India is----how far these projects that pose a grave threat to agriculture, forests (including rainforests), fisheries, water bodies and the rich bio-diversity of the region are acceptable in the context and ideals of Green Economy?

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BY MUBINA AKHTAR

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