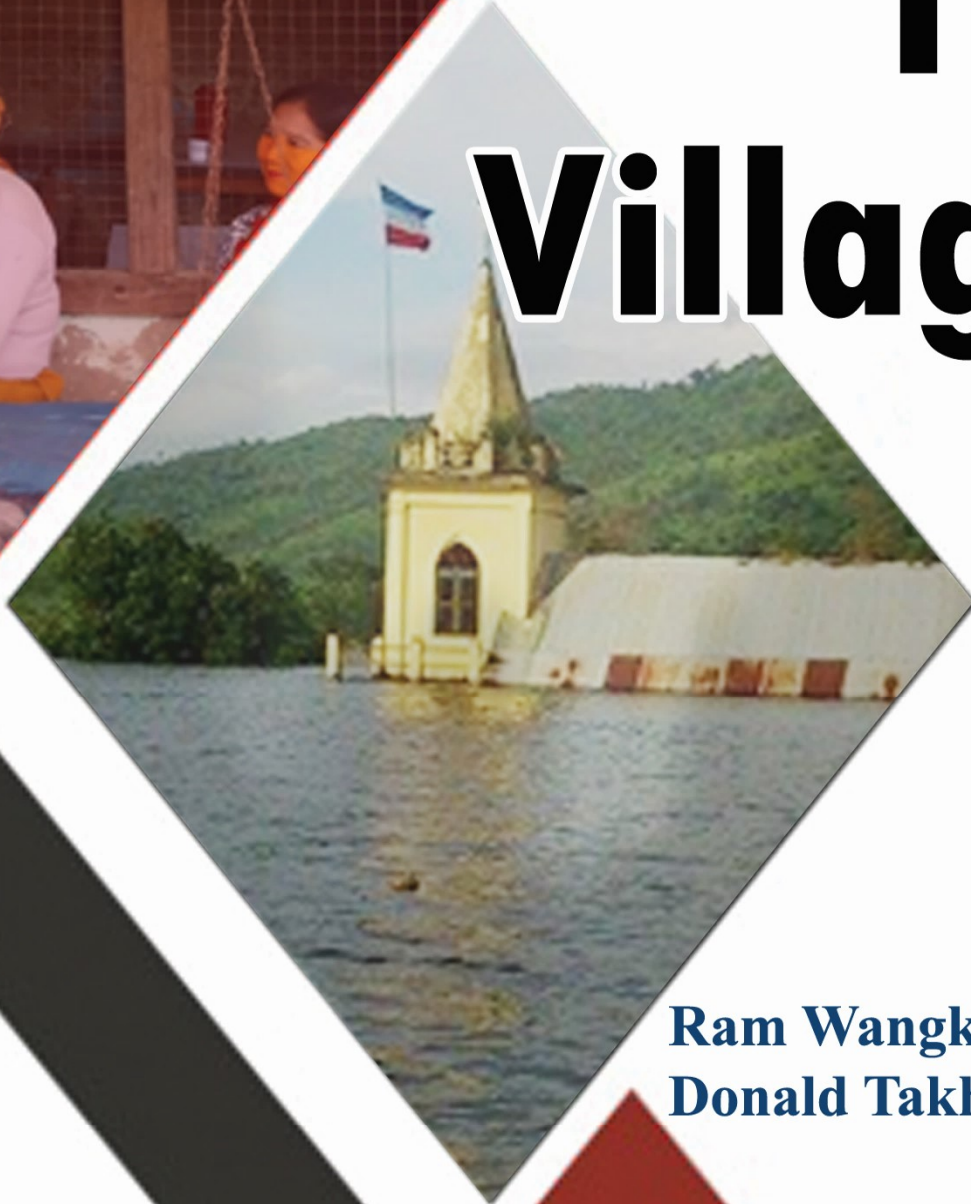


Tales of Two Villages



**Ram Wangkheirakpam
Donald Takhellambam**

**Upstream-Downstream
Chadong - Tumukhong**

TALE OF TWO VILLAGE

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In this section, two case studies have been presented to illustrate the varied impacts of the Mapithel dam and its challenges on the upstream and downstream villages concerning the water situation. Chadong is upstream and the last among the villages that went underwater, while the Tumukhong is located in the immediate downstream just below the dam that faced numerous challenges. The twin stories bring to fore a telling account of what happened to the two villages now separated by a dam and live in almost entirely different conditions that otherwise were connected by the river and its shared resources.

Setting the Context

In the early 1970s, the Irrigation and Flood control Department (IFCD), Government of Manipur proposed the Thoubal River Valley Multipurpose Project, also known as Mapithel Dam, which was cleared by the Planning Commission in 1980. The main objectives of the project were to harness the waters of the Thoubal river for providing safe drinking water, irrigation, and electricity facilities. But all these benefits, it was feared, would come at a huge socio-economic, ecological and environmental cost. It became apparent that the project, once got operational, would displace at least 16 villages upstream of the dam along the Thoubal river due to the submergence of an estimated 1182 hectares of cultivable lands (paddy fields, homestead, and jhum lands), and about 595 hectares of forest land.

Quite expectedly, the project received a series of jolts right from the start of construction of the Mapithel dam in 1989 as it got embroiled in various legal and administrative wrangles amidst raging protests by the affected communities, especially in the upstream villages. Over the past three decades, the project authorities remained mired in controversies related to land acquisition, forest clearance, compensation, and rehabilitation of the displaced families with suitable economic supports.

While the affected villages in the upstream such as Chadong, Riha, and Ramrei, among others, quickly mobilized themselves to spearhead a collective movement against the dam project under the aegis of the Mapithel Dam Affected Villages Organisation (MDAVO), the problems in the downstream villages went unnoticed or were ignored by the project proponents as it is the case in most dams across the world. Even the official and legal narratives were all about those who lived upstream. India also does not have any legal provisions and requirements for downstream impact, except for a dam break analysis of just 10 Kms downstream. Problems and challenges faced by those who live downstream are not even counted. The government and the dam companies, in general, think citizens are the major roadblock to infrastructure development projects, which was evident in the way they dealt with the issues raised by the Mapithel dam-affected people of the Thoubal basin in the past several decades.

This dam has a significant impact on the major communities of Manipur, the Tangkhuls and Kukis in the upstream and then the Meiteis in the downstream. This dam, as mentioned before, has been built on the Thoubal river, which is a source of food, livelihood, socio-cultural linkages for all three communities. This is a perennial flow, originated in the lush Mapithel hill range. A fertile riverine agriculture system evolved over decades along the river basin. The good catchment forest of the Mapithel range also immensely contributed to flourishing agriculture watered by the Mapithel (Thoubal) river and its tributaries flowing down the uplands. Unfortunately, this dam has impounded and choked the deeply rooted continuous discourse that indigenous communities cherish with their land, forests, and rivers for generations. The dam has disrupted this natural symbiotic interaction and affected a completely different order of life and relationships, which will take years to reconcile. This dam has also manufactured a new social fabric with uncertain hues and distorted threads in the village of tumultuous Tumukhong, which lies within 500 meters from the dam and reservoir site.

During the initial days of construction, the MDAVO had petitioned the Manipur and Central governments, seeking to stop the construction of the dam. A long struggle continued with many unwanted events unfolded over the decades. It also sought a review and investigation of the failure and under performance of all commissioned mega-dams in the state, including Khuga, Khoupum, and Singda dams, as well as the Loktak Multipurpose Project. Mapithel has proved to be a symbol of all that has gone wrong with the process of acquiring land, from lack of consent to compensation, to thievery, to callousness over resettlement and rehabilitation.

It is in this context, the two case studies of Chadong and Tumukhong villages have been presented to highlight a wide range of diverse issues, problems, challenges, and existential threats that people are subjected to in the name of so-called "development," especially the mega-dam projects over the free-flowing rivers and tinkering with its waters, thereby endangering the lives of the riverine communities.

Mapithel Dam – At a glance

Mapithel dam, also known as Maphou Dam, is part of the Thoubal Multipurpose Project is located downstream of the Thoubal River, passing through Chadong village. The dam was sanctioned by the Planning Commission, Government of India in May 1980 with a completion target date of 1987.

The main components of the project include:

- i) An earthen dam 66 meters high and 1074 meters long at Phayang/Maphou to impound live storage of 124.58 Mega-cumecs
- ii) A barrage at Keithelmanbi, 17 km. downstream of the dam site
- iii) Left and Right irrigation canal system comprising 57 km. of the main canal.
- iv) A powerhouse near the dam for installed generation of 7. 50 MW

Chadong

Life in a displaced village

This story is about a displaced village, Chadong, trying to rebuild their lives and cope with water scarcity while their actual village lies buried under the water.



Chadong Church a witness to the submergence

Anyone traveling to Chadong from Imphal needs to take a right turn at Yaingangpokpi village, a small trading hub 25 km from Imphal, before going uphill towards the Ukhrul district. After driving about 30 minutes along the blacktopped road that snakes its way up, the road abruptly seems to disappear ahead; what remains there is a trail that suggests that the road has been abandoned and left unused for long. That is the cue that one has reached the outskirts of Chadong village. That was before 2013.

PRE-DAM CHADONG

Chadong was a majestic Tangkhul Naga village often described by locals as the ‘Babylon’ due to its terrain, river, vast agricultural fields, and streams. The new Chadong settlement, just above the mountain from the old site, is situated in the new Phungyar Constituency in Kamjong District and about 30 Kms away from Imphal.

Chadong was very different from most of the other Tangkhul settlements as it was set up on the lower hills just by the riverside, while most of the villages were located on the hilltop. Its location close to the river had made life easy for the inhabitants as they enjoyed both the ever-present clean stream water and easy access to the river.

The people of new Chadong whom we have interacted with for this story talked about how water was abundant in their old through out the year. Most Tangkhul villages in the hills have a hard time fetching water from a far distance between the source and the settlements. And women mostly take the difficult task of arranging water for the whole family. But this was not the case at Chadong. The streams and natural springs emerging from the pristine Mapithel forest range provided perennial freshwater for drinking and domestic uses. The water of the Mapithel (known as ‘Thoubal’ in the valley) river was also effectively used for irrigating the farmlands.

All streams flow down from Ukhrul as well as the Mapithel hill range and join the Thoubal river in the plains. Fish was so abundant that everyone had enough for self-consumption and surplus for sale to nearby villages or at Yaingangpokpi. Different varieties of fish, snails, and lobsters: *Ngaton*, *Ngamuleirou*, *Waikhu*, *Ngara*, *Khabak*, *Nunga*, *Sarengkhoibi*, among others, including *Tharoi* (snails) were found in the Thoubal river. The catch from the Thoubal river was famous for its taste, and there was a huge demand for it. So, the fish provided monetary benefits to the villagers too.

Villagers had both *Tam-Lou* (valley paddy fields) and *Ching-Lou* (Hill paddy fields) and were primarily focused on agricultural activities. There was enough food for the villages, and the surplus produces sold at the nearest traditional market hub at Yaingangpokpi. Chadong was even known as the ‘Rice Bowl’ of Ukhrul. Shortage of basic necessities was unheard of in the village. Everyone who visited the village spoke of how beautiful the village was with its easy access to water and fertile land.

The Mapithel Dam project came as a rude shock to the people, which threatened to destroy the prosperous and happy community and the surrounding natural environment.

A Brief History of Anti-dam movement

The first time people learned of the plans for constructing the dam was in the mid-1970s when they met the officers who came to survey the area. To deal with this impending doom Mapithel Dam-Thoubal River Valley Multi-Purpose Project Affected Villages Committee was set up in 1990. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, villagers started organizing protests against the dam. In July 1992, the Government of Manipur constituted a High-Level Committee to sort out differences with the villages, which led to the signing of a Memorandum of Agreed Terms and Conditions (MOATC) on 19 June 1993. However, the MOATC was confined to minimal rehabilitation and resettlement programs and rates of compensation.

The dissatisfaction over the improper implementation of the MOATC prompted further negotiations between the state Government of Manipur, even at the level of the Chief Minister, and representatives of the affected villagers. Meanwhile, in February 2005, the Committee was renamed as Mapithel Dam Affected Villages Organisation (MDAVO), which made serious efforts to stop the multipurpose project despite the advance work on the dam. Protests, rallies, memoranda, press conferences, boycotts, etc., were held at dam sites and in the state capital. After much public pressure in October 2007, the state government decided to constitute an Expert Review Committee to “review the present Government policy of Rehabilitation and Resettlement Programmes pertaining to the affected villages of the Mapithel area due to the construction of the Thoubal Multipurpose Project.”

It is apparent from the various exchanges between the representatives of the affected villagers and the state government that the level of participation of the affected communities in decision-making, particularly related to the conceptualization of the dam, compensation, and their habilitation and resettlement plans, has been insignificant or extremely limited. That was because they were not provided with any opportunity for participation during the planning stage of the dam. The project was formulated and proposed without obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected villagers.

Moreover, the state government, instead of waiting for the report of the Review panel, it opened another channel for negotiation with a new set of people from the affected villages; the government struck a separate deal with some village representatives with a proposal of a one-time payment of Rs 14 Lakh/family as the final settlement. Several families accepted the proposal, while several others rejected the agreement.

That was the turning point in the popular resistance struggle in Chadong. Like all resistance stories, dams create fractures in families, clans, and villages due to many push and pull factors that usually ensue during the construction phase. Even the stiffest resistance is intentionally torn down by creating disagreements between leaders between ‘a no-dam position and a better rehabilitation package’. Even an ancient issue of the village becomes a bone of contention between two clans that get entangled with the dam issue, as it also has happened in the case of Chadong.

The village is now divided into three main factions. 1) who refused to accept the monetary package. 2) willingly and whole-heartedly took this money, and 3) a mixed group agreed to move to a new village opposite the original village.

In other words, there are now supposedly three Chadong ‘villages’ on the upper reaches of the original village site where most of those who refused to take the rehabilitation money are settled. The new chief and the secretary live there. The second one is settled above the New Chadong site and is populated by a small group of families led by the village’s ex-chief. And the third is the New Chadong, which has some 45 households and is headed by a chairman. The government has promised to create all the necessary amenities in this ‘officially rehabilitated’ village.

And with this, Chadong, along with all its history and institutions built over the past 100s of years, got buried under the reservoir.

New Chadong – striving for survival:

The village sits at a higher altitude overlooking the water reservoir and the fertile agricultural land that now rests under its depth. The new waterscape of reservoir has adversely impacted the traditional ways of life and living in the area. Ironically, water scarcity is a major problem since the major streams at Louphong and Lamlaiaren are not accessible anymore. People now depend on small streamlets wherever found in the highlands of the new settlement. These tiny hill streams are mostly seasonal and quite far from the new habitation.



As happens in any hilly region, these tiny streams dry up during the summer, creating acute water shortages. In the monsoon months, though the water flow of these streams swells up, it is tough to access these sources due to slippery and unstable terrain. Villagers, especially women, need to struggle to get a bucket of water from the stream during the rainy season. And if the rain stopped for a few days, there would be hardly any water in the streams. There are a few perennial streams, but these are on the other side of the reservoir. During the months from February to June, the villagers are plagued with severe water scarcity. Many of them buy water, at a rate of Rs. 250/300 for every 500 litres, to meet their domestic needs. When there is excessive rainfall, water is still a problem as the water in the streams turns muddy.

Gender Role reversal

In the old Chadong, nobody complained much about water. Everyone fetched their water according to their needs. Most didn't store water. Running spring water was primarily used for household use. A tank was built near the village church to make it easily accessible to parts of the villages. Women had more responsibility in managing household water use because it was primarily the women who controlled the house and the kitchen, while men were away in the fields and other works for income.

At present, the source of water is so far that women no longer can fetch water, so men alone fetch water most times. The new settlement site is about one km from the reservoir and can be reached only on foot. However, crossing the vast surface water of the reservoir is risky. People have taken to rainwater harvesting to cope with the water crisis, but it's only for a few months. A drop of water is valued highly due to the scarcity.

Roads are as good as non-existent. Earlier, women also collected firewood from the surrounding area, but now in the new settlement, it is the men's job to collect firewood as they are required to travel farther distance, said villagers. So, even fetching something for household use causes a lot of hardship.



Harvesting as relief from drought-like situation

Upland farming is highly labour intensive and is solely dependent on rains. It is also based on traditional knowledge and practices, which are generally characterized by mixed cropping and low productivity. Unlike in old Chadong, the villagers in the new settlement in the upland do not have suitable land for farming. The villagers now buy vegetables from Yaingangpokpi, where they once sold their surplus; neither do they have access to fishing. Many families, who lived on fishing in the Thoubal river, have lost their livelihood; they now buy fish from nearby fish farms.

Right of water use of reservoir

One of the contentious issues remains unresolved: securing the rights of fishing in the reservoir and the use of its water. Negotiations have not yielded any satisfactory result; the authorities, too, do not seem to show any urgency to resolve the issue. All this has given rise to apprehensions that the villagers may eventually lose their rights over the vast water body of the reservoir. As the water level is kept at some 250-300 ft deep, the old fishing technique on the river's natural flow is very different, and villagers are trying to adapt to new high water. However, there is a fear that one day the government can enforce user fees or even ban or regulate fishing in the reservoir area, as has happened in the case of the Loktak lake, where even fishing has been restricted.

Failed Promises

In 2014, they were forced out of the Chadong village and given

settlement at the new Chadong. The government then offered many things for the villagers, but proper rehabilitation programs have not been completed to date. Despite the government assurances, the new village still lacks proper amenities, no school, no health center, no community hall, no church (except for a makeshift one), no water supply system, and no electricity when they shifted. In the past six years, only electricity and a stretch of stone-paved road have arrived in the new settlement. Recently, the construction of the government primary school and the sub-primary health center has been completed but not yet inaugurated.

The lack of basic amenities in the new settlement has also affected the livelihood of the people. Relocation of the village workforce from agricultural labour to the informal sector has forced them into the marginal sector of a direct hand-to-mouth economy.

It has also been reported that the Government of Manipur and the Joint Action Committee Against Forced Construction of Mapithel Dam, Manipur (JACAFCM) and Mapithel Dam Affected Headmen/Chiefs & Elders Organization (MDAHCEO) have reached an agreement, in which the 'exclusive fishing and fish rearing rights have been accorded to the affected villages' only. This is new progress toward the long-term use and security of the villagers affected by this dam. But even then, the villagers feel that the new agreement may create fresh tension over the language interpretation in certain sections of the agreement such as, the 'exclusive fishing and fish rearing rights' of the 'affected villages only'. After all, many villages upstream and downstream of the dam have been differentially affected by the dam-induced water situations.

Tumukhong

The Fear of Living Downstream



TUMUKHONG Village, Thoubal River, Mapithel Dam

Tumukhong was never a downstream, but a sleepy village blessed by Thoubal river; now it is facing a slow death.

Tumukhong

Tumukhong is largely a Meitei village in the Imphal East District and about 25 Kms from central Imphal. The village has about 1300 persons with around 200 households, and their primary livelihood is agriculture and fishing. Some families are also involved in sand and stone mining from the river bed. Just upstream, on one side is the Maphou Kuki village and on the other side is Nongdam Tangkhul village. In this sense, there is seemingly a peaceful mix of three communities, which are otherwise found locked in some conflict or the other. So, when the Mapithel project was proposed, and subsequently, when the construction began, there was no discussion among them on the likely impact of the project on Tumukhong and the further downstream villages. In fact, they were told that once the project commenced, it would bring a lot of benefits to the local people in the downstream. They would get jobs in the construction and other economic opportunities, as well as the supply of water for drinking and irrigation purposes, which are the main objectives of the dam project.

Well, initially, when the construction activities began, many families from Tumukhong had someone working on the project site. Some were truck drivers, while others worked as gate keepers or security guards or just as manual labourers. The temporary workers, mostly from the farmers' families, earned some money, and everything seemed hunky-dory.

In the meanwhile, as the dam was getting near completion in around 2008, a group of people representing villages from the dam site to the downstream formed the Mapithel Dam Affected Ching-Tam Organization (MDACTO) and sought their proper rehabilitation and resettlement. There were representatives from Tumukhong and Moirangpurel villages, too, among other downstream villages.

In its first press statement, issued on 25 May 2008, the organisation stated: “The Mapithel Dam of the Thoubal Multipurpose Project which began in early 1980 was built without the due knowledge and consent of those who live at the downstream of the dam, and also without any downstream impact assessment and accompanying Resettlement and Rehabilitation”. It also pointed out that the downstream villages - such as, Tumukhong, Moirangpurel, Moirangpurel(II), Etham, Laikhong, Bewlaland, Saichang, Molkon, Bongyang, among others - have been kept in the dark about the likely impact of the dam on the riverine ecosystems, and socio-economic and cultural relations and arrangements of those living downstream of the dam.

However, it said, “From our experiences ... during the construction time we are faced with (several) problems, including air and water pollution. Our air has become dusty, making (it difficult for us) to even breathe during the peak hour construction time. Dust covered our fields, our houses and streets, and even our food. Water has become polluted and undrinkable with dust, mud, and effluents used for heavy vehicles used for dam construction”. Moreover, with the installation of the coffer dam, the downstream villages have been experiencing water shortages for irrigation and household use. Sand mining and boulder extraction activities, which are also a source of income for many, have dwindled, affecting their livelihood, it added.

The MDACTO also raised the issue of Dam safety Dam safety issue, citing the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report, which noted with concern, ‘the poor safety norms’ that have been followed in the Mapithel dam construction. This also has been substantiated by testimonies of dam workers and has also been substantiated by testimonies of dam workers corroborated by the recent break on the spillway wall. It is natural for downstream, responsible citizen’s to ask for a proper safety assessment of the dam.

Earlier in February 2008, the organization had submitted a memorandum also to then Chief Minister stating their concerns over the safety of dam and seeking his intervention. However, the government chose to remain silent and non-responsive.

“A responsible government would have immediately asked for an enquiry and a full-scale safety assessment, but instead, it has threatened to arrest those who have raised this issue. A militarization and an undemocratic mindset of the government will not only prove to be disastrous for the dam and downstream inhabitants but also a doom for the whole of Manipur,” it warned. “This is irresponsible, unaccountable, and a disregard of all democratic call of its citizens,” it lamented.

Anti-dam downstream protests:

In response to government’s indifferent attitude, the MDACTO pressed for a comprehensive impact assessment of the dam – economic, social, and environmental – on the communities and natural resources, both downstream and upstream. Along with this, it also demanded a complete Resettlement and Rehabilitation package and its implementation plan to be prepared with the full and active participation of the affected people as represented by the MDACTO.



Thoubal River Flood

At the same time, MDACTO decided to take more stringent measures, including stoppage of all activities in the dam area, non-cooperation with dam authorities, eviction of dam-related people from the villages, etc. Subsequently, a ‘rally cum meeting’ was also held in September 2008. Alarmed by the growing discontent and protests among the affected population, the government swung into action to suppress the anti-dam campaign and arrested four executive members of the organization.

Amidst such people’s protests, uncertainties, and non-committal government approach, dam construction continued and was completed. Although the dam has been inaugurated in 2018, its functions have not been fully utilized for reasons known to the Government. Irregularities in opening and closing the dam gates without any announcement or information have now become a source of new concerns for the downstream villagers. Once the dam gates are opened, the river is flushed with access water, creating a man-made flash flood in its wake and causing unexpected damages to riverside agriculture and small-scale sand mining in the river bed.

Post-dam scenario:

Earlier the natural flow of the river used to bring sand and stone and fill up the open riverbed, and in the following year, once the water recedes, the river bed is mined for sand, stones, and boulders. This constitutes a large chunk of their local economy and is a major resource provided by the Thoubal river. But all these livelihood activities disappeared after the free run of the river stopped due to the dam. And when the dam gates are opened, the open pits on the riverbed get filled in the water sans sand and stones, thereby setting up unknown death traps for people.

Recently a person died due to drowning in an open pit while crossing the river. The water level is maintained at a required level during the dry season when the gates remain shut, and no water is released for three-four months. And during the rainy season, as and when water swells up beyond the danger mark, gates are suddenly opened to release water without any announcement or forewarning,



threatening the lives and property in the downstream. There are even stories of menfolk keeping night vigils on the flood situation and sleeping during the day, thereby foregoing their daily works. During the dry season, *pukhri* is dug out inside the river to store water for the immediate needs.

Impacts of the dam may be different in upstream and downstream, but both are heavily affected by the construction. Water released from the dam is unfit for drinking due to a strange odour- something like methane gas - in it. Decomposition of the biomass in the reservoir is said to be the reason for such stench of methane in water. Villagers also complained of skin rashes after a swim or a bath in the river.

The river was the main source of water for riverside farming and the seasonal cultivation of green vegetables. Villagers are now digging their agricultural lands along the riverside for the extraction of sand and stones. But this too, is going to be exhausted soon. The desperate people have started mining red sand from the surrounding hillocks despite restrictions from the forest department and the government.



Paddy Fields converted into sand/stone mining areas

Fish and Fishing

Villagers said they were made to believe that with the construction of the multipurpose project, fish breeding in the river would increase. They would be economically better off while engaging in fisheries after the construction of the dam. But that turned out to be a mirage! People are hardly seen fishing in the river. On the contrary, the construction of the Keithelmanbi barrage, which is a part of the Mapithel Multi-Purpose Project, further downstream, has blocked the mobility of fish, swimming up the Thoubal river. Meiteis are fish eaters, and they eat fresh, dried, or in its fermented forms as the main primary source of protein. However, the villagers who once sold fish from the river to other parts of Manipur now buy fish for consumption from outside the village and the river.



Women selling Andhra Pradesh Fish at Tumukhong Bazar

Fishing in the upstream of the dam is restricted, and even if some people tried to go for fishing, it appeared to be quite a risky job for the villagers to cast fishing nets and gears in the large area of water. Women in Manipur have always been entrepreneurs, and trading has been their mainstay. When their fishing activities stopped, women in Tumukhong began to sell fish imported from outside the state. However, even this business has become very difficult and challenging due to the ongoing pandemic situation since March 2020.

So, the thriving local fishing economy has collapsed along with the ever famous and tasty *Nung-nga* from the Thoubal river that everyone craved for.

Future woes:

Residents of Tumukhong claimed that they mostly collected water from the two perennial springs located near the Louphong and Thangjingpokpi Tangkhul villages. In fact, they regularly paid some royalty in cash or kind to the village chiefs. Water for domestic use came from the river, but now the villagers either go to the nearby streams in the hillocks or buy water, if so required. Safe and quality of water is not just essential for drinking and daily household uses, but it is also associated with health safety, especially the reproductive health of the adolescent and lactating mother. Uncertainty of supply of water, which was earlier promised by the government, will also affect farming or crop and vegetables. It's a tragedy that the government is trying to supply water to Imphal, while the villagers who reside by the river are reeling under water insecurity. Is this not stealing water from the poor and those who cannot fight back, and giving it to the powerful affluent?

On one hand, thousands of families lost their livelihoods and income, and now there is scarcity of food and water, on the other, which has created a fear psychosis in the riverine communities. In fact, the hardship of the villagers has now multiplied due to the pandemic and uncertain living conditions in the downstream of the dam.

“It seems the dam took away our freedom,” lamented one villager. “Nay,” remarked another, “it took our water, our sand, our fish, and all this, it took away our life”.



About the story writers



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“ We come to realize that nature too, if not nurtured, conserved and protected, has its limitation and ceases to provide for us. ”



BACKGROUND OF NE INDIA WATER TALKS

The first-ever ‘NE India Water Talk’ was held in December 2019 at Guwahati with a call from KK Chatradhara, a social and environmental activist, participants from the eight states joined the talk and decided to retain the forum as ‘NE India Water Talks’, an archival platform of water stories for Northeast India. It also acts as a workspace for the people working on water issues of the region.

The documentation of the water stories was designed during ‘NE India Water Talk-2019’, to create a virtual repository of water stories of the region. We are looking forward to more volunteering efforts to make it possible for each village of Northeast India to be a part of this repository.

We welcome your suggestions and contributions to this initiative.

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