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Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project and the Development Discourse

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Abstract: This article critically examines the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project (LSHEP) through the lens of developmental discourse, situating it within India's broader push for infrastructure-led national growth. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theorization of power and discourse, the study interrogates how hydropower is framed as a symbol of progress, regional upliftment, and energy security. It unpacks how state and institutional narratives portray LSHEP as a gift of development, marginalizing local voices and silencing dissent. While official claims highlight benefits such as economic integration and modernity, civil society organizations, initially embraced but later resisted the project, reflecting a shift from hope to contestation. The analysis further explores the role of fear, repression, and the strategic use of silence in enforcing consent. Ultimately, the article argues for a rethinking of development in Northeast India, advocating participatory and ecologically sensitive alternatives that account for local histories, aspirations, and rights.

Keywords: Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project (LSHEP);Development discourse; Hydropower; Civil society; Northeast India; Environmental governance; Contested development narratives.

Introduction

Development has long occupied a central place in the imagination of modern nation-states, especially in the Global South. In a country like India, development is not merely a policy goal, it is a political promise, a marker of progress, and a narrative of national growth. As India aspires to secure its position as a global economic power, the emphasis on building large-scale infrastructure, dams, highways, power plants, has become synonymous with fulfilling that promise.Among the various sectors contributing to this developmental vision, hydropower has emerged as a particularly important tool. Celebrated for its renewable nature and its potential to meet growing energy demands, hydropower is often framed as a clean and sustainable alternative to fossil fuels(Dey et al.,

2022). It is also projected as a symbol of modernity and technological advancement, especially in the ecologically rich but economically marginal regions of the Northeast(Chowdhury &Kipgen, 2013). Within this framework, mega-dam projects are portrayed as both a necessity and a national duty, something to be welcomed rather than questioned.

Yet, the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project (LSHEP), India's largest under-construction hydropower dam, stands as a striking example of contested development(Messell, 2019). Located at the border of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, this project has been the subject of intense public debate, long-standing civil society resistance, and unresolved environmental concerns. While the state and its institutions uphold LSHEP as a vital component of India's energy future, communities downstream have expressed concerns over its potential ecological, cultural, and socio-economic impacts.This paper critically explores the LSHEP not simply as an infrastructural project, but as a site where conflicting meanings of development converge. Drawing on field insights, protest narratives, and state discourse, it examines how the project is imagined, justified, and challenged in everyday life. In doing so, it highlights how "development" is not a neutral term, but a discursive and political construct, one that can marginalize voices even as it promises progress.

The Idea of Development: A Conceptual Overview

To critically engage with development in the context of the LSHEP, it is essential to move beyond understanding it as a set of economic goals or infrastructural outcomes. This paper approaches development as a discourse, a system of knowledge, language, and power relations that defines what development means, who speaks for it, and whose interests it serves. This perspective is largely drawn from the work of Michel Foucault, whose insights on power, discourse, and governmentality provide a powerful framework for interrogating development practices.Foucault's notion of *discourse* refers to more than just language or rhetoric; it encompasses the structured ways in which knowledge is produced and institutionalized, and how such knowledge comes to shape what is seen as 'truth'(Miller, 1990). In this sense, development discourse functions as a regime of truth, a system that legitimizes certain ideas (like growth, progress, or modernization) while silencing or discrediting others (such as indigenous knowledge, environmental caution, or local resistance)(Foucault, 1971). Within this regime, large dams like LSHEP are not merely engineering ideas; they are symbols of national progress and state rationality, embedded in a broader language of modernization and control.

Foucault also introduces the concept of power not simply as repressive, but as productive(Haugaard, 2022). Power, he argues, operates through institutions, practices, and knowledge systems, it does not merely forbid, but rather shapes what can be said, thought, and done(Miller, 1990). This is especially relevant in the context of development,

where power manifests through the production of statistics, expert reports, environmental assessments, and policy documents. These instruments do not just describe the world; they construct realities in which the dam appears necessary, scientific, and beneficial. In contrast, local voices of uncertainty or opposition are often positioned as emotional, irrational, or "anti-development."

Another crucial Foucauldian concept that applies here is governmentality, the way modern states govern populations not only through laws or coercion but through the management of life itself(Jessen & von Eggers, 2019). In the case of LSHEP, this includes the deployment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, livelihood schemes, and welfare programs by state agencies and National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC). These are not merely compensatory gestures but are techniques of governance, mechanisms to produce consent, neutralize dissent, and shape citizen-subjects who align with the state's developmental vision. Here, development becomes a form of power that operates through care, not just control(Arnason, 2012).

Importantly, Foucault's framework helps us understand that resistance does not stand outside power, but is formed within its very logic(Haugaard, 2022). The local civil society organizations protesting LSHEP, such as Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK),Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti(KMSS), orAsom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad(AJYCP), are themselves entangled in the discourse of development. Their resistance often involves reclaiming the meaning of development (as sustainable, participatory, or ecologically balanced), rather than rejecting it outright. In this way, development discourse is not monolithic but is constantly contested, negotiated, and reconfigured by both state and non-state actors(Chae, 2008).Thus, through a Foucauldian lens, the idea of development surrounding LSHEP is not a technical or economic given, it is a strategically constructed and politically charged discourse, backed by institutions, legitimized by knowledge systems, and resisted through local politics.

LSHEP as a Development Project

The Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project (LSHEP), situated at the border of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam near the town of Gerukamukh in Dhemaji district, is India's largest under-construction hydroelectric project. With an installed capacity of 2000 MW, the dam is being built across the Subansiri River, a major tributary of the Brahmaputra (Barman et al., 2020). The project is undertaken by the NHPC, a central government enterprise, with the backing of the Ministry of Power, Government of India. Its scale and strategic location have placed it at the heart of the state's energy development agenda for Northeast India.

From its inception, LSHEP has been framed as a cornerstone of India's national development, with the justification centered on its potential to meet the increasing demand for electricity, especially in the eastern and northeastern regions(Hazarika, 2017).

The government has consistently emphasized that the project is crucial to addressing the country's energy deficit, reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and promoting renewable energy sources like hydropower. In this framing, LSHEP is not merely a dam, it is part of a larger vision of energy security and sustainable growth(The Assam Tribune, 2025).

Developmental rhetoric around LSHEP frequently draws on language of regional upliftment. The Northeast, historically viewed by the Indian state as a peripheral and underdeveloped region, is often positioned in policy discourse as needing integration into the national mainstream(Singh, 2006). Large-scale infrastructure projects like LSHEP are projected as symbols of that integration. By investing in hydropower and connectivity in the region, the state presents itself as a benevolent force bringing progress, employment, and modernization to a historically "neglected" frontier(Middleton et al., 2019).This narrative of progress is further reinforced through the language of nation-building. NHPC and state agencies have repeatedly articulated the dam as a contribution not just to Assam or Arunachal Pradesh, but to the Indian nation as a whole. Such framing leverages a moral and emotional appeal, opposing the dam is not just seen as resisting development, but as resisting the national interest. Public documents, press releases, and project reports frequently highlight the project's alignment with India's national goals.

In many ways, LSHEP has been packaged as a developmental gift to the region. The project's promoters have highlighted its potential to bring roads, schools, hospitals, and better communication to an area that has historically lacked state attention. Moreover, the project becomes synonymous with modernization, a gateway to inclusion, opportunity, and economic prosperity. This framing, however, carefully sidesteps the associated risks, ecological disruption, seismic vulnerability, downstream impacts, and the concerns raised by local communities and scientists alike.The symbolic power of the dam thus lies not just in its physical scale, but in how it is imagined and presented. The state constructs LSHEP as a rational, scientific, and technical intervention, one that should, by all logical measures, be welcomed. This is where the discourse of development becomes particularly potent. It naturalizes the idea that such projects are essential and inevitable. It sets the terms of debate in such a way that to oppose the dam is to be "anti-development," "emotional," or even "irrational." However, in reality, the project was initiated without fully addressing the complex social and ecological landscape of the region. The Subansiri River is not just a water body, it is central to the cultural, economic, and spiritual lives of the communities that live along its banks(Baruah, 2012). The fact that such a massive intervention could proceed with limited local consultation raises questions about who development is for, and who bears its costs. By presenting LSHEP as an unproblematic emblem of progress, the state obscures the uneven impacts and lived consequences of such a project.Thus, the Lower Subansiri project illustrates how development is not just about building infrastructure, it is about constructing meaning. Through its scale, language, and

symbolism, LSHEP becomes more than a dam: it becomes a powerful narrative of nation and modernity(Flaminio, 2016). Understanding this discursive construction is essential to unpacking why the project remains so contested, even decades after its announcement.

Responses from Below: Civil Society and Resistance

While the LSHEP was projected by the state and NHPC as a symbol of progress, civil society organizations in Assam responded with a more grounded and critical evaluation of the project's promises. Over time, what began as cautious consent slowly transformed into a sustained and organized dissent, as local communities and regional actors began to experience the socio-ecological consequences of the dam and questioned the developmental narratives built around it.

In the early stages of the project, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was no strong public opposition to LSHEP. The initial responses were shaped by a hopeful anticipation that the project might bring roads, employment, welfare schemes, and regional recognition. This attitude was particularly prevalent in a region long neglected in state planning. However, as technical information about the dam's design became publicly available, especially regarding its placement in a seismically active zone and its potential to disrupt the ecological balance of the Subansiri River, public sentiment began to shift.Civil society organizations such as the TMPK, AASU, AJYCP, and later the KMSS, played an instrumental role in shaping and amplifying this dissent. TMPK, a student-led organization representing the Mising community, one of the key riverine communities living along the Subansiri, was among the first to question the lack of local consultation and the ecological consequences of the dam(Hazarika, 2018). Their resistance stemmed not only from environmental concerns but also from a deeper sense of cultural and existential threat(Hazarika, 2018). The river, for the Mising people, is not just a resource but an intrinsic part of their identity and livelihood. The project's impacts on fishing, agriculture, and sedimentation directly translated into risks to their survival and autonomy.

As opposition gained momentum, AASU and AJYCP, two influential regional organizations with histories rooted in the Assam Movement, joined in solidarity. Their participation elevated the movement from a localized protest to a wider regional mobilization, framing LSHEP as another instance of center's imposition on Assam's people and resources. This brought the protest into the political mainstream, drawing in media attention, public forums, and academic interest.One of the most critical phases of civil society mobilization was between 2006 and 2013, when groups like KMSS led blockades, river satyagrahas, hunger strikes, and road protests. Protestors halted the movement of construction materials and blocked NHPC trucks at several points, especially in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts. These events created a charged atmosphere where the dam was no

longer just a technical issue, it became a symbol of state neglect, environmental injustice, and unequal development.

A significant tool of resistance was the use of regional media and grassroots communication platforms. Newspapers became a crucial medium through which critiques of LSHEP were voiced, analyzed, and circulated. The local dailies published field reports, interviews, and opinion pieces that questioned the environmental impact assessments (EIA), highlighted the voices of affected communities, and critically engaged with government narratives. In an era when national media coverage remained minimal, these platforms ensured that the resistance did not remain invisible.What is crucial in understanding the nature of this resistance is that it did not begin as an outright rejection of development. Instead, many civil society actors originally sought dialogue and re-evaluation, they called for transparent assessments, scientific reviews, and community consultations. The transition to protest occurred when these demands were repeatedly ignored. Expert Committee for LSHEP raised legitimate technical concerns, including about dam safety, sedimentation, and downstream flow regulation. These were often bypassed by NHPC and state authorities, creating a sense that the project would proceed regardless of local opposition or environmental risk.

This realization led to a broader reimagining of the idea of development itself. Local communities, once hopeful of benefits, began to see the dam as an imposition, an externally designed project that disregarded their lived realities. The idea that LSHEP was a "gift" from the state gave way to the perception that it was, in fact, an extractive project, where risk was distributed unequally and accountability remained elusive. Development, in this context, came to be seen as something done *to* them, not *with* them.

Over time, resistance evolved, not just in form, but also in tone. As physical protests became harder due to surveillance, arrests, and police action, a quieter, more internalized form of resistance began to take shape. This included a deliberate silencedriven by fear, fatigue, and the futility of engaging with an unresponsive system. While visible dissent may have declined in recent years, the discontent has not disappeared. It simmers in everyday conversations, in poetry, in whispered critiques, and in the lived tension between hope and betrayal.Thus, civil society's response to LSHEP offers a powerful critique of how development is imagined, imposed, and contested in India's peripheral regions. It challenges the dominant narrative of dams as unproblematic symbols of progress and re-centers the voices of those who live with the consequences. In doing so, it opens space for rethinking development not just as infrastructure, but as a relationship between power, place, and people.

Silences, Fears, and Forced Consent

In recent years, the once-visible resistance against the LSHEP has markedly diminished in public spaces. The road blockades, river satyagrahas, and fiery press statements that once defined the movement have grown quieter. This fading of overt protest, however, should not be mistaken for resolution or acceptance. Instead, it reflects a more complex emotional and political landscape marked by repression, fatigue, fear of dissenting voices.

Many civil society leaders and community members involved in the early phases of the movement speak of a sense of exhaustion. Years of mobilization, public meetings, technical engagements, and confrontations with state and security agencies have taken a toll. Several activists faced surveillance, intimidation, or criminal charges during the peak years of protest. The state's response was not always through open confrontation, it was often more insidious: delays in clearances, refusals to share official information, or shifting the goalposts of negotiation. Over time, these tactics bred disillusionment and a quiet withdrawal from the frontlines of protest.

Moreover, the co-option of certain voices and the deployment of selective CSR schemes added further complexity. While only a small portion of the affected population received tangible benefits from the dam authorities, the strategic use of development packages, such as livelihood training, cash-based compensation, or road-building, helped fragment community responses. These gestures created a façade of inclusion while undermining collective resistance, leaving communities internally divided and hesitant to continue a struggle whose costs now seemed disproportionately high.This decline in vocal opposition has often been misread by state actors as acceptance or consent. Public silence is celebrated in official narratives as proof that the "misconceptions" about the dam have been cleared, or that people have now realized the benefits of the project. Such readings are deeply flawed. What appears as silence is, in many cases, a tactical withdrawal born out of fear, powerlessness, and the futility of repeated engagement with an unresponsive system.

For many downstream residents, particularly in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts, the fear is not just political, it is existential. The unpredictability of water release from the dam, the erosion of riverbanks, and the unexplained changes in river behavior have created a daily sense of vulnerability. The cost of raising questions, whether through protest or even public speech, has become too high in a region where political oversight and surveillance have intensified.Foucault's insight that power often operates through knowledge and discourse rather than brute force is especially relevant here. The development discourse around LSHEP functions not merely to justify the dam, but to delegitimize those who question it. Protestors are labeled "anti-national," "anti-development," or misinformed(Joshi et al., 2018). This process of discursive marginalization is one of the most potent forms of suppression(Kidwai, 2020). By defining what counts as rational, modern, and progressive,

the state silences alternative knowledge systems and lived experiences that do not fit within its developmental imagination(Kidwai, 2020).
Thus, development becomes a tool not of empowerment, but of control. It cloaks coercion under the guise of national interest, and dissent under the label of ignorance. The story of LSHEP, therefore, is not just about a dam and its technicalities. It is also a story about how the state manufactures consent, not necessarily through persuasion, but through exhaustion, division, and narrative dominance. It is a reminder that the absence of protest does not equal the absence of pain, and that silence is often the most powerful form of unspoken resistance.

Rethinking Development in Northeast India: Conclusion

The case of LSHEP is not just about a dam, it is a lens into the broader contradictions and challenges of development in Northeast India. It lays bare the uneven geography of development, where the costs and benefits are not equally distributed, and where certain regions and communities are expected to sacrifice for the promise of national growth. While LSHEP is framed as a vital component of India's energy future, its impacts are concentrated on already vulnerable populations, indigenous communities, small farmers, and river-dependent households, who bear the brunt of environmental risk and social dislocation.This asymmetry is emblematic of a developmental model that prioritizes central visions over local realities. The repeated bypassing of local knowledge, the absence of meaningful consultations, and the dismissal of ecological and cultural concerns reflect a deep democratic deficit. Development, in this model, is imposed rather than negotiated, it becomes a one-way transmission of policy rather than a process of collective decision-making. LSHEP illustrates how technical and economic justifications can be used to override ethical, environmental, and social questions.
One of the key lessons from LSHEP is the urgent need for participatory and inclusive approaches to development. Projects of such magnitude, especially in ecologically fragile and politically sensitive regions, cannot be governed by a top-down logic. Development must engage with the voices of those who live closest to the land and water being transformed. It must recognize that resistance is not a threat, but a form of civic engagement, a call for accountability, sustainability, and justice.Furthermore, LSHEP raises the question of whether the current reliance on mega-infrastructure as a pathway to progress is appropriate for regions like the Northeast. The hydrological, seismic, and socio-political complexities of the region demand more sensitive and decentralized planning. Smaller, community-led renewable energy initiatives, livelihood-based development strategies, and ecosystem-sensitive interventions could provide more sustainable and equitable alternatives to massive dam projects.Rethinking development also means rethinking the metrics by which it is measured. Growth cannot be defined solely by

megawatts generated or kilometers of road constructed. It must also be measured in terms of ecological balance, community well-being, cultural continuity, and democratic participation.

In conclusion, the story of LSHEP is a cautionary tale, but also a call to imagine differently. It reminds us that development, to be meaningful, must be rooted in dialogue, not domination; in care, not conquest. For Northeast India, and for India more broadly, it is time to shift from development that demands silence to development that begins with listening.

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