

Siang Hydro Politics: Strategic Deterrence and Human Rights at the Crossroads of Development

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Abstract

The Siang Upper Multipurpose Project, located in the geopolitically significant Siang River Basin of Arunachal Pradesh, represents a convergence of development planning, strategic policy, and environmental governance in a region marked by transboundary water dynamics. Framed within the context of India's Operation Sindoor and broader concerns over China's upstream infrastructure activities on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), the project is viewed by policymakers as a component of India's hydrological preparedness and regional infrastructure strategy. This paper explores the multifaceted implications of the project, with particular attention to its environmental, developmental, and human rights dimensions. While the initiative is projected to contribute significantly to regional economic growth and energy generation in the coming decade, it also raises questions about ecological sustainability, displacement, and the preservation of indigenous cultural and natural heritage. The deployment of security forces in the project region, though aligned with national security considerations, has generated debates around civilian engagement, transparency, and the balance between development and local consent. The study draws on interdisciplinary perspectives from political ecology, human geography, and international relations to assess how domestic priorities and cross-border water concerns intersect in shaping river basin politics. Ultimately, the paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Siang project, highlighting both its strategic rationale and the importance of inclusive, environmentally responsible policymaking in sensitive ecological zones.

Keywords: Siang River, Hydropower Development, Environmental Governance, Indigenous Communities, Transboundary Water Politics

Introduction

The Siang River Basin, situated in the heart of Arunachal Pradesh, holds profound geographical, hydrological, ecological, and cultural importance for Northeast India. As the uppermost stretch of the transboundary Brahmaputra River system, the Siang originates from the Tibetan Plateau and traverses deep Himalayan gorges before converging with the Lohit and Dibang rivers to form the Brahmaputra. This ecologically sensitive region is home to the indigenous Adi and Galo communities and lies in close proximity to the contested Sino-Indian border, making it a site of both environmental and geopolitical significance.

In recent years, the Government of India has proposed the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) a massive hydroelectric dam with an estimated capacity of 11,000 megawatts. The project is positioned as a critical component of national strategy aimed at enhancing energy



security, managing transboundary water flows, and countering China's expansive hydropower infrastructure on the Yarlung Tsangpo (upper Brahmaputra) in Tibet. While state and central authorities advocate for the project on grounds of strategic defense, renewable energy generation, and regional development, it has provoked widespread resistance from local communities, environmental advocates, and human rights groups.

This paper examines the complex and often contentious dimensions of the Siang Dam project. It begins by outlining the geographical and hydrological profile of the river basin, followed by an analysis of the strategic imperatives driving the project. It then delves into the socio-political and environmental controversies surrounding the dam, with particular attention to human rights concerns, the displacement of indigenous populations, and ecological threats to a fragile Himalayan landscape. Ultimately, the paper seeks to critically evaluate whether the pursuit of national interest can be reconciled with the ethical obligation to uphold the rights, heritage, and sustainability concerns of the communities who have long safeguarded this vital riverine ecosystem.

Methodology and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to investigate the multifaceted dimensions of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP). The research is grounded in secondary data sources, drawing extensively from a range of publicly available materials. These include reputable national and regional newspapers such as The Arunachal Times, The Hindu, The Economic Times, and India Today. In addition, the study relies on content from official government websites, policy documents, and academic reports to construct a comprehensive understanding of the project's political, ecological, and socio-cultural implications.

To capture localized perspectives and on-the-ground developments, the research incorporates data from local media outlets, digital news portals, and the social media accounts of regional news agencies, community groups, and political representatives. This allows for a more nuanced reading of public sentiment, indigenous resistance, and community mobilization around the dam project.

Through the triangulation of these diverse sources, the study aims to answer the central research question and address the existing gap in scholarly literature concerning the intersection of large-scale infrastructure, indigenous rights, and environmental justice in Northeast India. The analytical framework is informed by interdisciplinary perspectives, integrating insights from political ecology, human geography, and critical development studies.

Objectives

- 1. To examine the strategic rationale behind the Siang Hydro Multipurpose Project within the context of India-China transboundary water dynamics and Operation Sindoor.
- 2. To analyse the environmental and human rights implications of the project, with a focus on its impact on indigenous communities, ecological sustainability, and displacement.

Geographical and Hydrological Profile of the Siang River Basin



The Siang River basin is centrally located in Arunachal Pradesh, within the geographical coordinates of 27°30'–29°20'N latitude and 93°48'–95°35'E longitude. This area, which once comprised the erstwhile Siang District, is now divided into five districts: Upper Siang, East Siang, Siang, and Lower Siang. The basin is home to 634 inhabited villages and is predominantly inhabited by the Adi and Galo tribes two major indigenous communities of the state (S.N. Jha, 2021).

The Brahmaputra River, a 2,880 km long transboundary river, originates from the Ansi Glacier near Mount Kailash in southwestern Tibet at an elevation of 5,300 meters. Known as the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, the river flows eastward across Tibet for 1,700 km before entering Arunachal Pradesh at Kepang La near Gelling. It then takes a dramatic U-turn often referred to as the "Great Bend" and flows southward through the Siang Valley. Within India, it flows 920 km through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and another 260 km through Bangladesh, where it is known as the Jamuna, before draining into the Bay of Bengal.

Tuting, a town located at 1,240 meters above sea level, lies on the bank of the Siang River just 34 km south of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and 170 km north of Yingkiong (200 m elevation) (The Arunachal Times, October 22, 2024). The Siang River's total catchment area up to Pasighat is approximately 2,50,594 sq. km, of which 14,038 sq. km lies within Indian territory. While the Tibetan catchment is snow-fed, the Indian section is largely rain-fed.

The Indian stretch of the Siang is bounded by the Eastern Himalayas to the north, the Subansiri Basin to the west, and the Dibang Basin to the east. It flows southward for 226 km through steep gorges before reaching Pasighat at 152 meters elevation. Near Pasighat, the river adopts a braided course with multiple channels, formed due to a gentle gradient and silt deposits. Distinct river terraces are visible along the stretch between Yingkiong and Pasighat. After flowing another 52 km, the Siang joins the Lohit and Dibang rivers upstream of Kobo near Sadiya (123 m elevation) to form the Brahmaputra.

Throughout its course, the river receives several tributaries, progressively increasing in size and discharge. With an average annual flow of 615 billion cubic meters, the Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers globally by volume and provides crucial ecological, cultural, and economic benefits to populations in Tibet, Northeast India, and Bangladesh. The Siang River alone contributes 25–33% of the total discharge of the Brahmaputra (The Arunachal Times, October 22, 2024).

The Government of India has proposed a massive hydropower project on the Siang River, with a storage capacity of 9.2 billion cubic meters and an estimated generation potential of 11,000 MW, using a pondage height of approximately 280 meters (The Arunachal Times, January 21, 2025).





The Background of Protest Movement

The opposition to mega dam projects on the Siang River is not new. It began in the 1980s under the banner of Siang Bachao Andolan, later renamed Siang Bachao Federation. The project was initially assigned to the Brahmaputra Flood Control Company (later Brahmaputra Board Company), then handed over to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), and subsequently to Jay Pee Company (JP). Currently, NHPC has resumed efforts to execute the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project, a proposed 11.2 GW (11,000 MW) dam in Upper Siang District.

Despite changing hands, the project has consistently faced resistance. Local communities have protested since the 1980s, citing threats to their land, culture, and environment. Over the decades, various organizations have led the movement, including Siang People's Forum (2002), Lower Siang Project Affected People Action Committee, Dam Affected People's Forum, Mebo Area Bachao Committee, and currently the Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum (SIFF) since 2013.

In April 2022, under NITI Aayog's directive, NHPC was instructed to conduct a prefeasibility survey. Local resistance remained strong. A public consultative meeting was held on 19 October 2024 at Yingkiong by the All-Upper Siang District Students' Union (AUSDSU), attended by over 38 villages, HGBs/GBs, elders, and community leaders. Most attendees, except politicians and government officials, opposed the project. While Adi Bane Kebang (ABK) remained neutral, the Adi Students' Union voiced opposition. Community elders emphasized their ancestral connection to the land, arguing that submerging it would dishonour their heritage. They view the dam as a threat not only to their environment but also to their identity. (Miti Taying, 2025)

Findings and Discussion

1. How is Siang Upper Multipurpose Project a strategic to counter China's water dominance in future?

The proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP), with an estimated generation capacity of 11,000 MW, is expected to provide clean and renewable energy to the Northeastern states of India, which have historically faced energy shortages. In addition to its energy potential, the project is anticipated to spur local economic development and improve critical



infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and communication networks (The Arunachal Times, October 22, 2024).

Strategically, the dam is viewed as a countermeasure to China's increasing control over the Siang River upstream. By managing water flow within its own territory, India seeks to assert greater control over the river's dynamics and reduce the impact of any unilateral actions taken by China (The Arunachal Times, October 22, 2024).

Chief Minister Pema Khandu has emphasized that the SUMP, with an estimated cost of ₹1.13 lakh crore, is not solely intended for electricity generation. According to him, the project also aims to regulate the river's flow throughout the year and mitigate flood risks arising from potential water discharges by China. His remarks followed China's approval to construct the world's largest dam at an estimated cost of USD 137 billion on the Brahmaputra River in Tibet, near the Indian border, where the river takes a sharp U-turn before entering Arunachal Pradesh. In a media interview, Khandu stated, "The SUMP is not just about generating power, but also about maintaining the natural flow of the Siang River and mitigating potential flood risks from water releases by China" (Utpal Boruah, The Arunachal Times, December 30, 2024).

According to reports, China's hydroelectric development along the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) is driven by multiple strategic and developmental objectives. These include improving living standards in Tibet, addressing freshwater scarcity, and supporting the country's climate goals of peaking carbon emissions by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 (A.N. Mohammed, Siang River Diplomacy: India's Response to China's Move, The Arunachal Times, October 3, 2024).

Despite limited transparency, China has disclosed plans for a series of five cascade hydropower projects along the Tsangpo River Zangmu, Gyatsa (Jiacha), Zhongda, Jiexu, and Langzhen located east of Lhasa. The Zangmu Dam, standing 116 meters high with a capacity of 510 MW, is situated in a gorge approximately 140 km southeast of Lhasa at an elevation of 3,260 meters. It began generating power in November 2014. The 360 MW Gyatsa Dam was completed in August 2020, while construction is currently underway on the 560 MW Jiexu Dam.

In addition to these, China is also advancing plans for three more hydropower projects upstream of the Great Bend, on the Yiwong River a tributary of the Tsangpo. These include the 640 MW Dagu, 71 MW Bayu, and 800 MW Zhongyu dams, all of which are reportedly in advanced stages of planning (A.N. Mohammed, The Arunachal Times, October 3, 2024)

In his pro-dam paper Siang River Diplomacy: India's Response to China's Move, hydropower consultant A. N. Mohammed outlines ten strategic imperatives for SUMP:

- 1. Geopolitical Tensions: China's Motuo Dam (60,000 MW) near the Indian border escalates India's strategic concerns.
- 2. Water Diversion Risks: Potential Chinese diversion of Siang waters could severely reduce flows into India.
- 3. Flood Risks: Unpredictable water releases could trigger artificial flooding in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.



- 4. Border Dispute Nexus: Siang flows through Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as "South Tibet," linking water and territorial disputes.
- 5. Riparian Rights: China's upstream dominance weakens India's legal position under international water law.
- 6. Human Security: The Siang sustains millions in the Northeast; disruption could threaten livelihoods, agriculture, and ecosystems.
- 7. Renewable Energy Goals: Aligns with India's 2070 carbon neutrality target.
- 8. Developmental Asymmetry: India lags behind China in dam construction, reducing regional water and energy leverage.
- 9. Border Development: SUMP would improve connectivity and economic resilience in a sensitive border state.
- 10. National Security: Strategic control over Siang is vital amidst Chinese expansionism.

Therefore, to safeguard India's interests, the project proposes 9 billion cubic metres of water storage to counteract flood threats and water shortages (A. N. Mohammad, The Arunachal Times, October 3, 2024)

In the wake of the April 22, 2025 terror attack at Baisaran Meadow in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir which left dozens dead and many injured India launched Operation Sindoor, a robust military response that demonstrated the country's indigenous defence capabilities (The Hindu, Pahalgam Terror Attack, 2025). As retaliation and counter-retaliation unfolded, China reaffirmed its staunch support for Pakistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a meeting in Beijing with his Pakistani counterpart Ishaq Dar, reiterated that China will "firmly support Pakistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty and territorial integrity" and assist in its fight against terrorism. At the same time, China called for dialogue between India and Pakistan to de-escalate tensions following the violent clashes earlier that month (Alyssa Chen, 21 May 2025).

In anticipation of further security threats, possibly involving both Pakistan and its strategic ally China, the Ministry of Home Affairs initiated Operation Abhyaas, a nationwide civil defence mock drill. The exercise simulated hostile scenarios such as air raids, fire emergencies, and large-scale search-and-rescue operations. Notably, Arunachal Pradesh India's northeastern frontier state bordering China was included in the drill. Exercises were conducted in key locations including the state capital Itanagar, Hayuliang (Anjaw), Bomdila (West Kameng), and the sensitive border district of Tawang. Strategic public institutions like Khandro Drowa Zangmo District Hospital, ANM School, LD Public School, and Masang Dung Rhuemey were involved in the preparedness operations (Press Trust of India, 7 May 2024).

Against this backdrop of heightened national security concerns, India escalated its defence posture in Arunachal Pradesh by deploying armed forces to militarize the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) dam site in May 2025 (The Hindu, 27 May 2025). This decision was seen as a direct response to China's assertive regional actions and its unwavering support for Pakistan. Chief Minister Pema Khandu, during a media briefing, emphasized that India must not become complacent. "China is unpredictable and can do anything," he warned, underscoring the necessity for sustained vigilance and strategic preparedness. He described the Siang dam project as a critical "defence mechanism" for India.



CM Khandu also referenced China's Premier's recent visit to the Arunachal border and the Chinese government's approval of the massive 60,000 MW Dadam project planned between its 10th and 15th Five-Year Plans. These developments have raised serious concerns over India's water security in the Northeast, especially for the coming 15 to 20 years (Eastern Journal, 30 May 2025). Echoing these concerns, the Education Minister of Arunachal Pradesh stated in an interview with IndiaToday NE Television that the construction of the Siang dam is not just an infrastructural or developmental project, but one of "national interest" vital to "national security."

Controversies and Disputes over the Project

Despite government's defence of the Siang Multipurpose Dam Project, ever since the NITI Aayog announced the building of the dam, the local communities firmly believe that the Sing Upper Multipurpose Project violates their rights.

1. How has the Siang Dam Project violated human rights in Arunachal Pradesh?

The Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) has been widely criticized for violating the human rights of indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the Adi tribe residing in the Siang Valley. A major concern has been the government's failure to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected people before beginning the Preliminary Feasibility Report (PFR) survey. According to Lamuk Padun, president of the Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum (SIFF), the NHPC began conducting surveys without notifying the local communities or sharing the full project details despite repeated demands for transparency during official meetings (The Arunachal Times, 23 May 2025). This lack of consultation violates both national law, such as the Forest Rights Act (2006), and international human rights standards which emphasize the need for participatory development and community consent.

Adding to the tensions, the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered the deployment of armed police and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) across multiple villages in Upper Siang, Siang, and East Siang districts through an order dated 9 December 2024. This militarization of civilian spaces, aimed at enforcing the implementation of the dam project, has been perceived by local communities as a coercive tactic that infringes on their right to peaceful protest and self-determination (The Arunachal Times, 23 May 2025). Human rights organizations such as the Centre for Research and Advocacy (Manipur), Affected Citizens of Teesta (Sikkim), and Borok People's Human Rights Organisation (Tripura) condemned this move, stating that it "undermines all semblance of democracy" and amounts to the criminalization of dissent (The Hindu, 2025).

Furthermore, the project threatens the cultural and existential identity of the Adi community. Residents fear becoming "refugees" in their own land, with the potential displacement of over 27 villages, resulting in the loss of homes, livelihoods, and ancestral heritage. Local voices have stressed that the dam jeopardizes their paddy and orange farms key sources of survival and could sever future generations from their land and cultural roots (Down to Earth, Jan 2025; The Arunachal Times, 1 June 2025). Collectively, these factors demonstrate how the SUMP has violated fundamental human rights related to land, culture, security, and participation.



2. How is the Siang Dam Project likely to cause damage to the environment?

The Siang Dam Project is also expected to have profound and potentially irreversible environmental consequences, particularly given the ecological sensitivity of the Eastern Himalayas. One of the most pressing concerns is the large-scale submergence of land. According to local estimates, the project could displace between 27 to 47 villages, inundating vast tracts of forest, farmland, and human settlements. The environmental degradation caused by this level of submergence threatens biodiversity, disrupts riverine ecosystems, and undermines the ecological balance of the region (The Wire, 24 May 2025; Arun Bhoomi, 2025). Since agriculture is the mainstay of the region, loss of arable land directly impacts both food security and traditional livelihoods.

The project's location in a high seismic zone further amplifies the environmental risks. Experts have warned that the region is prone to natural disasters like landslides, glacial melting, and flash floods, all of which are being intensified by climate change. The Hindu (2025) reports that such projects, built in fragile mountain ecosystems, increase the disaster vulnerability of local populations. Furthermore, damming a major river like the Siang leads to fragmentation of river systems, disrupting sediment flow and aquatic life. International Rivers has noted that such fragmentation, coupled with over-extraction and pollution, threatens the basic human rights to water, food, and health for river-dependent communities (International Rivers, 2025).

Indigenous ecological knowledge and conservation practices are also at risk. Indigenous people, who comprise only 5% of the world's population but safeguard 80% of its biodiversity, are essential stewards of these environments. Their displacement due to the dam would not only be a human rights issue but also an ecological one, as their sustainable practices would be lost (International Rivers, 'Indigenous Rights' 2025). In response to these threats, civil society groups have called for alternative, ecologically sustainable energy models such as distributed mini-hydel projects that meet local energy needs without inflicting large-scale environmental harm (Counter Current, 2025). These arguments highlight the significant ecological costs of the Siang Dam, which go beyond development rhetoric to encompass biodiversity, sustainability, and intergenerational environmental justice.

Recommendations

Therefore, in order to mitigate the question of national interest, prevent environmental degradation and to promote and protect indigenous rights without compromising developmental concerns, the Government of India and project authorities such as NHPC should ensure free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of affected communities before any further action is taken. Public hearings must be genuinely participatory, inclusive of all stakeholders, and transparent in content, purpose, and impact. Secondly, a cumulative and independent ESIA must be conducted that includes the downstream and upstream ecological impacts, potential seismic risks, cultural dislocation, and biodiversity loss. These assessments must also evaluate alternative, decentralized energy options. Thirdly, he worldviews and ecological wisdom of indigenous groups like the Adi and Galo should be integrated into planning processes. Their traditional land-use practices and cultural relationship with the river must inform any long-term water governance model. Fourthly, the deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF)



has escalated tensions and distrust. The state should avoid using militarization as a tool of enforcement in civil development matters and instead focus on dialogue and trust-building mechanisms with local populations. Fifth, instead of mega-dams, the government should consider small-scale, community-managed renewable energy solutions like mini-hydels or solar microgrids. These are less invasive, more sustainable, and compatible with the region's ecological and cultural context. Sixth, legal safeguards for indigenous communities under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, must be respected and enforced. Community land titles and access to forest-based livelihoods should be protected before any land acquisition is approved. Seventh, India should take diplomatic initiatives to establish a basin-wide river governance framework with China and downstream nations like Bangladesh, to ensure equitable and ecologically responsible use of the Brahmaputra/Siang system.

Conclusion

The Siang Upper Multipurpose Project represents a critical juncture where strategic national interests intersect with environmental sustainability and indigenous rights. While the project is framed as a counter to upstream developments by China and a solution to India's energy demands, it raises serious concerns about displacement, ecological damage, and democratic accountability. The resistance by local communities underscores the need for more inclusive, transparent, and ecologically sensitive development practices. For long-term stability and justice, development in the Siang River Basin must respect both national priorities and the rights of those who have long called this region home.

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