Dams of danger

The aggravating flood situation in upper Assam following release of excess water from the Rangaduli hydel project has raised serious questions over the viability of big dams in the region, especially in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra basin in Arunachal Pradesh. Environmental scientists and activists have decried the Centre's plan to go ahead with as many as 168 large hydroelectric projects in the region on the ground that the basic concerns before initiating such a large-scale intervention on the fragile Himalayan ecology were largely ignored. Indeed, the hurried manner in which the projects are sought to be pushed through without addressing the genuine concerns such as downstream impacts in the form of floods, loss of biodiversity, seismic vulnerability of the region, etc., seems to corroborate the stance of the opponents of big dams. The situation is certainly grave, and calls for a reassessment of the Centre's hydro-power policy for the North-East. The opposition of the scientific community has been that the projects are being cleared without a thorough study on any of the environmental and social concerns and the downstream impacts. This is valid reasoning and brushing it aside would only jeopardise the lives of thousands of people likely to be affected by the dams. An riparian State like Assam stands to be the worst-hit by the projects, and we have already been victims of dam-induced floods several times in the recent past. Making large-scale intervention on the Himalayan ecology could also lead to catastrophic consequences for its rich biodiversity. The way pristine wildlife habitats are disappearing across the planet, protection of a biodiversity hotspot is a concern of not just the North-East or India but of the entire world. While the proponents of the hydro-power policy would argue that it is the best way to get cheap, non-polluting power so critical for development, the question left unanswered is that the colossal social and environmental costs of these mega dams could effectively negate all the benefits.

The circumstances are compelling, and the Assam Government would do well to engage the Centre in a dialogue on the issue before projects are given the nod. Scientific study done by impartial agencies involving top environmental scientists must precede construction of any big hydel project in the North-East. It is a fact that the environmental impact assessment (EIA) reports of the projects cleared so far have been shoddy and give grossly underestimated presentations of the environmental and socio-economic losses. The Assam Government can no longer afford to be complacent, and must compel the Centre to intervene in the desired manner. While we say that flood is our biggest problem, the question is – can we allow anything that can present it further?
ISI and HUJI support
NE extremists: KYKL
informs police

AGARTALA, July 31: Two Manipur-based KYKL extremists, arrested from north Tripura last night, today confessed that some Northeastern militant outfits, including NSCN and PLA, were getting support from ISI and HUJI in Bangladesh to carry out anti-Indian activities. During interrogation the KYKL ultra disclosed that besides Northeastern militants, some international terrorist outfits had been using Tripura as corridor for their movement from Bangladesh to other Indian cities, police here said. SPO of Tripura detained Maibam Roshan Meitei of Kachikul in Imphal (West) and Singam Joykuman of Thoubal Okram from Bathacher Bazaar border in north Tripura when they were allegedly crossing Indo-Bangladesh border to proceed towards Kailashahar town. On the other, acting on secret information police and BSF personnel jointly raided the house of one Nandan Sarkar at Kalamchoura in west Tripura yesterday and seized about 15 kg ganja and Bangladeshi currency Taka 6000 and one mobile set, but the accused was absconding. Meanwhile, police launched investigation following the recovery of the dead body of a TSR jawan, identified as Swapan Dey, posted at sentry post of TSR 3rd battalion headquarter in Shimbukcherra of Dhalai district. (UNI)
ULFA and Foreigners

On the occasion of the ULFA’s so-called martyrs’ day, chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa said that the Government of India would never deport foreigners from India because “the Indian imperialism itself is a system” under which Assam would be “ruled by foreigners (Indians)”, and that “there is no solution to the problems of illegal infiltration into Assam under the system of governance of imperialist India”. First thing first, Arabinda Rajkhowa should leave foreign shores and come back home to see how the people of Assam have totally rejected the concept of ‘sovereignty’ for the State — because they are citizens of independent India and are, therefore, already sovereign. Secondly, he should have the guts to talk about the demographic topsy-turvydom brought about by illegal Bangladeshis in Assam — yes, by nationals of a country where the top ULFA leadership reportedly owns huge business empires and takes orders from its master, Pakistan’s ISI. The ULFA chairman should tell the people of Assam whether he will be permitted by the ISI to do anything without its approval. And thirdly, he should ponder as to whether he himself has not become a foreigner after having lived in a foreign country for so long with all luxuries on earth and after having ordered attacks against his original homeland and brethren from his adopted homeland — Bangladesh.
‘Maoists training Asom militants’

GUWAHATI, July 31: A shadowy insurgent group of Asom has established links with Maoist rebels, with several of its cadres said to be undergoing training at the hands of Maoist instructors, mainly in Jharkhand, security officials said on Thursday. “Two militants belonging to the Adi Vaxi National Liberation Army (ANLA) who surrendered before the authorities in Golaghat district on Wednesday have revealed that up to 24 of their cadres have been undergoing training with Maoists in Jharkhand since January,” an official told IANS on condition of anonymity. Mikhail Bina and Raju Gaur, the two ANLA militants who have surrendered, told police that the group has more than 300 cadres and its arsenal includes dozens of AK series assault rifles, revolvers and grenades.

The ANLA, formed in 2004 to push the interest of tea plantation workers across the State, shot into the limelight after it claimed responsibility for the December 13, 2007, bomb attack on a New Delhi-bound Rajdhani Express in Assam that killed five passengers and injured nine others. The group is also said to have a written agreement with the Maoist faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) for possible joint operations against the security forces and for not carrying out any extortion in each other’s areas of influence without prior notice.

“We believe that the ANLA has kept most of its weaponry with the NSCN-IM,” the security official said.

The ANLA has been trying to capitalize on the Adivasi sentiments after the community’s agitation for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status gained momentum following the November 24, 2007 rally in Guwahati that turned violent after protesters clashed with local residents.

The Assam Police has always believed that ANLA leaders were operating out of Jharkhand and has been keeping a close watch on their activities.

ANLA started its terror run by kidnapping wealthy members from within the community, including businessmen and relatives of some local politicians in southern Assam.

During the initial days after its formation, the ANLA were patronage from the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), active in Karbi Anglong district. Later, the NSCN-IM took the group under its wings.

Analysts say the ANLA could well emerge as a new terror front in Assam. “The group could well provide the bridge to the Maoists to come and open shops in Assam,” said Washington Hussain, director at the Guwahati-based Centre for Development and Peace Studies, a think tank. IANS

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Lonely gibbon goes to forest to live with partner

KAZIRANGA, Aug 5: She learnt to watch TV, reacted to pictures of food in magazines and even ate with a spoon, but in the end she went to live in the woods with her partner.

Her name is Siloni, a female captive-bred Hoollong Gibbon, who is a first-ever success story of rehabilitation of the rare ape in Assam, was released in the wild after being reared in a temporary enclosure till her sexual maturity and subsequent matrimony with a male in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP).

“The animal has conceived and we are expecting the baby within a few months. Foresters have been monitoring the movement of the couple and everything is normal,” KNP Director Suren Baragohain, told PTI.

Siloni was rescued from a temple in Golaghat district by Baragohain when he was the Divisional Forest Officer there in 2003.

“She was in an injured condition when I brought her from a priest. I took her to my home and nurtured her. She had developed acquaintance with humans as she had learnt to watch TV, react to pictures in books and even eat with a spoon,” the director said.

Siloni was subsequently admitted to the centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Kaziranga. Later, she was transferred to a temporary enclosure in the release site in the adjacent Pobitora Wildlife Reserve about four months ago for acclimation before her release into the wild. The release site was selected in Pobitora Reserve Forest after a study confirmed the presence of alone male gibbon in the area.

The spacious enclosure was suspended under the canopy of a ficus tree about five meters above the ground. It was there where the male gibbon, who wandered from the wild, stayed with her.

Late at night, the pair was even observed mating through the enclosure mesh providing cogent evidence to their successful pairing. The decision for the reintroduction of wildlife in this species is the primary reason for the rehabilitation of mammals that live in pairs. Habitat fragmentation has forced many gibbons in the Northeast to live in isolation, often without a mate like this solitary male in Pobitora Reserve Forest.

Conservationists believe that successful rehabilitation of Siloni could provide a strategy for the management of gibbons living without mates in the wild. PTI
Chautaki initiative

It was a remarkable accomplishment by the people of the non-descript Chautaki village of North Salmara in Bongaigaon district that went largely unnoticed in the media. Their feat of planting 2,84,000 saplings in 24 hours on a plot of 31.5 hectares – apart from making them the forerunner for a place in the Guinness Book of World Records – has messages that are particularly relevant at a time when deforestation is assuming alarming proportions in Assam. The whole endeavour was inspiring, and what made it possible was the large-scale participation of the village community, aptly assisted by the administration. Community participation can do wonders in bringing about transformations in ecological, social and economic spheres, and the Chautaki experience goes to show that if the motivation is there, the people themselves can become tools for a change for the better. Their achievement is all the more creditable because they have demonstrated how a wasteland can be used for afforestation. As for the record books, Chautaki stands well-placed to dethrone Tamil Nadu’s Nagapattinum village which holds the world record for planting maximum number of saplings when its villagers planted 2,54,469 saplings within 24 hours. Chautaki’s inspiring exploits were closely monitored and documented in the presence of independent observers, and a report is soon to be sent to the Guinness authorities for the recognition.

The success of the extraordinary afforestation drive at Chautaki makes it a fit case for replication elsewhere in the State. The Forest Department would also do well to take a leaf out of this development and strive for greater community involvement and participation in its plantation and conservation activities. Lack of community involvement is a major reason behind the failure of many of our government-sponsored drives, including those aimed at afforestation and conservation. Motivating the community into undertaking such campaigns would also result in enhancing the people’s awareness about the need to preserve forests and the environment. An enlightened and committed community could be a potent antidote against the menace of deforestation and destruction of forest wealth. Given the precarious position of our forests due to large-scale deforestation and encroachment, a concerted green campaign by voluntary organisations, government agencies and the media with active participation of the community is the need of the hour. The villagers of Chautaki have shown the way by their unique drive, and the need now is to carry forward the campaign to every nook and corner of the State and turn it into a mission.
Mautam rats damage crops in Mizoram

AIZAWL, July 31: Armies of rats have ravaged maize and other crops in Mizoram, agricultural officials said on Wednesday.

Aizawl district alone accounted for more than 20 percent of maize harvest loss after rats damaged crops, State Agriculture Department officials said after maize harvest at Phullen and surrounding villages in eastern part of Aizawl district.

In south Mizoram's Lawngtlai district, rats not only destroyed maize but also nibbled standing paddy stems, District Agriculture Officer Rohmingthanga Colney said.

The affected villages in the district included Lungzorhnum, Bualpui-NG, Lunggpher, Rawibuk, Vanhne and Rulkual where mass poisoning of rats was initiated.

Villages like Serkhan, Bukpui and surrounding villages in Mizoram-Assam border were also hit by rats, Kolasib District Agriculture Officer Labiniansana said.

Apart from maize, rats also attacked other crops like pumpkin, cucumber, chilli and watermelon, he said.

Sailam and surrounding villages in Serchhip district also lost an estimated 75 per cent of expected maize harvest, the officials said.

The officials said rat menace was compounded in the areas where mautam or gregarious flowering of bamboo variety of Dendrocalamus Hamiltoni, locally known as “Phulrua” was found.

Rat population goes up exponentially after eating bamboo flowers and seeds, which happens once in around 48 years. (PTI)
First ever medical college to be set up in Arunachal

ITANAGAR, July 17: The Arunachal Pradesh Government has decided to set up the first ever medical college in the state by upgrading the General Hospital at Naharlogun here.

Official sources said here today that state Health and Family Welfare Minister C C Singpho disclosed this information while participating in an anti-malaria programme at Mudoi village, 36 km from Diyun in Changlang district, recently.

Singpho further informed that President Pratibha Patil was likely to lay the foundation stone of the central government-approved AYUSH hospital at Pasighat, headquarters of East Kameng district, in November.

The Health Minister also distributed 2,000 K-Othrine solution impregnated mosquito nets to the villagers.

He urged the villagers to keep their surroundings clean and ensure proper spray of DDT.

He also stressed on constitution of village health and sanitation committees and directed the health officials to implement the scheme properly.

"The health sector is one of the top priority agendas of the State Government," he said and informed about the other health oriented initiatives of the Government.

Expressing concern over the spread of the dreaded HIV/AIDS, the minister informed that 105 HIV/AIDS cases had been detected so far in the State, the sources added. (UNI)
**Tribals to make animation films based on folklore**

NEW DELHI, July 30 — For over two dozen tribals, many of them from some of the remote parts of the country, the rusted tools of daily life have been replaced by a keyboard and mouse as they make their way into the world of animation.

Armed with multimedia software like Photoshop, Frontier, Maya, Macromedia 3D Max and Combustion SFX (for special effects), tribals hailing from Jarkhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and the North-Eastern region are being assisted by six students of Jawaharlal Nehru University-based National Institute of Design in the capital to synchronise their tribal folklore into animation films.

The participants are not only writing their scripts, storyboarding and designing picture frames for their respective 5-minute films but will also render rural tunes as background music for them.

“We are doing the storytelling and film editing part. How and where to place the characters in the film sequence is being handled by the NID students,” says Yerkat Ramon Singh Shyam, a Goza tribal artist from MP, as he draws various designs of the Squared for their film “Gati Kala Supra”.

The Santhal tribal group from Jarkhand and West Bengal are putting together a folktale with the main characters of a Bear, Tiger and a Man.

“Our designs are drawn from wall paintings found in our villages. The music that the film will have will be unique to our culture,” says Bharat Bhushan Murmu, a santhal from Jarkhand.

“The whole of India is discovering animation. Hence this is the right time for these tribal artists to reap the benefits of the technology and explore their innate animation,” Tara Douglas, workshop conductor and an animator herself, says.

Douglas said these artists need financial help and encouragement. She is also contemplating to approach the Ministry of Culture and India Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (INGCA) for monetary assistance as animation is a “costly business which these artists cannot afford”.

As the tribals prepare beautiful pictures of wild animals, birds, trees and other flora, the NID students pitch in for “depth and perspective” of the subject.

“We are not here to change their lifestyle and their traditional stories... that is their take,” Gaurav Jugal, a final year student of Animation and Film Design at NID, says.

The two-week workshop is being organised by the India Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Douglas, who works with the Adivasi Art Trust in the capital.

The group from Manipur is preparing a story based on a man and a monkey. One participant — Olen Amakhahn — says that the workshop will take their skills “forward by leaps”.

The three films will have sound effects by the tribal artists themselves and the participants have been instructed to “forget themselves and be the animated characters”.

“If you are rendering the sound for a wolf, feel like it... if you need the feel of the environment,” sound engineer for the project Ankit tells the gathering. — PTI

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**AASU warns Govts on mega dams**

GUWAHATI, June 30 — Accusing the State Government of surrendering before the Centre by allowing mega hydel projects in the fragile upper Brahmaputra basin in Arunachal Pradesh without assessing their adverse downstream impacts, the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) today warned both the State and Central governments that no dam would be allowed compromising Assam’s interests.

Making it clear that the AASU was not opposed to development but that efforts at developing a place should not have debilitating damages on another, the students’ body said that recent experiences with flash floods had laid bare the destructive traits of big dams on downstream areas. “There have been quite a few instances of Assam’s floods turning worse due to sudden release of water from dams in Arunachal and even Bhutan. Flood is already a serious problem and we cannot allow it to deteriorate any further,” it said.

Pointing out that the hydropower map prepared by Arunachal Pradesh aimed at generating 56,539 MW power completely ignored the threats posed to Assam, which is a downstream State, the AASU said that the assessment of possible adverse impacts on downstream areas at best had been shoddy. “We strongly oppose setting up of any hydel project without making a clear assessment of the dangers it poses to downstream areas,” it said.

Lambasting Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi for his “weak” stand on the issue, the AASU said that he was pushing Assam to the brink at the dictat of the Centre. “The Chief Minister has been maintaining a stoic silence on the matter for long, resulting in untold hardships for the people during the rainy season,” it said.

Stressing the need for a comprehensive study by experts on the issue of big dams, the AASU said that it had already been in touch with well-known persons in the field so that adequate research could be facilitated. It said that it would also seek cooperation of other organizations in opposing mega dams,” it added.