BEYOND MATERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE: THE MAPITHEL DAM AND THE EXPERIENCES OF TANGKHUL WOMEN

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Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2023
In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation

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Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to convey my gratitude to all research participants for narrating their distressing and insightful experiences because of the construction of the large Mapithel dam. It is beyond me to capture the lived realities that the people are going through,a even at a time of the global COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to dedicate this paper to all affected marginal and voiceless groups whose lives have been displaced, disintegrated, and distorted in the name of development. I would like to sincerely thank Urvashi Butalia, Karuna Menon, and Bidisha Mahanta, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for granting funds to a young researcher for conducting research. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer and the editorial team for taking care of this paper on its journey to getting published. Finally, I am sincerely indebted to Julieyanah Shimray, Ashonshok Kachui, and Livika Ayemi for going through the draft and giving helpful comments and suggestions.

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ABSTRACT

Discussions on gender and infrastructure are not recent nor a new phenomenon in the borderland communities of India's Northeast frontier. In the last three decades, the frontier has been a silent victim of material infrastructure like large dams, transnational highways, roadways, railways, and expansion of urban buildings. Material infrastructure has shared a close connection with social, economic, and political forces. Dealing with material infrastructure means reconsidering it from the lens of gender infrastructure, because women's voices are unheard and get limited space in the male-centric development planning, process, and implementation. Therefore, this paper discusses how women negotiate land ownership, compensation, resettlement, and rehabilitation. The paper presents diverse ethnographic narratives about Tangkhul women's struggles,

hardships, and injustices as the cost of the Mapithel dam. The paper also introduces the concept of ava *khon* (mother's voice). For a Tangkhul Naga, ava khon is lovelier and sweeter than the voices/songs of *sampheirok* (common hawk cuckoo), *nasha* (dove), and *koktui* (common cuckoo). However, when the construction, land ownership, and compensation of material infrastructure are concerned, the ava khon are unheard, voiceless, and valueless. I argue that, while constructing mega infrastructure projects like large dams and roads, proper attention should be paid to the community's social relations and accommodating them beyond the material infrastructure.

Keywords: Development, material infrastructure, Mapithel dam, Tangkhul women

INTRODUCTION

In September 2020 I dialled Ani's number to know how she and her family were doing during the Covid-19 lockdown. It had been more than a year since we had seen each other at her house, as she was my host for my ethnographic fieldwork. In India, a lockdown was imposed on 24 March 2020 and extended for more than six months to avoid the spread of the virus. Before the outbreak of the global pandemic, Ani sold cucumbers at a waiting shed where people sold local products. Tourists visited this area, which was also a picnic spot at the Mapithel dam site.

There were four of us staying in her thatched house: Ani, her husband, their son, and me (ethnographer). While staying at her house, sometimes I helped her carry cucumbers in a *shopkai* (bamboo basket) from her home to the waiting shed, which is about a 20-30 minute walk. I remember one day she sold two full shopkai of cucumbers that got her Rs 300, which was a fair amount compared to other days.

As we talked on the phone, Ani asked a few questions mostly about the pandemic, '*Aboy* [referring to ethnographer], when will *Kazat*

(sickness) [referring to COVID-19] be over? Will my villagers get sick? Is it not only happening in *ayar* [outside, referring to other states]?'[1] I had no words to respond to her modest inquiry. I could not assure her that there would be no sickness (infections) in her village. The virus was extending from one person to another through communities, and it could affect her village any time. Some of her villagers had reverse migrated from India's COVID-19 hotspots like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru. For that reason, village authorities along with local organisations and the government had imposed stringent guidelines to prevent people from walking around and also restricted villagers from engaging in any livelihood activities. Ani informed me on the phone that unlike the previous year, she did not have space to sell her cucumbers in the local market; besides, no tourists were coming for picnics and sightseeing. She said, 'I do not know how we will survive. We cannot do anything because of coronavirus. Besides, the dam water is rising every day and has spoiled the vegetables I planted near the dam site.'

Surviving the global pandemic was everyone's priority and, as a result, people returned to their homes in villages and towns for their safety. It also affected project-affected youth, children, women, and families who reverse migrated to their village. They were once displaced by the tragedy of the construction of the Mapithel dam; they fled in search of jobs, education, and for settling down in a new town or city. Now they had come back in search of safety from the global pandemic. This raises a critical question: do development agencies have long-term strategies for project-affected people as they sacrifice their land, forests, rivers, homes, and livelihoods for national development? These concerns were raised by project-affected persons in front of development agencies before the global pandemic. These are also narratives of struggles, hardships, and injustices as a cost of constructing material infrastructure. One may argue that development agencies are not responsible for the global pandemic, so they cannot be held responsible for the people; their primary purpose is the construction of the large dam and generating an economic

boom. Development agencies might justify that compensation has been given to the affected people and their resettlement has been implemented, but research has shown that compensation has failed to lead to any economic recovery of the affected people. If we interrogate the politics of settlement and land distribution from a gender perspective, development agencies have implemented policies with a spirit of capitalism, bureaucracy, and authoritarianism. In most cases, development agencies' concerns are accumulating wealth and extracting resources from the frontier where the resources are abundantly available, where the rule of law is weak, and where fewer people participate in constructing infrastructure, primarily negating the participation of women.

We can consider these projects elitist as the local populace is not consulted when planning and implementing them. So, concerns of well-being for the project-affected community people like women, children, elderly persons, and youths are entirely out of development policies, even at a time of the global pandemic. In short, these dams are built without benefiting local communities.

Discussions on gender and infrastructure are not a new debate or a new phenomenon even in the borderland communities of the Northeast India frontier. Discussions on material infrastructure like roads, railways, hospitals, information communication and technology (ICT), and large dams have been dominated by various actors like the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and other international financial institutions. What has been missing in the discourse in development and policy studies is the importance of a social relationship with material infrastructure. Project-affected community are silent victims of material infrastructure, and their social relationships with the communities based on their values, beliefs, and customs have disintegrated into different forms, which is more poignant than the infrastructure's local economic impact. Kikon (2019a) suggests that aspirations of material infrastructure have power and politics, and transforming the lives of people through infrastructure is to give importance to gender and social relationships.

One may ask, why is the construction of infrastructure such a big concern for people's lives? Or how was/is the condition of the people that the state's development agencies wanted to uplift? Who are these people?

One may (re)consider going back to fundamental lines of inquiry like how are social relationships related to material infrastructure? These are a few lines of investigation that led me to writing this paper, to present the lives of the affected people, especially indigenous Tangkhul women whose lives were displaced because of the Mapithel dam as a material infrastructure. Women's voices are unheard and have limited space in development planning, processes, and implementation for demanding compensation, land (re)distribution, and other basic needs. As per tradition, Tangkhul indigenous customary practices hold women in high regard, and they are often treated as neutral peacemakers (Shimray 2004; Yangkahao 2020).

WOMEN AND INFRASTRUCTURE

In current development projects' policies, planning, and implementation in South Asia and Southeast Asia, various International Financial Institutions (IFI) like the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are involved with state development agencies. It is not wrong to say that they are indisputable international financial institutions or development agencies for providing loans and grants for the construction of material infrastructure like large dams, roadways, railways, airports, and for expanding urban construction. For them, promoting material infrastructure is the essence of their existence. They maintain that material infrastructure's construction is key to transforming people's social and economic conditions. One may ask, why is the construction of infrastructure so much of a concern for improving people's lives? Or how have the lives of people whom state development agencies wanted to uplift been impacted by

material infrastructure? Who are the affected people? And what is this material infrastructure that these financial institutions are providing loans for? These are fundamental questions bothering researchers from the frontier of the periphery of the peripheries known as India's Northeast frontier. Moreover, there are complex and less-attempted discourses between gender and infrastructure in policy and gender studies on development in India's Northeast.

According to Ferguson and Harman (2015), infrastructure refers to large scale projects in water, energy, sanitation, transport, and ICT. Meanwhile, for Kikon (2019a), infrastructure in the Northeast frontier refers to aspirations for good roads, bridges, schools, and clinics in which infrastructure is firmly held in the framework of improving the economy, mobility, healthcare, and communication. However, looking at the current debates in South Asia and Southeast Asia, infrastructure policies' planning and implementation lies within power and politics, neglecting the space of social relationships, gender relations, community values, and norms and beliefs. In 2012, the World Bank published the *World Development Report 2012* (WDR) titled *Gender Equality and Development* with a goal of gender equality that would lead to better development outcomes. The report was an outcome of the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. It showed that there were disparities in earning and productivity among men and women, which was the key thing it would address (Lin 2011). Robert B. Zoellick, former President of the World Bank Group (2007-12), opined in the foreword of WDR (2012) that the lives of girls and women had changed as compared to the last quarter century in education, labour force, and life expectancy. He added that there was still limited growth in gender equality both in developed and developing countries and that 'women still fall behind in earning and productivity, and in the strength of their voices in society.' Zoellick gave suggestions for overcoming these challenges as a 'pattern of progress and persistence in gender equality'. The WDR (2012) report proposed plans to show a kind of inclusivity rather than exclusivity between gender and infrastructure. However, regardless of the policies,

programmes and their implementation, there are always differences between the promises and delivery of proposed infrastructure policies. For instance, Ferguson and Harman (2015) critically analyse WDR (2012) using a feminist perspective to interrogate the intersection between gender and infrastructure. They found that WDR (2012) lacked gender awareness in the process of constructing infrastructure and its approaches to gender equality and women's empowerment was narrow. They pointed out that the report did not call for more space for women in decision making, participation, and implementation. Their analysis showed that the mainstream gender debate is lost in current infrastructure narratives. They pointed this out from an analysis of four sectors: transport, energy, water, and ICT. They concluded by suggesting that WB should acknowledge its limitations and problems and should correct the philosophy behind its infrastructure projects in the early stages.

It has been over eight years since WDR (2012) was published. However, the agenda along with ecological feminist criticism is still relevant for understanding the interlinking between gender and infrastructure. This has led to a (re)thinking of the gender discourse on material infrastructure and development policies as development agencies boast that their ideals are reducing gender gaps in capital, boosting economic and social opportunities, and amplifying women's voices in societies. For a very long time, infrastructure policies were male-centric, patriarchal, autocratic, and capitalist. For example, in the case of ongoing large dam projects in Arunachal Pradesh like the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project, the Dibang Hydropower Project, and the Demwe Hydropower Project, the affected indigenous women and poor migrant farmers' voices have been silenced and they have limited 'public hearing' space for assessments, resettlement policies, and compensation. Besides, during the public hearings for these projects as these were mandatory for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), development agencies/donors conducted a public hearing in a bureaucratic manner rather than listening to the voices of the affected people at the personal level (Menon 2020). As

Menon (2020) stated in her extensive ethnography work in Arunachal Pradesh, '…women have limited or no space to demand economic, social, cultural and environmental rights to determine their future.'

In Manipur's context, when it comes to connectivity by roads and transportation infrastructure, Arora and Ziipao (2020) show through their ethnographic accounts of a truck's journey carrying commercial goods between Dimapur (Nagaland) and Imphal (Manipur) that goes through internal roads, border highways, and the hill-valley division of different ethnic frontiers. These authors found that there was a stark contrast between the hill-valley area in road maintenance despite its importance and necessity. Manipur considers roads as a symbol of hope, prosperity, security, and peace as it is a landlocked frontier having limited air and rail connectivity. However, coming to the accounts of heavy truck drivers' experiences as illustrated by Arora and Ziipao through their ethnography, they faced frisking by the state police, army personnel, militants, and different ethnic groups for security and taxes, both legal and illegal.

But when it came to women, they experienced more challenges, for instance sexual abuse and molestation by multiple actors and agencies while frisking. As Arora and Ziipao (2020) state, 'Many women find this journey very discomforting, and some have reported sexual abuse and molestation by security personnel and militants.' As Porter (2008) maintains, transportation planning from the gender perspective involves improving mobility, connectivity, and communication in rural areas, which then could also improve women's conditions in a non-transport intervention such as fetching or supplying drinking water, carrying firewood, and engaging in farming and livelihood activities.

Women's engagement in rural road construction and maintenance is a concern that has been neglected in connectivity spaces (Gonzales et al. 2018). For example, Widana (2018) illustrated that tribal women in the Papua New Guinea (PHG) Highlands did not receive payments for road construction, unlike men. Like men, tribal women who were engaged in road construction had the same necessities and needed to buy or spend for their families and household needs. Concomitantly,

there are gender gaps in participation in the construction of rural roads, where men are more concentrated as they provide technical assistance and heavy machine activities. In contrast, women are engaged in removing material from road embankments, which shows a division of labour depending on gender. Moreover, the contractors or donor agencies in PHG rural road construction hired or employed workers through community leaders. This is a patriarchal society and they focus to employed only men. Besides, donors and development agencies are only concerned with completing the work rather than acknowledging or understanding the community's social relationships, which creates a bottleneck in the projects (Widana 2018). Similarly, Rahman (2019) warns that cases in India's Northeast frontier infrastructure projects like roads and bridges for connectivity for borderland communities could lead to potential chokepoints if executed without considering socioeconomic and political institutions' concerns. So, we can assume that constructing material infrastructure is directly associated with extracting resources embedded with social, economic, political, and environmental values.

As mentioned earlier, resources, politics, and material infrastructure are important for all development agencies/donors as a means of accumulating wealth and improving the economy. However, when we look from the perspective of the affected communities, resources, politics, and material infrastructure are often contested politically, economically, socially, environmentally, and culturally. Bauhardt (2013) raises fundamental questions about gender relations with the politics of natural resources: who will access those resources, use those resources, and govern those resources? Bauhardt adds that there is inequality in the distribution of natural resources, and the decision to grant such resources was in favour of those in positions of power according to hierarchies. In fact, resource politics and gender relations are unexplored or have seen limited academic attempts, especially in academic discourse on the Northeast frontier. However, Dolly Kikon's (2019b) ethnographic work, *Living with Oil & Coal* shows the politics of resource extraction in the foothills

between Assam and Nagaland. The study shows that the borderland communities are contesting the ownership of the resources, in which the state has invited national and international corporations to extract and accumulate wealth. The space of extracting minerals from mines is controlled by powerful Naga men in collaboration with politicians, landowners, village councils, prominent business families, and with non-Naga coal traders and agents. Further, there are complex activities between the state and non-state actors over the resources as the global market expands in these foothills for extracting oil and coal. Moreover, the ownership of resources among the federal states of Nagaland and Assam is completely different from what the Constitutional provisions provide for the ownership of resources. For Nagaland, Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution provides special status to protect land, resources, Naga customary laws, and religious and social practices. In Assam, apart from the autonomous areas, there is no such provision for protecting natural resources as they all belong to the state. Meanwhile, in Nagaland, there is a complex and unresolved dispute over Article 371(A), especially from a gender and resource perspectives. From a Naga feminist perspective, Kikon (2017) argues, 'if the Naga customary law is the foundation for the protection of lands, water, forests and resources, then, the gender rights and equality becomes meaningless.' Many Naga feminists feel Naga customary laws are rooted in a male-centric philosophy that negates women's participation, or in other words, women are excluded from the state's decision making. Kikon adds that the denial of rights to Naga women is nothing new as it has been going on politically for a while; for example in 2017, violence erupted in Nagaland over a demand for 33 per cent reservations for women in Urban Local Bodies' elections as mandated by the Nagaland Municipal Act. However, this measure was vehemently opposed by tribal leaders who said that 33 per cent reservation for women was non-customary, and there was lack of consensus between societies, legal experts, and local organisations while implementing this decision. Thus, one may ask, what is the meaning of women living under customary law if the law undermines

their rights and privileges? If the customary law is meant to protect land, rivers, forests, and water, then again, where is justice for women in resource planning, especially when it comes to the extraction of resources and building infrastructure?

Analysing the nexus between gender relationships and customary laws, resources, and politics is way beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth mentioning that (re)constructing customary laws that could interpret the Constitution is essential for understanding the needs of women, widows, children, differently abled, and elderly persons from the perspective of a global market-driven accumulation of wealth. According to Diala (2017), 'Living customary law is best perceived as a product of people's adaptation of custom adaptation to socio-economic changes. Though development agencies and international financial institutions may consider their policies as well-crafted documents for planning, processing, and implementation.

BRIEF CONTEXT FOR THE MAPITHEL DAM

The Mapithel dam or the Thoubal Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project is considered one of the main agendas for driving economic growth for the people of Manipur. The project is administered by the Irrigation and Flood Control Department (IFCD) of the Government of Manipur (GoM) in Kamjong district in Manipur. It is popularly known as Mapithel dam because of its location in the Mapithel area, which mainly consists of seven villages: Chadong, Ramrei Aze, Lamlai/Ramrei Khullen, Lamlai/Ramrei Khuno, Louphoung, Riha, Thoyee, and Nongdam (Tangkhul). All these villages belong to indigenous Tangkhuls. Tangkhuls are one of the major Naga communities in Manipur found mostly in Addition: Ukhrul district and Kamjong district. linguistically, the Tangkhuls speak the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Shangrei 2014; Vashum 2014). Like the patriarchal system in other indigenous

communities, the Tangkhuls also practice customary laws based on patriarchal structures. All the political, social, economic, religious, and cultural concerns are inherited and governed by the village's chief known as Awunga and his clan-based village council known as Hangva (Varah 2013).

In 1976 a feasibility project report was submitted to the Central Water Commission by the Manipur State Planning Department and IFCD assisted by the Geological Survey of India (GSI) and the Centre for Soil Materials Research Station (CSMRS). In 1980, or four years after its submission, the Planning Commission in the Government of India (now known as NITI Aayog) accepted the feasibly report for a 66 metre high, 1,074 metre long, and 1,215 hectare dam reservoir scheduled to be completed by August 1987 with the aim of providing drinking water, flood control, irrigation, and power generation. With the Planning Commission's approval in 1980, the project started, led by India's leading infrastructure companies such as Ansal Properties & Industries Limited, New Delhi and Progressive Construction Limited, Hyderabad. However, in the span of four decades (1980-2020) the dam failed to meet its primary objectives. The government attempted multiple times to commission the dam, but it continued to fail due to demands by affected communities for resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R), non-payment of compensation for land acquisition, and delay in funds released by the Centre. Therefore, to speed up its construction, GoM agreed to the R&R plans in 1993 and set up a team headed by the Hill Commissioner to monitor the rehabilitation programme and to avoid delays in the construction of the dam. But then again, R&R plans (1993) failed to compensate the affected people and provide the required amount on time; they also did not provide alternative livelihood opportunities. GoM again revised the plans and re-introduced R&R plans in 1998 and 2011 by agreeing to a memorandum to provisions for setting up a school, hospital, roads, a commercial market, post offices, banks, electricity, jobs, and other essential services for the affected families and persons. However, instead of providing essential services and needs, repeated objections

by project-affected communities led to the signing an agreement. which later became a mere document instead of an implementation document. The affected Tangkhul communities felt betrayed as no promises were delivered. Moreover, GoM used armed forces or state machinery to subdue their voices in organising protests, bandhs, strikes, and agitations to demand basic needs. In fact, the R&R plans of 1993, 1998, and 2011 have not only delayed providing compensation but have also not provided alternatives livelihood opportunities. They have also led to social disintegration, disharmony, and conflicts amongst affected communities. Struggling to live for decades while losing their land, forests, rivers, and livelihood options had a deep impact on the psychological upbringing of some of the groups. They were to receive compensation so they could give up their struggle, but this did not happen. Some of the groups continued to demand things agreed to in the memorandum of agreement. These differences among the affected communities brought a division between 'us and them', and this weakened the people's movement demanding basic services and needs. GoM and infrastructure corporations used this 'social disintegration' as a tool to speed up their work and avoid activities that hamper construction.

Nevertheless, in 2014, project-affected communities, both upstream and downstream, reorganised and continued opposing the dam by involving various social institutions such as church leaders, village authorities, youth organisations, women's organisations, and other civil society organisations (CSOs) like the Mapithel Dam Affected Village Organisation (MDAVO), the Mapithel Dam Multipurpose Project Displaced Village Committee (MDMPDVC), and the Joint Action Committee on Resettlement and Rehabilitation of Chadong Village (JAC on R&R Chadong village). Among the local organisations in the upstream, MDAVO has been a flag-bearer for anti-large-dam people's movements and is representative of the affected Mapithel communities. MDAVO has been raising various issues in front of development stakeholders to inform them of their failure on the agreed terms and conditions and the poor implementation of

R&R 1993, 1998, and 2011. Besides, the organisation has also drafted various memoranda and submitted them to the Prime Minister of India, Chief Minister of Manipur, United Nations' Rapporteur, the National Green Tribunal (NGT), and to different political parties for reviewing the R&R plans, urging them to fulfil the agreed terms and conditions and also to increase their compensation. They have been opposing the commissioning of the dam as the affected Tangkhuls' lives and well-being have not improved; instead they have been experiencing hardship and struggle in livelihood, rehabilitation, and resettlement which were not implemented fairly, and compensation was distributed in a piecemeal manner for an extended period.

In January 2018, the Water Resource Minister of Manipur issued a press statement in the local newspaper that the dam would be finalised and commissioned in March 2018 by the Prime Minister of India and urged the people not to engage in any activities that may hamper the inauguration. However, the affected communities continued to vehemently oppose the commissioning of the dam without fulfilling the agreed terms on their environmental, social, and cultural concerns. They also protested as they had not been given the remaining compensation, and the rehabilitation programmes had not been reviewed. Irengban Arun, media advisor to the Chief Minister of Manipur stated, 'We [development stakeholders] felt that it was not right to inaugurate the project until all its components are complete' (Saikia 2018). As a result, the project has been on hold (even at the time of writing this article). Even four decades after its construction, it is still unclear why development agencies showed muscle power in dealing with the poor affected Tangkhul communities. Why should development agencies proclaim themselves as champions of infrastructure policies while uprooting people socially and culturally?

JOURNEY TO ETHNOGRAPHY

In June 2018, I started my ethnographic fieldwork in Chadong and Lamlai/Ramrei villages. I started my journey in these villages because they are considered to be the villages most affected by the Mapithel dam. Their churches, community halls, schools, playgrounds, cemeteries, paddy fields, gardens, roads, rivers, and forests were submerged by the dam's water. I was not expecting to see endless water on the tops of the surrounding hills. A few years ago, the people of Mapithel area were moving freely and could practise traditional food hunting anywhere, but now the villagers could not move freely, and their transportation was totally dependent on locally-made boats. During the ethnography, I often got stuck at my host's house for weeks. Due to heavy monsoon rains I was not able to meet any research participants, and occasionally some of the participants kept postponing our meetings as they were engaged in livelihood activities. Besides, it was difficult to get a boat to cross the water. Whenever there was continuous rain, I often looked at the rain from my window and felt that it would never stop. I waited patiently for many days wishing for the rain to stop.

One Thursday evening, while I was standing on the verandah, I saw Ani carrying some leftover food and vegetables towards the pigpen to feed her pigs. Without hesitation, I ran towards her as she did not have an umbrella. While feeding the pigs, she said, 'I have been feeding these two pigs for a long time for the coming Christmas celebration. Last year, my pigs got sick and died, and I did not have much money for Christmas celebrations. I pray that that will not happen again.' In fact, for the last month I had been seeing Ani feeding her pigs every morning and evening regardless of rain, sunshine, or cold. I could see her dedication in rearing her two pigs as part of her income.

After weeks of heavy rain, I saw a clear morning sky and without waiting for a second, I decided to take my chances and visit Old Chadong village. My primary purpose was meeting the village chief

and listening to his story about their struggles and people's movements against Mapithel dam. While going to the Old Chadong main boat stopped at Lamlai Khullen I realised. As I reached the boat stop, I did not see anyone waiting nor were any boats available. For a moment, I thought that I might not get a chance to cross the dam's waters. But then, as I walked on the shore, I saw a small signboard in the distance with a phone number for hiring boats. I called the owner, but an automatic computer-generated voice message said, 'The number you are calling is switched off or not reachable at the moment. Please try again later.' I did not expect to hear this as I had waited for a long time for the rain to stop. I re-dialled the number, but I listened to the same automatic voice message. I sat down and looked at the endless water. While sitting there, I felt helpless because I did not want to return without meeting the village chief, neither did I have a boat to cross the water.

I thought of how the affected families managed if there was a crisis. Where did they buy their groceries? Did they receive compensation? Why were they still living there despite rising water levels? As I was thinking all this, my phone rang. It was the same hiring boat number. The man from the boat said he had switched off his phone and asked me why I had called. I told him the purpose of my visit. He accepted my request, and said it would take him 20 to 30 minutes to pick me up. He was in the middle of fishing, and I had no choice but to accept. While waiting, I saw a boy and a girl heading towards me. It was surprising to see five- and six-year-old kids walking towards the boat stop while none of the villagers were around. When they reached the boat stop, I asked them where they were going. They looked a little shy and uncomfortable. I tried to ask again because their parents might be searching for them; I did not expect to see these kids playing around in these areas. At last, they told me that they had finished their school for the day and were expecting for their parents to come and pick them up by boat. I informed them that I was also waiting for the boat, but it seemed they were not concerned about my waiting and continued playing. While waiting for more than 30 minutes, a small boat with a

carrying capacity for five people arrived. Incidentally the boat driver was the children's father.

After long hours of walking and waiting, I finally crossed the water dam and reached the village chief's house at around 12:45 pm. But I found that the village chief had already left for hunting and would be returning extremely late in the evening or at night. I did not have a choice but to wait, and at the same time I had to get back to the boat and walk back to my host's house before dark. I moved back to the boat stop and was heading back towards my host's house. On reaching the boat stop, I could not find the driver. When I called him he told me that he had already left for fishing. He told me that it would not be possible to pick and drop me, and suggested that I should wait for the community boat at around 4 pm. I still had to wait three hours for the community boat. I was disappointed and helpless, so I sat on one of the two boats and tried to assess my situation. I realised that I had failed in my purpose for the day. I realised, since it was a challenging task just meeting one person, how hard finding transportation must be for those living there. And what were the challenges of walking on muddy hilly roads? As I was sitting on the boat, I saw a woman in the distance arranging her bamboo boat for rowing. I ignored whatever she was doing. I thought that she was planning to cross the dam, but then she started rowing towards me. On reaching, she asked, 'What are you doing here?' I replied that I had come to meet the village chief, but he was not available, and I was waiting for the boat to cross the water. She may have thought that I had come from *tampak* (referring to Imphal) searching for some job. I asked her, where she was going. She said, 'I am going to collect the fishnet that I kept in the morning.' I asked her whether she was afraid to ride a shabby bamboo boat in a large body of water? She replied, 'What can we do? We have to adapt to these challenges to survive from this water dam,' and then she rowed away in her bamboo boat.

A few hours later, I also took a boat and crossed the dam and walked back to my host's house. My day had not been successful, but I recalled the fisherwoman's words. I had to accept my fate and saw the

possibility of my ethnography fieldwork taking an informal turn. The fisherwoman's words came to my thoughts frequently and this led me to seek more stories about affected women and their lived experiences. The following paragraphs are narratives of affected women.

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFFECTED TANGKHUL WOMEN

It was after the Sunday Church service that I had an opportunity to sit and listen to the stories of Awon, Ashim, Atim, Aphy, and Aton at Aton's residence (all names have been changed to protect identities). We sat in the kitchen, and Aton served us fresh cucumbers from her garden along with Wai Wai noodles. Gladly, I stretched out my hand to take the cucumbers, while the others were chit-chatting. A few minutes later, Aton formally introduced us as she knew the reason for my visit. It was on her invitation that the four women who are members of a self-help group (SHG), church leaders, members of a women's society, farmers, and teachers had come. As we all sat in Aton's kitchen, Awon aged about 45, sitting near the *meithalung* (traditional cooking firewood stove) asked me in a low guttural voice, '*Nawui hi governmentli misangrala?* (Will you be submitting this to the government?)' As soon as I heard this, I held back as I felt that this question was because of mistrust between the development agencies and affected people. Moreover, as soon as Awon asked her question, she and the other women laughed. I was surprised to hear them laugh. I was aware that the affected people I planned to interview thought that I may be representing a government agency or some other group.

Initially, I could not understand why they were laughing, till one of them informed me that, in the past, the development agency had conducted surveys for resettlement, rehabilitation, and compensation and had not returned to help the affected people. For this reason, they considered all government activities a witticism. I promptly shared the purpose of doing ethnographic work and reminded them that I was

a student and researcher, not affiliated to any NGO or government agency. By now, they had accepted me and willingly participated in my study. I assured them that I would maintain ethical considerations by keeping their identities safe and avoid any social, political, and cultural interference. Atim said, '*Katamnao bingwui exam katha khava khikha mathamanei* (If it is for the purpose of student examination then, we do not have a problem.)'[2] I believe affected people have been politicised for a very long time and being part of an ethnography work is a sensitive issue. For instance, some affected people were not willing to participate as their community had disintegrated into groups with some in favour of development agencies and others who were against it. This division among the communities led to insecurity, mistrust, and conflict. Atim asked, '*Nana khangahan chili ithumli sakaza leila?* (Would your questions affect us?)' I did not have structured questions but I wanted to listen to their stories about their struggles, hardships, and injustices because of the construction of the large Mapithel dam.

Everyday Lives after Mapithel Dam's Construction

I tried to ask the group of five women sitting in the kitchen, '*Nathum wui mirin kathada okthui mameili khala?* (How are you all living/surviving?)' I asked this as a kind of greeting as we were meeting for the first time, and this type of question is often seen as a greeting amongst Tangkhuls. When someone greets like this, it is customary to respond with what they are going through. They all paused and stayed silent for a while. Earlier, they were discussing something about SHG funds. I was not able to understand in detail, but I assumed that they were planning to distribute their funds for livelihood activities. After a moment, Awon broke the silence by asking, *'Kathada hangshi khalei? Ningsaza lakka ithum ringkhavai apong malei thuda* (How should I tell? We are deeply sad for we do not have any opportunities to live.)' Awon said:

> Initially, we were not aware of this large dam, and we considered it as something that will bring good fortune. We thought

> that building a large dam of this kind will bring magnificent opportunities for poor people like us. In the beginning, the government informed us that it would compensate the full amount of money, and also promised land to build quarters, even ensuring jobs to each family who had sacrificed for Mapithel dam. But now, looking at our present living conditions, there is no more land, forests, rivers, or plots to build houses. There is no more space for a paddy field, no more space for vegetable gardening. Even our children are not getting jobs. There are so many unimaginable things, and we are dissatisfied with the government and are disheartened living like this.[3]

Awon's narrative connected me to my ethnography fieldwork. I had seen that their paddy fields were covered with dam water, and there was a scarcity of alternative livelihood opportunities. As I walked around the village for more than two months, I saw a few villagers who had resettled in the new resettlement area, but most of the time I felt like no human beings existed there. Most of the villagers chose to move out to live in the nearest towns or cities like Imphal, Ukhrul town, and Yangaingpokpi. I observed that a few villagers attended church services for the celebration of *mangkham phanit* (festival after rice planting). The Tangkhuls' celebrate mangkham phanit right after planting paddy to thank god for providing land, water, rivers, forests, and rains for their paddy plantation. This is also pleading to the almighty for providing protection to their planted paddy. For the Tangkhuls, mangkham phanit is one of the most significant festivals for it connects them to their natural resources, customs, and cultural as well as spiritual beliefs. There are many forms of mangkham phanit celebrations, depending on the village, space, and time. Some of the villages celebrate it by holding prayer services, community feasting with pork and beef, and social and cultural events. However, regardless of the different celebration, mangkham phanit is celebrated to signify that they have planted paddy and are invoking god's protection so that they can harvest a lot of food grains.

Celebrating mangkham phanit for the affected Chadong and Lamlai/Ramrei villages has become unusual since the water dam has been filling their fields and also the top of the hilly frontiers. The affected Chadong village was once known for an abundance of rice in Tangkhul and neighbouring villages. It was popularly known as the 'rice bowl' of Tangkhuls while the affected Lamlai/Ramrei village was known for its vast land, forests, and rivers among Tangkhul villages. Loosely translated, Ramrei means 'village with vast land'. Chadong and Lamlai villages were no longer what they were known for, for they had completely lost their land. As one of the participants, Ashim said,

> There was a time when we had a large area of land for cultivation. We planted varieties of vegetables and fruits. We had planned to explore more types of fruits and vegetables, but then at that time we did not have much money to invest in buying seeds. Moreover, we also did not know how to get seeds from the government. After we lost our paddy fields and forests, the government is providing free seeds. We can get them from the government office by showing our Aadhar card for agriculture and horticulture products. However, at this time we are in a helpless situation for we cannot do anything without agricultural products.[4]

Aphy shared her story along with Ashim. She asked, '*Naoda ithum wui naongara wui thotli kathada ringvani khala chang*? (How will our children survive?).' Aphy continued,

> As of now, we do not have anything to cultivate food grains. We are facing difficulties in engaging in daily wage work. I cannot imagine what my children's future will be. It is not just that we have lost our paddy fields, we have also lost our livelihood. Previously, I harvested a lot of ginger, bananas, and guavas in the garden and sold them in *keithei* [Imphal] for my children's education. But now, looking at the present condition, I feel that the government came to our areas like a thief and silently seduced us by giving us a lot of false assurances. We are not getting basic needs that we were supposed to receive.[5]

Affected people were vulnerable to be deceived hearing the gospel of development such as good houses, jobs, electricity, drinking water, flood control, schools, hospitals, and good roads at the cost of sacrificing their land, forests, rivers, water, and cultural and spiritual resources. Regardless of communities, ethnicities, nation, or state, everyone needs basic services, but when the promises and deliveries contradict and disturb the well-being of the communities, affected communities start mistrusting development agencies. As Aphy said, 'There was no help coming from the government even when we were relocating from the submerged areas to the new resettlement sites.' She looked at me with a disappointed look and recounted,

> We are not like others who had a lot of men in their families to carry heavy luggage, utensils, wood, firewood, and other material for the construction of new houses. We could not easily cross the *ngayi* [referring to the water dam as a lake]. Now, we have to ride a boat every time while crossing the dam, and it is not free of cost.

It was also inconvenient for me to hire a boat from a waiting shed (small market) to go to Old Chadong village. I hired a boat for 10-15 minutes for Rs 800, and I felt that I was being overcharged. I wondered how affected people could effort to hire a boat. As Atim rightly pointed out, 'Riding a boat is all about money and business for their survival.' She added,

> We had never imagined that we would ride a boat as transportation for buying rice and salt. We are getting just Rs 200-Rs 300 selling cucumber, and we spend more than we earn. Because of this, we have to be more cautious whenever we plan to buy household goods. It is not just my family that is being careful; every one of us is. There is also a community boat that runs in the morning and evening that costs less, but then we cannot depend on it during an emergency.

The participants informed me that riding a bamboo boat is not a culture or daily practice in this hilly Mapithel area. Before the dam came up, there was no practice of rowing a boat for attending church

services, women's meetings/gatherings, or buying groceries. Riding a boat is a new norm for them. According to the participants, they were scared of riding and rowing bamboo boats; they were scared of crocodiles or giant snakes living in the water who could easily eat/swallow them as they did not know how to swim, and they were not experts in rowing a boat. But then, slowly, they had learnt how to row a boat as they did not have a choice. Gradually, some women started rowing boats for catching fish near the river bank. Most of the fisherwomen and men put the fishnet around the bank in the morning and left it for the day, and collected the fish that got trapped in the fishnet at sundown for their meal.

Protest Experiences by Women

I may have a limitation communicating the women's daily struggles and their lived experiences, but I strongly feel that the affected Tangkhul women are experiencing more than a sense of dissatisfaction; they feel betrayed and helpless in blindly trusting the promises of development. Therefore, project-affected villages and persons have organised different agitations and protests to demand the fulfilment of a memorandum of agreement (MoA), compensation, and alternative livelihoods. As Ashim said,

> On 23 March 2018 the Water Resources Minister, Government of Manipur announced that the Prime Minister of India would inaugurate Mapithel dam. We were shocked to hear this announcement about commissioning the dam as some of us, like me, have not received compensation and have been protesting and demanding compensation and other livelihood opportunities. But on the other side, they were planning to commission the dam. So, we along with 20 women from our village went down to Nongdam village by boat to join a protest at the inauguration site. We started shouting together, 'No dam, no dam.' Whenever we shouted, police and army personnel became aggressive and threatened us with guns and tear gas.

As Ashim was narrating this, Aton shared her experience of participating in the protest. She recounted,

> Police and army personnel were standing in front of us with their big guns. They did not want us to come near the inauguration site. We also did not like the government officials passing through the road for the inauguration. So, we along with some local organisations blocked the road. They fired tear gas to disperse us and also tried to arrest some of our women, men, and local organisations' leaders. But we continued to confront them by shouting, 'No dam, no dam' because we did not want to have a forced inauguration.[6]

Listening to these stories reminded me of a picture of a Lungmila from Laphong village published in the local newspaper *Hueiyen News Services* on 3 November 2008. She was lying with blood on her face, and two women were lifting her; she had been injured by tear gas. Remembering the picture and listening to these stories, I could not imagine how powerful the development agencies were that treated affected people using the state's machinery. There are several incidents where Tangkhul women were instrumental in organising or mobilising protests. As Aton said,

> Sometimes, I feel like we are being used for demonstrations and strikes. I know that it is right to protest, but whenever there is some problem in our village, they (referring to village authorities who are mostly run by men) inform the Shinao Long (women's organisation) to mobilise people for protests. Even last month [referring to May 2018], army personnel came to our village at night and walked around. As sometimes crime is committed by our villagers, we women mobilised all the villagers to come out. We hit the iron electric post with stones so that it produced a sound like *klang klang klang* to alert us. For us, the sound of a striking electric post is an emergency signal, and all the villagers have to come with *maila sharlakha* [torches made with bamboo] in the dark.

During my ethnography fieldwork, I found that the Indian Reserved Battalion (IRB) was posted between Lamlai/Ramrei Khullen and Khanou to look after the dam's construction. While security personnel were stationed in these areas, they blocked the road and frisked everyone to check villagers who passed through their army gate. The villagers felt insecure by their presence; they could not cross their land freely for their daily agricultural activities and other work. Many times, security personnel tried to arrest some villagers who had been vocal against the injustices meted out to them due to the construction of the dam. But when IRB left the villages in 2015, there were fewer cases like these.

Struggle for Land Resettlement and Compensation

When it comes to land distribution or allocating property, the Tangkhuls have customary laws based on patriarchal practices in which all the land or property is inherited by men. Participants in this study were aware that they will not inherit land or property based on the Tangkhuls' customary practices. However, when it comes to projects affecting compensation and land distribution for resettlement, the participants expressed something that moved beyond patriarchal practices. As Ashim said,

> We women are equally affected like the men of this village. We women are resettling like the men who are relocating because of the dam. It is not only men in these affected villages who will be getting married, even women from this village will be getting married. Therefore, we women have the right to receive compensation. I do not understand why the government is taking women to be less than men. *Ithum shinao bing mikumo maning mala?* [Are we women not human beings?] Sometimes, I do not understand my culture that prefers everything for men. Why is the dam compensation only for men? Why is the land distribution only for men?

Ashim's narrative shows that they have not received any compensation on behalf of women. The government compensated the head of the household, which is often a man. So, land distribution for resettlement was male-centric. According to Awon,

> We are not happy with the government, and even with the village authorities as they did not treat us equally. We know that the government is not listening; even our village authorities are not negotiating on our behalf. We would have been happy if had they treated us equally. When it comes to dam compensation, village authorities and leaders never invited us for the meetings, and they also did not consult us. They considered us to be weak. But when it comes to protesting or any kind of agitation, they are the first to invite us and mobilise us. *Shinao bing hi sifalak kahainei. Athumna full mamilala, ithumli tangkhai mangla minishi chiva ningshi nara. Shiki (paisa) naola mami chidala* [We women are in a grievous situation. Even if they could not give us the full amount, at least half the amount would have been nice. But then, even one paisa was not given].

LEARNING FROM AVA KHON (MOTHER'S VOICE)

Drawing from ethnography, fieldwork, observations, and narratives of the participants supplemented by literature on gender and infrastructure, especially on women's lived experiences, I concluded that the four decades of constructing the material infrastructure—the Mapithel dam (since 1980)—led to the disintegration of the communities into different groups who were displaced in separate groups for resettlement. For four long decades, the Tangkhul Nagas had no choice but to sacrifice their land, forests, rivers, agricultural land, culture, and livelihood options for national economic interests. For them, development means sacrificial dissociation from their identity. Therefore, to reclaim their identity and right to ownership of land the communities resisted the dam along with local organisations

like MDAVO in front of development agencies/stakeholders in the form of protests, strikes, bandhs, and submitting memoranda. In this, Tangkhul women were prominent resistance members demanding their water rights, forest rights, and proper resettlement and rehabilitation policies. Although land in Tangkhuls Naga follows the patrilineal system, activities on land like agriculture and animal husbandry have been firmly embedded in the women. For instance, Aphy is a farmer and a member of an SHG in the village. Earlier, she harvested ginger, bananas, and guavas in her garden and sold them in the market. Aphy also sold cultivated food grains to support her family and her children's education. Therefore, losing agricultural land and other livelihood activities was a loss for women like her engaged in customary practices of farming. The adverse impact caused by the construction of the material infrastructure had no intention of selecting a particular gender, group, or community for hardships to help others. On the contrary, it is the bureaucratic and authoritative development policies, or capitalist development agencies/stakeholders, development donors/funders, and political elites who promote the construction of material infrastructure for accumulating wealth at the cost of periphery resources/locations and marginal groups especially women, children, differently abled, and elderly persons. It is development agencies/stakeholders who shut their eyes to one group and promote another.

Here, the fundamental question is: is there any significance of such development projects if they lead to exclusivity? This exclusivity shows that development promises and their delivery do not match and affected communities feel the 'infrastructure of injustice' (Ziipao 2020). For this reason, the affected Tangkhul women are demanding that all the agreed resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) programmes be fulfilled and are resisting through the spirit of 'no dam, no dam' and preventing its forced inauguration. However, development agencies/stakeholders continue to be employed by the state machinery to subdue the voices of marginal groups/communities to force the inauguration of the dam. Therefore, one may ask, should the marginal

groups/communities abandon their identity, resources, and well-being at the hands of crony capitalism? How do they continue to find a space for negotiations by taking into account all social factors? Here, the fundamental lines of inquiry are reconsidering and negotiating to move beyond material infrastructure and drawing closer to a peaceful society.

I would like to suggest a few ways by bringing out the concept *ava khon* (mother's voice), which is referred to as women's voices talking about their daily lives, struggles, hardships, and injustices that are the embodiment of their social, political, and cultural systems. For the Tangkhuls, ava khon is considered lovelier and sweeter than the voices/songs of *sampheirok* (common hawk cuckoo), *nasha* (dove), and *koktui* (common cuckoo). As one popular Tangkhul song *koktui khonla leishi* (lovely is the cuckoo song) neatly describes Ava Khon (Rev Sekshim Kasar):

Koktui khonla leishi,	(Lovely is the cuckoo song,
Sampheirok khonla leishi.	Sweet is the calling of the common hawk cuckoo.
Nasha khonla leishi,	So is the dove's cooing too,
Thalala ava wui khon leishimei.	Even so, lovelier is mother's sweet voic0.e)

Reading, hearing, and listening to this popular and inspirational song, Ava Khon is associated with wisdom, care, and the power of nurture. It represents a space for negotiations in conflict, healing, and peacebuilding. As Yangkahao (2020) explains the role of the *Pukreila* as a peacemaker. Pukreila refers to Tangkhul women marrying men from other villages/communities. When there is a fight between two or more villages, or there is a conflict, for example, over land, resources, and territories between a Tangkul woman's parents' community and husband's community, Pukreila steps in as a peacemaker to avoid any conflict or prevent war by listening to the voices of Ava Khon. As Yangkahao (2020) states, '…no one dared harm her; indeed, to harm a *Pukreila* was to dig one's own grave.' When it comes to

material infrastructure construction her pleas for compensation, land resettlement, and basic needs are not being heard. In a simple interpretation, Ava Khon is no longer sweet or lovely as portrayed in Tangkhul patriarchal societies; it is struggle, hardship, and injustice that are ingrained in the social system politically and culturally. As a matter of fact, Ava Khon represents the voice of hope and salvation from their struggles and injustices, but for development agencies, Ava Khon has limited space in development planning, processes, and implementation.

As I recalled the narratives, I remembered that the participants had said that development agencies did not consider women as equal to men for compensation, land redistribution for resettlement, and other basic needs. For instance, men who were 18 years received compensation whereas compensation for women was not considered, so they have been demanding and protesting for essential needs/services based on the importance of social relationships. For development agencies, giving importance to social ties is completely out of sync with accumulating wealth. As Kikon (2019a) suggests, aspirations of material infrastructure have power and politics and transforming the lives of people through infrastructure is giving importance to gender and social relationships.

Similarly, one may ask how social relationships are congruent with material infrastructure? The discussion on material infrastructure like roads, railways, hospitals, ICT, and large dams has been dominated by various actors like WB, ADB and other international financial institutions even in the discourse in development and policy studies. But what has been limited in the scholarship is the importance of social relationships and material infrastructure, as the participants of this study suggested that development agencies are mostly negotiating with only the village authorities and some local organisations, which are primarily male-centric social systems with very little participation by women. According to Ashim's narrative, '...it is not only men from these affected villages who are getting married, but even women from

this village will also be getting married. Therefore, we women have the right to receive compensation.'

Such narratives could be interpreted as meaning that, ifwomen received as much compensation as men, their struggle would have common goals. In other words, like men lose livelihood opportunities, women in the villages also lose their livelihood options. It has equally affected all regardless of gender, but what has been implemented by development agencies has selectively targeted men for their purpose of accumulating wealth. Also, it was found during the fieldwork that there were cases where the rehabilitation package was not concerned with the welfare of children, widows, and elderly persons. In the context of cultural and environmental sensitivity, they were losing their cultural significance that is related to their agricultural activities such as *luira phanit* (seed sowing festival), *mangkham phanit* (festival after sowing paddy), and *chumpha phanit* (celebration after harvesting). All these festivals are closely inter-linked with their nature, customs, beliefs, and norms. Celebrating these festivals brings a connection to the almighty and nurtures healthy social relationships. Similarly, in Chadong village, I found that villages had been divided into three clusters based on their location for resettlement and compensation, Old Chadong village which is currently located adjacent to the dam, and West Chadong and Chadong New Sites villages which are located uphill and across the dam.

Looking at the women's complex and sensitive experiences, one could ask, are development agencies concerned about the importance of social relationships? To find an answer to this question readers will need to consider listening to Ava Khon. One can also ask: do affected communities need to have social relationships? These are needed as more and more studies, particularly those based on environment and ecological concerns, identify social relationships as one of the key factors in a sustainable way forward. In other words, the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is what is expected for a peaceful society. One should also empathise with the affected

communities as they lose their culture while benefits are derived mostly by male-centric developed elites.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, constructing material infrastructure should move away from dominant patriarchal development policies and reconsider all social factors. Besides, resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) for displaced persons should also move beyond the dominant patrilineal system. Development agencies and all stakeholders should reconsider material infrastructure based on the importance of communities' social relationships. To do this, listening to Ava Khon could be a way of avoiding less adverse impacts and paying equal attention to gender and infrastructure. After all, no gender, community, or region is against development. But development that disintegrates communities and uproots them from their social and cultural identities and distorts livelihood options is not an option. These need to be reconsidered through Ava Khon. As affected Tangkhul women continue to demand a space for negotiating and demanding their basic services/needs, Atim quoting from the Bible during the meeting said, '*Polu mira, phalu samphangra* (Asked and it will be given, seek and you will find)' (Gospel of Matthew 7:7). Thus, constructing material infrastructure is providing equal attention to community social relationships and moving beyond material infrastructure.

NOTES

1. Ani (name changed), in telephonic conversation with the author, Mumbai, 10 September 2020.
2. Atim (name changed), in conversation with the author, Ukhrul, 22 July 2020.

3. Awon (name changed), in conversation with the author, Ukhrul, 22 July 2018.
4. Ashim (name changed), in conversation with the author, Ukhrul, 22 July 2018.
5. Aphy (name changed), in conversation with the author, Ukhrul, 22 July 2018.
6. Aton (name changed), in conversation with the author, Ukhrul, 22 July 2018.

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