

INDIAN EXPRESS CAMPAIGNS FOR BIG HYDRO IN NORTH EAST

Should a newspaper be allowed to twist facts for its misguided advocacy?

Starting from Oct 8, 2010, Indian Express (IE) ran a campaign AGAINST Jairam Ramesh and FOR big hydro projects in Arunachal Pradesh. Here is a brief account about that campaign, including critical comments. The only other newspapers that carried some such stories and edits during the period were the Jansatta and Financial Express, both being Express group publications.

Oct 8, 2010

Title: In note to PM, Jairam takes on Govt, puts question mark on N-E projects

This opening salvo from Ravish Tiwari starts straight with direct attack: "In unprecedented distancing from the government by a key minister and questioning its development works in the strategic North-East (NE) and Bhutan, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh...". These opening lines show that this is NOT a news story but a pandering of misguided & pro vested interest views. There was nothing unprecedented, nor distancing from the govt (what Ramesh was doing through the letter is exactly what a government functionary should be doing and his concern for environmental issues is exactly about his job as an environment minister), nor were these necessarily development works (past record of performance of such projects show this), but that does not bother IE.

Typically, then the story goes on to quote unnamed ministers, if at all these are quotes from the ministers, there is nothing in these quotes to that a minister would be ashamed or afraid to be named.

The story even speaks for the government, listen, "What's worrying for the government is that Ramesh has already made some assurances that could impact the pace of progress." This part of the story is not even a quote from some minister. So Indian Express equals the government? No doubt what is progress can only be defined by IE and no one else!

It is interesting that the IE reporter also has access to the minutes of the hydropower task force for NE that is denied under RTI (Right to Information Act) to SANDRP (South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People), hear this: "It is recorded in the minutes of a recent meeting of the task force on hydro power development."

Oct 9, 2010

Title: Jairam got facts wrong on N-E projects: Engineers

Next day, Mr Tiwari again quotes unnamed engineers, "But hydro-power project engineers associated with the Central Water Commission (CWC) of the Ministry of Water Resources expressed surprise, saying most of the 135 hydel projects in Arunachal, with a few exceptions, are of small capacity. In fact, 77 are less than 100 MW capacity and unlikely to cause much downstream impact in terms of riverine ecology." There is no doubt that CWC and MWR (Ministry of Water Resources) are essentially lobbies for large dams and large hydropower projects. Mr Tiwari and the un-named engineers he is quoting are pretty ignorant or are acting pretty ignorant when suggesting that projects less than 100 MW are "unlikely to cause much downstream impact in terms or riverine ecology". The riverine ecology is a an organic whole from upstream to downstream and a large dam (and most of these projects involve huge dams) in fact any dam would break that the organic link between upstream and downstream and thus have far reaching impact on the ecology, but Mr

Tiwari and his unnamed sources do not seem to have anything to do with science of riverine ecology or hydrology.

His next para further illustrates his ignorance or attempt in that direction, “These engineers pointed out that barring a few, all the projects there are run-of-river projects without the capacity to hold more than a day’s waterflow upstream. Run-of-river projects store water during the day to release it during a specified period, called peaking hours, to generate power. The entire cycle is usually repeated every 24 hours, thereby not storing water to choke the flow downstream.” Mr Tiwari also does not seem to know that Run of the river projects involve Long tunnels, upto 40 km long, and the water comes back to river only after coming out from such tunnels.

He makes another shocking misleading statement in next para, “The projects there will generate power close to the dam site, unlike many other run-of-river projects that divert water through tunnels to generation units several kilometres apart. In the latter case, reduction in waterflow can be felt before the water is again brought to the river several kilometres downstream from the dam. This is not the case with almost any of the projects in the North-East.” He should have found out before making such completely false statements that (to illustrate), the length of the tunnel for Teesta 3 project is 13.52 km, for Teesta 4 it is 6.65 km, for Teesta 5 it is 17.106 km and for Teesta 6 it is 11.5 km, all in Sikkim, which incidentally is part of NE India and he was talking about projects in NE in the above line. But facts for IE have never been particularly sacred, thus violating one of the basic principles of journalism.

Nor is he bothered if the existing hydropower projects in India actually generate peaking power or not. For his kind information, there is no existing assessment to show how much of the current generation from hydropower projects is generated during peaking hours, such an assessment has never been done.

Mr Tiwari scales new heights in pandering new knowledge about rivers when he says, “The Lower Subansiri and Lower Demwe projects singled out by Ramesh are run-of-river projects. What has amused engineers is the talk of adverse downstream impact on Jorhat and Sibsagar because of the Lower Subansiri project — the towns are on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra while the project is on the north side.” From NOW on, the north and south banks of rivers must behave differently, as desired by Indian Express.

May be, may be, in a report whose title screams that Jairam got his facts wrong should have got its own facts right?

Oct 9, 2010

EDIT: *Damming evidence*

IE does not believe in holding any punches, so it also put up this edit the same day. The edit starts with a shocking statement: “If there is one focus for the growing concern that UPA-II is characterised by policy incoherence, it could be the Union environment ministry.” This is shocking because the job of the environment ministry is supposed to work towards protecting the environment with as much or greater vigour than what the mining ministry does for mining or power ministry does for power projects. But we all are so used to an environment ministry that also acts as a rubber stamp or worse as an agent for environment destruction, that the current environment ministry that is taking their job slightly seriously, is not liked by the right wing national news paper and is ready to blow punches at its own credibility by writing such edits.

The edit ends with a certificate that has absolutely no merit: "Policy on the development of the Northeast was formulated with care, by an inter-ministerial group". Pray, sir, please explain what care and democracy was involved in formulating these big dam plans for NE? What was the involvement of people of NE? But IE has no time for such niceties, it seems.

Oct 13, 2010

[Title: Arunachal delegation seeks Krishna's help](#)

To keep the fire on, the paper repeats the quotes from an earlier report, this time, with the "news" that an Member of Parliament and two Members of Legislative Assemblies also met the External Affairs Minister. They have not yet bothered to report what the people of Assam, Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya or even Arunachal Pradesh feel about the projects, what the Assam Legislative committee has said, what the expert committee has said about Subansiri project and so on. This is worse than biased reporting.

Oct 14, 2010

[Title: Arunachal CM rebuts Jairam, sends SOS to PM: national interest at stake](#)

New ammunition is now available in the form of letter of Arunachal Pradesh CM to PM on this issue. Considering the nature of the events, it is a bit surprising that IE got this letter dated Oct 11 only on Oct 13, one assumes, since it is reported on Oct 14. It is though not a surprise that only IE got this letter, as also earlier Jairam Ramesh letter to PM! We are not saying that the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) is using the IE to beat up their own Environment Minister.

The letter from Arunachal Pradesh CM, the report claims, "Khandu has rebutted all of Jairam's arguments regarding basin studies, downstream impact assessment study and dam safety, and highlighted benefits to the downstream area, particularly to Assam." We have reviewed that letter and this is completely unfounded claim, but facts have never been a hindrance for some IE reporters, it seems. For example, the Arunachal Pradesh CM claims, "It was observed that as in case of Ranganadi HEP (Hydro Electric Project) (405 MW) the projects provide positive benefit to downstream areas." But the fact of the matter is that people of Assam have been feeling that the dam has accentuated flood disasters in Assam and even Assam CM (Chief Minister) have written to the Prime Minister about this. But more important is the claim about POSITIVE benefits to downstream areas, for which neither the Arunachal CM, nor the IE provides any support. One wished reporters of national newspapers were slightly more discerning in reporting such false claims as facts.

Oct 20 2010

[Title: Arunachal CM statement: Hydro projects won't affect downstream areas: Khandu to Jairam](#) This one is by Amitabh Sinha

In terms of pandering unfounded statements as if they were facts, this report takes the cake, or rather the whole bakery: "Khandu informed Jairam that concerns of Assam on the downstream impacts of hydropower projects in Arunachal were highly exaggerated since only two of the projects in his state actually involved construction of dams. The rest were run-of-the-river projects which offered no threat to people downstream." It seems the reporter Mr Sinha has no idea what a dam is and that everyone of the 100+ big hydro of Arunachal involves LARGE DAMS as defined by India's Central Water Commission, International Commission on Large Dams and

also the World Commission on Dams. This includes all the run of the river large hydropower projects of the Arunachal Pradesh and each one of them will have very very significant and far reaching social and environmental impacts both in the upstream and downstream of the project sites.

Oct 21, 2010

EDIT: [All cleared up?](#)

Ok, now we have competition for the award of bakery. The second edit in two weeks in this national newspaper that is increasingly reading more like a lobby for large dams says, "The answers should worry us. For one, the problem is that the environment ministry has been careless and unwise in its approach to the various relatively small projects that have been planned for Arunachal in an attempt to increase the region's prosperity and integration into the rest of the economy.. it's a question of India's political will..." So the newspaper decides to call the projects that involve huge dams, long tunnels, submerging forests, destroying hills, creating millions of cubic meters of muck and drying up rivers and displacing people and also creating massive methane emissions in some cases, as "relatively small projects". Nehru once called such thinking as megalomaniac, but Shekhar Gupta and company won't mind that I guess. There are many other misleading and Orwellian assumptions in this edit, but let us not detail them here. Mr Gupta, in true Orwellian manner, does not forget to say that these projects are also important for "human reasons".

Oct 22, 2010

Title: [On the backfoot, Ramesh writes to PM again: I am batting for strategic projects](#)

This is a back thumping report, using selective quotes from another letter Mr Ramesh is supposed to have written to PM. We of course do not have benefit of reading either this or his earlier letter that IE opened this series on Oct 8, 2010 nor would the IE make them public. IE had done similar campaign against Ramesh in Feb 2010 on the issue of GM crops. Then they did not get the back thumping opportunity, they claim they have got it this time, we hope that is not the case. Incidentally, it was wrong on the part of Mr Ramesh to expedite clearance for Lower Siang project, as quoted here, since that is not an environment minister's job. In fact that would go against the job of an environment minister.

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(An Edited version of this story has been published at:

<http://www.thehoot.org/web/home/story.php?storyid=4901&mod=1&pg=1§ionId=21&valid=true>)