

Tipaimukh Project: A protest trip of Sammilita Nari Samaj

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Sammilita Nari Samaj, the united women's front to resist violence against women visited Jokiganj in Sylhet, the most vulnerable area to be potentially affected by the Tipaimukh Project in India. A 15 member team of Sammilita Nari Samaj started from Dhaka by train to Sylhet, another 5 member team joined from Chittagong. On 12 August the 20 member team of Sammilita Nari Samaj visited Jokiganj and Sylhet to express their solidarity both with the local people and with the peoples' protesting against environmentally and ecologically destructive Indian intervention in transnational river all over Bangladesh.

For Sammilita Nari Samaj, a united women's forum active against violence against women insists that Tipaimukh project must also be seen as an act of 'violence' against women. Communities living in lower riparian areas are being deprived from water and ecological functions of the river flows are being disrupted that will cause immense harm for all life forms. The leaders of SNS felt it is very much against humanity, it will destroy the life and livelihood of people, and women of those areas will become vulnerable to all

kinds of violence. The journey of the SNS was to get a real feeling of the dangers by being on the spot.



It was an experience to see how the society perceives the threats to the country and the people. In the Kamalapur railway Station, we opened up our banner “Resist Tipaimukh Project, Save Bangladesh” and stood on the pathway where the incoming and outgoing train passengers were passing by. The curiosity was there among the people because for them a large number of women are standing with a banner at 9 pm in the train station. Some people came closer to us to ask what we were going to do. This group of people seem to know about Tipaimukh project and are concerned. After hearing that we were going to Sylhet and to Jokiganj, they appreciated very much and thanked us. However, some young boys passed by, looked at the banner and the women behind it and asked among themselves, ‘Hey, what is Tipaimukh?’ Maybe they thought if the women are protesting, Tipaimukh must be a name of a woman who is violated! This might be common among the younger generation, and they must not have any forum where such issues of national concern are discussed.

Before getting on the train, the activists of Sammilita Nari Samaj chanted slogans, “*Tipai mukhey diley band, desher hobey shorbonash*” (Tipai much project will destroy

Bangladesh) “Amar mati amar ma, morubhumi hobey na” (My soil, my land, cannot be a desert). It was a night journey by train. We reached Sylhet station at 5:28 am.

It was raining from the morning in Sylhet; heavy rain. But we have to go to Jokiganj by any means. By 9:30 am the rain slowed down and we started by three micro-buses. First we went to Amalshid – a point on the Barak river located at 20 km. upstream from the bifurcation point of the Barak river to the Surma-Kushiyara River. This point is used as the inflow boundary on the Barak River and receives all the water generated in the Barak sub-basin and therefore establishes the relationship between the discharge at Amalshid and Tipaimukh point on the Barak River. It was therefore very important for us to visit Amalshid point at the suggestion of our hosts in Sylhet.



It was still raining, but much less than before. We stood on the spot where we could see the barbed wire boundary line on the Indian side and the BDR check post on the Bangladesh side. The local people showed a tongue-shaped char on the Amalshid point – called “Jihba char”. In bangla 'jihba' means tongue. They said, this char is on the river border and demarcated as “No Man’s Land” but now the land is controlled by India. If it is No Man’s Land, then it does not belong to India either, but why it is grabbed and controlled by India. The local people said, our people are not allowed to go there. The Jihba Char is symbolically showing to us, that if such control by India is shown on such a small char land, then if they have control over the Barak river water flow, how Bangladesh can ever get her share. We asked people, what do you think of the Tipaimukh dam or project? Will it be good for you? The answer was “how can it be good to us. We will not have water.” These responses were enough to understand the impact on the people. The Experts are going to say the same thing in their expert language. But the summery will remain the same.

For a while, we forgot to enjoy the beautiful scene of the Surma-Kushiyara river sub-basin, originating in the Barak, Meghalaya Foothills and Tripura Hills. This spot also combines the collective sufferings of people on both sides who are going to be affected by such a project.

Jokiganj Upazilla is 12 km away from Amalshid and 96 km from Sylhet. We started by micro-bus but were interrupted by a broken bridge. We got down from the micro bus and crossed the bridge to take local transport called Tempoos. Again local people were very curious to see so many women coming from outside. Why? They asked. When we said

that it was to protest against the Tipaimukh project, people responded very positively. They welcomed us with their heart and soul.

The rain stopped by the time we reached Jokiganj at noon time. It is located just on the border of India and Bangladesh on the north-eastern side. In the beginning we had a formal exchange of opinions on the Tipaimukh project and why Sammilita Nari Samaj came to express solidarity with the people here. There were school teacher, human rights activists, journalists, and other socially important people. Being on the border area, they do not have good experience in the relationship with India. A School teacher said, two years back India threw mortars and student died. We did not forget that. And now they want to control our water! It is not acceptable to us. Other speakers said, we can foresee the destruction to our biodiversity, our livelihood and our environment. We want to protest unitedly, but unfortunately we do not have any leadership in this regard.

Seeing the women's groups come from Dhaka only for this issue is very significant for them. We have not seen so many women leaders together in Jokiganj!

After the discussion meeting we had a rally with banners and festoons. Our leaders chanted slogans. Everyone stopped on the way and greeted us. We went to the main market area and spent some time to explain the purpose of our visit and how to resist such a destructive project. People surrounding us looked happy because of the support from us but they looked helpless. Nobody is listening to them.



We left Jokiganj for Sylhet. On the way back, I looked around. It was water all around. As we know, Sylhet sub-basin comprises larger portion of northeast region of Bangladesh (83.5%). It is bordered by floodplain land from the Old Brahmaputra River on the West

and Barak River on the east, by uplands of the Meghalaya Foothills on the north and by uplands and Piedmont floodplains along the south. The interfluvial depressions, commonly known as Haors are the dominant features of this basin. One can see the rich diversity of the Haor areas on the road sides specially during the rainy season. It was fascinating to see ducks, doves and other birds and animals on the water and road side. The fishermen are sitting with their fishing nets to catch fish. When we chanted slogan, 'don't turn our lands into deserts', these are the places we are talking about. Same must be true for Manipuri, Mizos, Nagas and other people living in Indian side. If the water flow is stopped it will be a genocide. It is not an issue, whether the Tipaimukh project is a Hydro-electric project, Irrigation or a Barrage, the issue is of the control of water by India. Bangladesh will have to depend for water not on nature but on the political will of the Indian rulers. This is outrageous.

In Sylhet, we had another public meeting with representation of different groups fighting against the proposed Tipaimukh project. The speakers said, even a rickshawpuller in Sylhet knows about the negative impact of the Tipaimukh project. The local people are aware about it. So it is not a question of the Experts to tell us whether this project is good or bad. We understand from our own life experiences. Another speakers said, even a mad person will not believe that India is going to use billions of rupees for the benefit of Bangladeshi people, or even the local communities of India. However, now the resistance against Tipaimukh is very much necessary and it should be absolutely non-partisan. Partisan interest will destroy the movement, so social groups such as Sammilita and others should join together in the movement against Tipaimukh project. Women also need cross-border alliance to fight against big dams, barrages, hydro-electric projects, in short all profiteering interventions that destroys life and livelihood of the people.

It is easy to write for or against Tipaimukh by sitting in Dhaka. The Parliamentary Standing Committee visited India and were reassured that nothing bad will happen to Bangladesh. The farce is that they could not go to Tipaimukh, because of bad weather. Sammilita Nari Samaj after visiting Jokiganj and meeting the common people have become hundred times more concerned about the impact of the project. Let Mr. Abdur Razzak, MP and leader of the Parliamentary team on the Water Resources visit people in Amalshid and Jokiganj and see how they feel.

We know that the government or the opposition will not really work for the interest of the people. People must organize together. So Sammilita Nari Samaj is already on the street.

[The team members included 1. Farida Akhter, 2. Tahera Begum Joly, 3. Rowshan Ara Rusho, 4. Sultana Akhter Ruby, 5. Shima Das Shimu, 6. Rushia Begum, 7. Lovely Yasmin, 8. Firoza Begum, 9. Ayesha Bilkis Banu, 10. Jahanara Begum, 11. Pervin Akhter, 12. Taslima Naznin Surovi, 13. Shampa Basu, 14. Asma Aktar, 15. Purobi Chakraborty, 16. Naima Khaled, 17. Monika, 18. Monideep Bhattacharja, 19. Asma Babli, and 20. Umme Kulsum]

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