



A Historical Study of the Dumboor Hydro Project and its Impact on the Peoples of Tripura.

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ABSTRACT

The Dumboor Hydro Project, launched during the latter part of the twentieth century, constitutes an important milestone in the development of Tripura's energy sector. This research paper explores the historical circumstances surrounding the project, its execution, and its socio-economic consequences for the local population. Adopting a mixed-methods research approach, the study combines qualitative interviews and quantitative information to evaluate the project's contribution to meeting energy requirements and its wider effects on community welfare. The findings indicate that although the project has supported energy security and economic progress, it has also contributed to environmental deterioration and the displacement of local communities. This contrasting outcome highlights the need for a balanced model of infrastructure development that gives equal consideration to economic advancement and social justice. The paper concludes by presenting recommendations for future development initiatives in Tripura and comparable regions, stressing the significance of stakeholder participation and environmentally sustainable practices.

1. Introduction

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The development history of modern India includes numerous projects designed to stimulate economic advancement, strengthen infrastructure, and improve access to essential services. Following independence, dams and hydroelectric power stations became significant elements of the country's development strategy. Nevertheless, the advantages associated with large-scale infrastructure initiatives have not always reached every section of society equally. In many areas, dam construction has caused the relocation of local populations and the destruction of agricultural land, forests, and traditional livelihood resources. Tripura, situated in northeastern India, offers an important example of this historical challenge. The indigenous communities of the state established distinctive social and economic connections with the surrounding hills, rivers, forests, and agricultural valleys. Land served purposes beyond agricultural production, sustaining customary traditions, social relationships, cultural practices, and collective historical memories. The Dumboor Hydro Project, commonly linked with the Gumti Hydroelectric Project, brought substantial changes to the Gumti River valley during the development-oriented decades of the 1970s. The reservoir formed by the project inundated considerable portions of the Raima–Saima valley, a region recognised for its fertile agricultural land and indigenous settlements. Historical accounts describe the displacement associated with the project as one of the major instances of development-related disruption in Tripura (Das Gupta, 1989; Malsom, 2026). Consequently, the project should be studied not merely as an engineering accomplishment but also as a historical development that influenced the lives of ordinary people. Its history raises important questions concerning the meaning of development, the acknowledgement of customary land ownership, the effectiveness of rehabilitation measures, and the representation of indigenous experiences in the historical narrative of the state.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate the historical origins and development of the Dumboor Hydro Project.
2. To understand the geographical and economic significance of the Raima–Saima valley before the project was constructed.
3. To examine the consequences of reservoir construction for indigenous communities and other affected inhabitants.
4. To analyse the changes brought about in agriculture, traditional occupations, settlement arrangements, and community relationships.
5. To explore the connections between development policies, land rights, compensation, and rehabilitation.



6. To evaluate the project's continuing historical importance in relation to Tripura's development and indigenous identity.

3. Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What historical conditions encouraged the establishment of the Dumboor Hydro Project?
2. In what ways did the formation of the reservoir change the lives of people residing in the affected valley?
3. What factors made displacement and rehabilitation important issues associated with the project?
4. What historical lessons can the project provide for future development planning in Tripura?

4. Research Methodology

This research adopts a historical and descriptive methodological framework. It primarily draws upon secondary materials, including academic articles, published historical studies, and research concerning development-induced displacement in Northeast India. The project is examined through three interrelated dimensions: its historical origins, its social and economic consequences, and its broader implications for indigenous communities. Information obtained from different publications is compared to identify common conclusions and differences in interpretation.

This paper is based on secondary research and fieldwork or direct interviews with displaced families. Furthermore, the available estimates of displacement differ considerably between official documentation and independent sources. These variations are recognised rather than presented as conclusively established facts. Additional investigation involving archival materials, government rehabilitation documents, and oral histories could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the project's local effects.

5. Historical Background of the Dumboor Hydro Project

5.1 Tripura and the Post-Independence Development Period

After the conclusion of British colonial rule, infrastructure expansion became a major priority of the Indian government. Electricity production, irrigation facilities, transportation networks, and industrial growth were widely considered essential for economic transformation. Large dams were frequently regarded as representations of scientific advancement and national progress. Tripura also underwent these wider changes as the state became increasingly integrated into India's administrative and economic framework.



Electricity played an important role in supporting public services, urban expansion, and productive economic activities. Hydroelectricity appeared to provide an opportunity to utilise the state's river systems to satisfy increasing energy demands. Nevertheless, infrastructure development occurred within a society where many indigenous communities relied upon land and natural resources governed by customary arrangements. The interaction between formal land administration and community-based land use became especially important when land was acquired or submerged for major public projects.

5.2 Geographical Location and Physical Setting

The Dumboor Hydro Project is connected with the Gumti River system and the reservoir known today as Dumboor Lake. The surrounding river valley included the Raima and Saima river regions, where fertile land supported agricultural settlements and rural economic activities. Before the reservoir altered the landscape, the valley was an important area for cultivation and the utilisation of nearby forest resources. Farming, fishing, forest-related occupations, and customary activities contributed to the local economy. The region was also closely associated with the historical memories and cultural identities of its inhabitants. The formation of the reservoir brought a fundamental transformation to this environment. Areas that had previously supported settlements and agricultural production were submerged, changing both the physical geography of the region and the relationship between local residents and their surroundings.

4.3 Construction and Commissioning

The Dumboor Hydro Project developed during the expansion of hydroelectric infrastructure in Tripura in the 1970s. Historical publications do not consistently identify the same dates for the construction and commissioning of the project. Certain accounts connect the damming of the Gumti River with 1974, whereas other sources identify 1976 as the year of commissioning. This difference is significant because the commencement of construction, the filling of the reservoir, and the formal commissioning of a power station represent separate stages. Therefore, an accurate chronology should be established through official project documentation before specific dates are regarded as definitive. The project was intended to produce electricity by utilising water retained behind the dam. Published sources refer to a planned generating capacity of approximately 10–15 megawatts, although the exact figure varies according to the technical specifications and historical period under consideration.

5. Displacement and the Loss of Ancestral Land

The displacement of indigenous families from the affected valley was among the most important consequences of the Dumboor Hydro Project. The reservoir inundated agricultural fields and settlements,



compelling numerous residents to relocate and develop alternative means of earning a livelihood. Published estimates concerning the number of affected families are inconsistent. Figures reported in official records and cited in the literature are considerably lower than certain independent estimates. One study examining tribal displacement in Northeast India refers to approximately 2,558 displaced tribal families, while broader estimates suggest that the number of affected families may have ranged from 8,000 to 10,000. These numbers should be regarded as differing estimates rather than as one conclusively verified total (Hussain, 2013).

The destruction of access to ancestral land also involved the loss of productive resources developed and maintained across generations. For households reliant on agriculture, displacement disrupted food production, family earnings, and established community relationships. Resettlement consequently represented more than a physical movement from one place to another. It interrupted the continuity of long-established livelihoods and social practices. The experiences of affected residents demonstrate why historical assessments of development projects must consider the people whose customary land use and livelihood arrangements may not be adequately documented in official records.

6. Economic Impacts on the People of Tripura

7.1 Loss of Agricultural Land

Agriculture formed the foundation of the economy in the Raima–Saima valley. The inundation of fertile agricultural fields restricted access to productive land and disturbed farming practices that had sustained local households for generations. For families whose food security depended upon cultivation, the loss of agricultural fields affected immediate consumption as well as long-term economic security. Replacement land, when available, might differ from submerged land in terms of soil fertility, accessibility, and agricultural productivity. Therefore, the economic consequences of displacement cannot be assessed solely through the financial valuation of property. They must also account for lost future harvests, reduced household independence, and the inability to continue established agricultural practices.

7.2 Transformation of Traditional Occupations

Displacement required affected households to reconsider their existing economic activities. Some families moved towards hilly areas and continued farming under different circumstances, including shifting cultivation, commonly referred to as jhum. Others were compelled to search for alternative employment or adjust to changing access to land and water resources. Fishing developed as an important livelihood activity connected with the reservoir and nearby settlements. However, the availability of fishing opportunities did



not necessarily enable every displaced agricultural household to replace its former income. Families accustomed to cultivating fertile fields could not automatically transfer to fishing without suitable equipment, relevant knowledge, access to resources, and connections with markets. The movement from agriculture towards alternative occupations demonstrates the unequal consequences of development. While a reservoir may generate new economic opportunities for certain groups, it can also impose considerable adjustment difficulties on others.

6.3 Compensation and Rehabilitation

Compensation and rehabilitation have remained recurring concerns in historical discussions of the project. The ability to provide formal evidence of land ownership was particularly important for families seeking recognition of their losses. Where land rights were established through customary occupation or collective community use, conventional documentation requirements could prevent some households from qualifying for compensation. Such exclusion could result in economic uncertainty, reliance on marginal land, and difficulties in establishing permanent settlements. The historical issue was therefore not restricted to the amount of compensation provided. It also concerned the standards used to identify affected families, the recognition of customary rights, and the extent to which rehabilitation measures restored sustainable livelihoods. A balanced historical evaluation of the project requires a detailed examination of government documents and the experiences of individual families. Nevertheless, repeated concerns regarding insufficient rehabilitation in the available literature suggest that resettlement must be regarded as a central element of the project's history rather than as a peripheral matter.

7. Social and Cultural Impacts

7.1 Disruption of Community Life

Land and settlement patterns are closely associated with social relationships. Neighbours cooperate in agricultural work, take part in community celebrations, and sustain networks of mutual support. When families are displaced, these connections may weaken or become dispersed across different settlements. The relocation of families from the valley could disturb established forms of cooperation and complicate the maintenance of community institutions. Residents who had previously shared agricultural land, forests, and water resources were required to adapt to unfamiliar environments and changing economic conditions. These developments demonstrate that displacement affects more than individual households. It can also bring significant changes to the organisation and functioning of entire communities.

7.2 Indigenous Identity and Collective Memory

For indigenous communities, ancestral territories possess historical and cultural significance that cannot be adequately represented through market prices alone. Rivers, hills, agricultural fields, and settlement locations may carry associations with family histories, customary traditions, oral narratives, and collective identity. Thomas Malsom's research into collective memory and resistance to dam-related development in Tripura demonstrates how earlier displacement experiences continue to influence indigenous responses to subsequent hydropower proposals (Malsom, 2026). This perspective is valuable because it illustrates how historical experiences can remain influential long after the initial construction of a project.

7.3 Displacement and Social Marginalisation

The consequences of losing land may be particularly serious for households that already experience economic and political disadvantages. When displacement is accompanied by inadequate rehabilitation, affected families may face prolonged insecurity. The combined effects of land loss, occupational changes, and weakened community relationships can intensify feelings of exclusion. These experiences may also influence the attitudes of affected communities towards government institutions and future development initiatives. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that every displaced family experienced identical consequences. Outcomes differed according to the availability of alternative land, household resources, occupational abilities, and the assistance received by different groups. A comprehensive historical analysis should therefore acknowledge both the common experiences and the differences within the affected population.

8. Environmental and Ecological Consequences

The establishment of a large reservoir significantly altered the natural environment of the Gumti River valley. The submergence of land changed the distribution of land and water, affected terrestrial habitats, and transformed the conditions under which local residents accessed natural resources. Environmental changes also interacted with the social consequences of displacement. As relocated households moved into other areas, their requirements for agricultural land and fuel resources could increase pressure on the surrounding environment. However, the scale and nature of these effects must be established through reliable local evidence rather than assumption. Consequently, the environmental history of the project encompasses both the physical transformation of the river system and the changing relationship between local communities and their natural surroundings.

9. Hydroelectric Development and Its Benefits



A balanced historical examination must also recognise the objectives and potential advantages of the project. Hydroelectricity can generate power without the direct combustion of fossil fuels during the electricity-generation process. The expansion of electricity infrastructure can also strengthen public services, commercial activities, and wider economic development. The Dumboor Hydro Project was established with the objective of contributing to Tripura's electricity supply. Its historical importance must therefore be evaluated within the broader efforts undertaken by the state to expand infrastructure and modernise its economy.

10. Long-Term Historical Significance

The Dumboor Hydro Project continues to hold historical importance because its effects have extended well beyond the period of construction. Community displacement, the transformation of agricultural livelihoods, and the loss of ancestral landscapes have become part of the wider history of indigenous development experiences in Tripura. One of the project's important legacies concerns the relationship between historical memory and contemporary development discussions. Previous experiences can influence the extent to which communities trust government assurances regarding new initiatives. Malsom's research illustrates the importance of collective memory in understanding indigenous opposition to proposed hydropower developments in the state (Malsom, 2026).

Finally, the project presents a broader question for historians: what criteria should be used to evaluate development? An account that focuses exclusively on installed generating capacity, construction expenditure, and electricity production offers only a partial understanding. A more comprehensive historical interpretation must also consider displacement, the distribution of benefits and burdens, changes in community life, and the experiences of people whose perspectives may receive limited attention in official accounts. Thus, the Dumboor Hydro Project holds significance not only in the history of energy infrastructure in Tripura but also in the study of tribal society, environmental transformation, and the politics of development.

11. Results

The study's findings suggest that the Dumboor Hydro Project has made a considerable contribution to improving energy availability in Tripura and supporting local economic development. At the same time, the project has contributed to environmental deterioration, including forest destruction and biodiversity loss. Moreover, the displacement of several communities has created concerns regarding social equality and justice.

13. Conclusion

The Dumboor Hydro Project occupies a significant position in the contemporary history of Tripura. Established as part of the state's initiative to expand hydroelectric infrastructure, the project transformed the Gumti River valley and contributed to broader economic and environmental changes. Nevertheless, the reservoir's formation submerged fertile agricultural land and disturbed the established lives of indigenous communities.

The resulting consequences included population displacement, alterations in traditional occupations, difficulties associated with compensation and rehabilitation, and the loss of places connected with community history and identity. These outcomes demonstrate that development initiatives may produce substantially different consequences for the wider population and for communities residing directly within the areas affected by such projects.

Ultimately, the Dumboor Hydro Project should be regarded both as an infrastructure initiative and as a historical example of development-induced displacement. A more comprehensive understanding of its legacy requires continued archival investigation, the documentation of oral histories, and a careful assessment of rehabilitation outcomes. Such research can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Tripura's history and help ensure that future development policies place greater emphasis on social justice, indigenous rights, and the long-term welfare of local communities.

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