



## Framing Development And Resistance: A Content Analysis Of Media Narratives On The Siang Upper Multipurpose Dam

Pranjit Doley<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh-791112, India.

Email: pranjit.doley@rgu.ac.in

Received: 21<sup>st</sup> June 2025

Accepted: 15<sup>th</sup> August 2025

Published: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2025

### ABSTRACT

This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of news articles from *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times*, examining how media frame the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) in Arunachal Pradesh. The analysis reveals that *The Hindu* predominantly frames the dam in terms of national policy, developmental progress, and strategic considerations, whereas *The Arunachal Times* focuses on indigenous rights, cultural and ecological concerns, and procedural issues such as the absence of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). *The Hindu*'s coverage tends to highlight institutional perspectives and national interest narratives, while *The Arunachal Times* amplifies grassroots opposition and local perspectives. These divergent framings illustrate the media's dual role in both legitimizing state-led development narratives and empowering indigenous resistance. The study contributes to understanding how media narratives shape public discourse on controversial infrastructure projects, highlighting implications for environmental communication and the representation of marginalized voices.

**Keywords:** Media Framing; Hydropower Development; Indigenous Resistance; Environmental Communication; Northeast India

## INTRODUCTION

Large-scale dam construction projects are embedded in complex environmental, socio-political, and cultural contexts. In such settings, the media play a vital role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy narratives. As agenda-setters and platforms for diverse voices, news media determine which aspects of a dam project are emphasized or downplayed (Entman, 1993). Through framing and selective emphasis, media bring certain issues into sharper focus on ecological risks, community displacement, seismic safety, developmental benefits, or national security concerns while marginalizing others (Degu Belay, Fantini, & Gagliardone, 2021; Deka et al., 2023). Media narratives surrounding dam projects often reflect competing perspectives. National-level outlets may portray dams as symbols of progress, energy security, and nation-building, whereas regional and local media highlight adverse social and environmental impacts framing dams as sources of disruption rather than benefit (Deka et al., 2023; Wang, Wei, & Tian, 2024). Local media, in particular, offer insights into grassroots perceptions and lived experiences of affected communities. As Guo et al. (2022) and Wei et al. (2021) observe, local reporting can amplify the voices of civil society organizations, environmentalists, and indigenous groups, producing alternative discourses that challenge state-driven development narratives. These counter-narratives expose the tension between top-down infrastructural visions and bottom-up socio-environmental realities.

Media narratives surrounding dam projects often reflect competing perspectives. National-level outlets may portray dams as symbols of progress, energy security, and nation-building, whereas regional and local media highlight adverse social and environmental impacts, framing dams as sources of disruption rather than benefit (Deka et al., 2023; Wang, Wei, & Tian, 2024). Local media, in particular, offer insights into grassroots perceptions and lived experiences of affected communities. As Guo et al. (2022) and Wei et al. (2021) observe, local reporting can amplify the voices of civil society organizations, environmentalists, and indigenous groups, producing alternative discourses that challenge state-driven development narratives. These counter-narratives expose the tension between top-down infrastructural visions and bottom-up socio-environmental realities.

Media framing of dam projects can also shift over time, aligning with key project milestones. Research suggests that news coverage evolves from initial policy announcements and clearances to protests, delays, and reassessments (Wu et al., 2018). Analyzing how media frames change across these stages can reveal shifts in public sentiment, policy discourse, and

journalistic priorities (Delang, 2019). Ultimately, how the media frame a dam project may influence whether it is perceived as a cooperative developmental initiative or a contentious venture. By emphasizing either, the benefits or the harms, media outlets construct powerful narratives that shape public opinion and potentially policy outcomes (Reese, 2007; Entman, 1989; Fürsich, 2010).

The Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) is a proposed 11,000 MW mega-hydropower and water management project on the Siang River of Arunachal Pradesh, India, which would be among the largest hydropower projects in India and the world. In recent years, the SUMP has garnered significant attention in both national and regional media due to a confluence of environmental, cultural, political, and strategic concerns. The project's location in a geostrategically sensitive border state and the involvement of the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) under central government directives have made it a high-profile development initiative. At the same time, strong opposition from indigenous communities and local civil society rooted in concerns over ecological degradation and cultural survival has turned the SUMP into a focal point of contestation.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

The SUMP controversy represents a clash between national developmental imperatives and local ecological and cultural realities. Mainstream narratives often tout mega-dams as essential for energy security and national progress, but such narratives can obscure the lived experiences, ecological knowledge, and cultural attachments of indigenous communities at the project site. The media, as key agents of meaning-making, have a critical role in framing how this conflict is perceived, justified, or challenged in the public sphere. However, there is a lack of scholarly understanding of how regional and national media outlets have differed in their framing of the Siang dam issue, and what implications these differences have for public discourse, stakeholder representation, and democratic engagement. In particular, no systematic comparative study has examined media narratives of this project. This gap in research obscures the broader communicative dynamics that mediate development and resistance in India's Northeast.

To address this gap, the present study compares coverage of the Siang dam issue in a prominent national newspaper (*The Hindu*) and a leading regional newspaper (*The Arunachal Times*). It aims to understand how each outlet has framed the project and the associated anti-dam movement. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the dominant frames used by *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* in their coverage of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project?

**RQ2:** How do these newspapers portray key stakeholders especially indigenous communities, activists, and government actors in the context of the Siang dam conflict?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to the literature on media framing, environmental communication, and indigenous resistance. It is significant not only for its empirical insights into a current development conflict, but also for addressing the underrepresentation of India's Northeast in mainstream media studies. The findings shed light on how local and national media construct competing discourses of development, rights, and ecological justice. In doing so, this research highlights the importance of participatory and pluralistic media practices that amplify marginalized voices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Media Framing and Power

The existing body of literature on media, environmental communication, and indigenous resistance provides a framework for understanding how infrastructural projects are discursively constructed in public narratives. Central to this framework is the concept of media framing. Originating from Goffman's (1974) sociological work on frame analysis and later refined in communication studies, framing refers to the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality in a media text to promote a particular interpretation. Entman (1993) famously describes framing as involving the selection of some elements of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a message, in such a way as to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. By highlighting some aspects of an issue while omitting or downplaying others, frames fundamentally shape audience perceptions and interpretations of that issue.

Gitlin (1980) observes that media frames often reflect dominant ideologies, thereby privileging state and corporate perspectives and sidelining dissenting voices. In contexts of development, this can mean that mainstream news tends to echo official narratives and paradigms, marginalizing alternative or oppositional viewpoints. In the Indian media landscape, scholars have noted a persistent urban and institutional bias; for example, Phadke (2013) argues that large dams are frequently portrayed by national outlets as emblems of progress and energy security, a narrative that glosses over the social and ecological costs. Sainath (2000) and Jeffrey

(2000) also document how Indian news coverage often neglects rural and indigenous concerns due to a metropolitan focus and the influence of political and economic power structures.

### **Media, Environment, and Development Discourse**

Environmental communication theorists emphasize the media's pivotal role in shaping public discourse on ecological issues. Cox (2013) and Pezzullo and Cox (2017) argue that media not only inform audiences about environmental developments but also shape how society perceives concepts such as "green energy" and sustainability. In the case of hydropower, mainstream media have at times uncritically endorsed large dams as sources of clean, renewable energy, aligning with climate change mitigation goals, and reflecting institutional and corporate interests (Pittock, 2010). Such framings can obscure the environmental degradation and social upheaval that often accompany the construction of mega-dams, especially in fragile ecosystems. This critique aligns with the work of Baviskar (1995) and Mawdsley (2004), who challenge top-down development paradigms that treat nature purely as a resource for extraction and economic gain. They advocate for recognizing the environment as a lived space imbued with cultural meaning, a perspective inherently held by many indigenous communities.

Studies of dam-induced displacement and development conflicts further illuminate the human costs that tend to be glossed over in pro-development media narratives. Dandekar and Thakkar (2010) document the widespread dispossession and forced dislocation caused by large dam projects across India. Fernandes (2008) highlights that such displacement leads to long-term cultural erosion and economic precarity, particularly among indigenous communities. In India's Northeast, similar patterns have played out. Goswami (2014) reviews the ecological and social impacts of hydropower development in Arunachal Pradesh and notes sustained local resistance to projects like the Lower Subansiri Dam. These protest movements, rooted in concerns for ecological balance and tribal livelihoods, have often received limited and episodic attention in the national media. Unless local agitations escalate into major conflicts or law-and-order problems, they tend to be under-reported or framed as parochial disruptions to national progress.

### **Media and the Northeast: Center-Periphery Bias**

Scholars have critiqued the Indian national media for historically marginalizing the Northeast region, both in volume of coverage and in the frames employed. Baruah (2020) argues that when the Northeast enters national discourse, it is frequently cast either as a strategic buffer zone or as a troubled periphery mired in insurgency, rather than being portrayed through the

lens of its legitimate developmental and cultural aspirations. Bhuyan (2015) similarly points out that indigenous narratives from the Northeast rarely gain traction in the national press unless they erupt into spectacular events. The result is a form of media erasure, where local voices and nuanced perspectives from the region are seldom heard by the broader Indian public.

On the other hand, regional outlets and other state-based newspapers provide more consistent coverage of local issues, including development controversies. These outlets, however, often operate under constraints limited resources, smaller readership, and at times political pressures from local power brokers. In recent years, the rise of digital media and social networking platforms has somewhat altered this landscape. Grassroots movements and youth activists in the Northeast are increasingly using online media to circulate counter-narratives that contest mainstream portrayals.

### **Indigenous Resistance and Alternate Epistemologies**

A key theme emerging from studies of development conflicts is that indigenous resistance is not simply a "no" to development, but often articulates an alternative vision of what development should mean. Escobar (1995) and Tully (1995) suggest that resistance by marginalized groups can be understood as the assertion of alternative epistemologies fundamentally different ways of knowing and valuing the world that challenge the hegemonic, market-driven logic of modern development. From this perspective, movements against dams are not only about stopping a project; they are about defending a relational worldview in which land and rivers are integral to community identity and moral order. Sharma (2014) urges scholars to interpret indigenous protests not merely as obstructionist or reactive, but as proactive articulations of ecological ethics, spiritual belonging, and cultural continuity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Sample**

The study employed a qualitative content analysis to examine media narratives on the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project. The research design was comparative, focusing on two English-language newspapers with contrasting scopes; *The Hindu* (national) and *The Arunachal Times* (regional). The choice of *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* was deliberate, reflecting considerations of representativeness and contrast. *The Hindu* is one of India's most prominent English-language dailies, known for its wide national circulation, in-depth reporting, and editorial independence. *The Hindu* often provides a policy-oriented perspective on issues of

national importance. The newspaper allowed us to assess how a leading mainstream outlet frames the developments in a remote region like Arunachal Pradesh. *The Arunachal Times*, on the other hand, is the most prominent daily newspaper within Arunachal Pradesh. It is a principal source of local news for the region and is known for actively reporting on indigenous issues, state politics, and grassroots affairs. It constructed a purposive sample of relevant news articles, opinion pieces, and editorials published between January 1, 2022 and June 30, 2025. This timeframe spans from the official revival of the SUMP in early 2022 through the ensuing years of debate and protest, capturing key developments such as government announcements, community mobilizations, and the major consultative meeting in late 2024. By June 2025, the issue remained unresolved, providing a natural cut-off for analysis. The rationale for focusing on 2022-2025 is that it marks a crucial phase in the SUMP saga where media attention was heightened and the frames likely became clearly articulated.

Articles were retrieved from the digital archives of the two newspapers using search keywords such as "Siang dam," "Upper Siang project," "hydropower Arunachal," "anti-dam protest," and "displacement." In total, 39 articles met our inclusion criteria and were selected for coding. This included straight news reports, feature stories, editorials, and op-ed commentary. We aimed to capture a broad range of content including factual reporting on events to opinionated pieces that provide insight into each paper's editorial stance.

### **Coding and Analysis**

The collected articles were analysed by using inductive thematic and frame analysis techniques. The unit of analysis was the individual article. Each article was read closely and coded for emergent themes, frames, and representations. In practice, this meant identifying recurring patterns in how the SUMP issue was portrayed including the problem definitions (what is the issue or conflict about?), causal attributions (who or what is blamed or credited?), moral evaluations (how are the actors or actions judged?), and recommendations or solutions (what is being proposed or demanded?). We paid particular attention to *language and tone* for instance, the use of certain keywords, metaphors, and adjectives indicating sentiment.

Emergent frames were not imposed a priori but discovered through this iterative reading process. As frames began to coalesce, we continually compared new articles with previously coded ones to refine our understanding of each frame's characteristics. A pattern in coverage was considered a distinct frame if it had consistent linguistic markers and conceptual coherence and recurred across multiple pieces. To enhance rigor and transparency, we documented our

coding decisions and use of evidence from the texts. We also compared our inductively identified frames with concepts from prior literature to see if they aligned with or diverged from known frame types. While the analysis was primarily qualitative and interpretive, we kept a tally of occurrences to gauge which frames and actors were most prominent in each outlet. This helped inform some qualitative judgments. We did not formally calculate intercoder reliability, as the coding was done by the primary researcher, but we strove for consistency by revisiting earlier coded articles after developing the coding scheme and adjusting as needed. Throughout the coding process, the researcher was conscious of their own positionality and potential biases. Being researchers from the region provided contextual knowledge but also the responsibility to ensure objectivity in interpreting media content. We triangulated the narrative analysis with factual cross-checks to ensure that differences in framing were not simply due to reporting discrepancies.

## FINDINGS

The qualitative content analysis of *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* coverage reveals that while both newspapers engage critically with the Siang dam issue, they do so through *distinct frames, emphases, and tones*.

### Media Framing Patterns: National Policy vs. Indigenous Perspectives

Applying Entman's (1993) framing perspective, we found that the two newspapers defined the problem of the Siang dam in divergent ways. *The Hindu* predominantly employed a policy oriented and investigative frame, often presenting the dam controversy as a subject of official deliberation and expert scrutiny. Its articles tended to frame the SUMP as a complex policy challenge or national issue that requires balancing development goals with environmental and human rights concerns. For instance, *The Hindu* ran stories on the central government's stance and on institutional interventions such as civil society groups petitioning the President of India, or the National Human Rights Commission issuing notices to the state government regarding local opposition. A notable element of *The Hindu*'s framing was the strategic justification for the project: several pieces referenced the need to build the dam as a countermeasure to Chinese dams upstream on the Yarlung Tsangpo. By invoking this geopolitical angle, *The Hindu* cast the dam as part of a larger narrative of national security and flood control, implicitly defining the problem in terms of competitive hydro politics.

In contrast, *The Arunachal Times* framed the SUMP issue through local and rights-based lenses, with a pronounced emphasis on the experiences and voices of the indigenous communities.



The regional paper consistently portrayed the dam primarily as a threat to the people and environment of Siang. Its coverage highlighted themes like the lack of *Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)* from local residents, the cultural and spiritual importance of the Siang River, and the perceived high stakes of environmental damage. The problem, in *The Arunachal Times'* framing, is fundamentally one of *justice and identity*: a top-down project being imposed despite the will of the people, risking irreversible harm to their land and heritage.

Many articles read as rallying narratives for the anti-dam movement. For example, *The Arunachal Times* ran prominent stories with headlines such as "Not gun, what Siang needs is dialogue" a direct reference to local leaders criticizing the deployment of armed forces during surveys and demanding respectful dialogue instead. Another headline, "Komkar erupts in protest against proposed deployment of armed personnel," vividly depicted grassroots resistance in a specific locality. Such framing implicitly questions the state's approach and legitimacy, casting the conflict as one of people vs. power. The tone of *The Arunachal Times* coverage was openly *critical* and advocative. Rather than neutrally relaying government statements, the regional paper's articles often opened with or centered on the protestors' perspective. Editorials and op-eds in *The Arunachal Times* went further to moralize the issue, characterizing the anti-dam struggle as a fight for indigenous rights and environmental sanity. In doing so, the paper's narrative aligns with what Baviskar (1995) terms a "cultural ecology" frame, wherein environmental conflicts are viewed at the intersection of nature, culture, and politics, rather than as purely technical or economic disputes.

**Table 1:** *Dominant Frame Emphases in Coverage of SUMP (2022-2025)*

Frame Type	<i>The Hindu</i>	<i>The Arunachal Times</i>
Environmental/Ecological	High	High
Rights/Democratic Process	Moderate	High
Cultural/Spiritual	Low	High
Developmental/Economic	Moderate	Low
Strategic/Security	Moderate	Low
Local/Community Voice	Moderate	High

## Stakeholder Representation and Grassroots Resistance

Another revealing dimension of the media narratives is which stakeholders gain visibility and how they are portrayed. In the context of the Siang dam, relevant stakeholders include indigenous community members, anti-dam activists and local organizations, state and central government officials, politicians, environmental experts, and even security forces involved in the project's survey work. The two newspapers allocated attention to these actors in differing proportions, shaping the perceived balance of voices in the public narrative.

*The Hindu* gave significant space to government and official voices, reflecting its national outlook. Articles in *The Hindu* frequently quoted or referenced statements from government representatives for example, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh assuring the public that "no hydropower project will be executed if people do not want it," or Union Minister Kiren Rijiju emphasizing the dam's importance for national security. By reporting such statements, *The Hindu* showed the presence of government concern for local opinion, but it also subtly reinforced the idea that the *authority* to decide rests with the state. *The Hindu* also tended to cite experts and institutions: environmental analysts on the dam's risks, members of civil society organizations commenting on human rights, or officials from bodies like the NHRC or NITI Aayog.

In stark contrast, *The Arunachal Times* placed indigenous community members and local activists at center stage in its reporting. The voices of Gaon Burahs, student union leaders, NGO representatives, and ordinary villagers were prominently featured. Many *The Arunachal Times* news pieces began by describing a protest or public meeting and quoting what local participants said for example, a village women's representative declaring they would not surrender their land, or a statement from the Students' Union condemning the government's actions. Government officials in *The Arunachal Times* stories often appeared in the context of being *petitioned* or *pressured* by the locals rather than as agenda-setters. This reversal of prominence is important as it frames the people as active agents and the government as a respondent.

In terms of portrayal, local stakeholders in the regional paper were almost uniformly presented in a sympathetic or heroic light as protectors of their homeland and rights. Activists like Ebo Mili were covered not only in news reports but even celebrated in editorials. One editorial titled "Standing with Ebo Mili" defended the activist after police complaints were filed against him for his role in mobilizing protests. *The Arunachal Times* framed such activists as principled advocates of their community, implicitly countering any narrative that might label them as

troublemakers. This stands in contrast to how, outside the Northeast, some national discourse can vilify strong local opposition as anti-development or influenced by "foreign-funded NGOs." In the pages of *The Arunachal Times*, the protestors were the protagonists of the story.

Notably, both outlets reported on the role of security forces in a *critical* tone. They highlighted that the presence of guns and troops created fear and anger among villagers. Rather than portraying the security personnel as neutral implementers of law, reports in both papers questioned the necessity and wisdom of sending armed units for what should have been a civilian consultation or survey process. This framing casts the state in a coercive light and garners sympathy for the villagers. In one *The Hindu* piece, the deployment was implicitly critiqued by citing a human rights notice about it, whereas *The Arunachal Times* carried firsthand accounts of villagers feeling "intimidated" by the security presence. Both approaches converge on the idea that militarizing a development project is problematic.

**Table 2:** *Visibility of Stakeholders in SUMP Coverage*

Stakeholder Group	<i>The Hindu</i>	<i>The Arunachal Times</i>
Government Officials	High	Moderate
Indigenous Communities	Moderate	High
Environmental Experts	High	Moderate
Local Activists	Moderate	High
Security Forces	Moderate	Moderate
Anti-dam Movement	High	High

### Democratic Deficit and State Coercion

Both newspapers, despite their different orientations, underscored the perceived democratic deficit in the project's planning and the evidence of state coercion in pushing forward the SUMP project. This theme emerged strongly in the coverage, suggesting a point of convergence in framing between the national and regional narratives.

In *The Hindu*, the democratic deficit was highlighted through reports of appeals and interventions at the national level. For instance, *The Hindu* covered stories where civil society organizations and community representatives petitioned the President of India and other central authorities, alleging that proper procedures were not being followed in the SUMP case. It also reported on the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issuing notices to the Arunachal

Pradesh state government regarding complaints about the lack of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the affected indigenous communities. By reporting these events, *The Hindu* implicitly framed the SUMP project as potentially violative of standard democratic and rights-based protocols.

*The Arunachal Times*, on its part, documented the democratic deficit in a more direct, on-the-ground manner. Virtually every report on a protest or public meeting inherently carried the subtext that locals felt excluded from the decision-making about the dam. The regional paper repeatedly mentioned the absence of meaningful consultation and the violation of the community's right to consent. For example, reports would note that village gatherings were held specifically because people were "kept in the dark" about the project's details or that government surveyors arrived unannounced, catching villagers by surprise.

A particularly stark illustration of state coercion and one that both papers covered was the deployment of armed security personnel to assist with the survey and preliminary work for the dam in early 2022. *The Hindu* described this through a critical lens by citing human rights concerns: for instance, it might report that a human rights group condemned the use of paramilitary forces to secure project sites, or that a prominent public figure questioned whether development should require a show of force. *The Arunachal Times* provided vivid accounts from villages where these deployments happened. It ran stories where local residents recounted how soldiers with guns landed in helipads or marched into remote areas to "secure" the terrain for surveyors, leaving villagers feeling both angered and intimidated.

## DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* coverage of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project yields important insights into the role of media in contested development projects. The findings highlight how media outlets, influenced by their socio-political contexts and audiences, can construct *very different narratives* around the same issue. In this case, a national newspaper and a regional newspaper both engaged critically with the SUMP, but from divergent vantage points one integrating the issue into national policy and security discourse, the other embedding it in local realities and indigenous rights discourse. This duality underscores the significance of media pluralism in a vast and diverse country like India. When only one type of narrative dominates, public understanding of an issue remains partial. The presence of an alternative narrative challenges the mainstream frame and enriches public discourse by introducing perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked.

The outcomes of this study affirm and deepen key debates in framing theory and development communication. First, the results echo Entman's (1993) assertion that framing is about selection and salience; *what* is highlighted and *how* it is highlighted. *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* selected different facets of the SUMP story for emphasis, where the former chose aspects that would resonate with or inform a national audience, whereas the latter chose aspects that resonate locally. Each outlet made certain elements more salient. *The Hindu* made salient the notion of a *policy dilemma* and a *security concern*, while *The Arunachal Times* made salient the notion of an *injustice* being done to local people and an *impending ecological/cultural loss*. These choices in salience directed their readers to interpret the Siang dam conflict in predictably different ways neither interpretation being "false," but each incomplete on its own.

Moreover, the findings support the view that framing is linked to power relations, as discussed by Entman (2007) in his concept of "framing bias." Each newspaper's framing choices reflect and reinforce particular power dynamics. *The Hindu*, whether consciously or not, often reinforced the state's framing of the issue by giving voice to official rationales like national development and security. This doesn't mean it sided with the state indeed it also reported the critiques but structurally, its framing the state's narrative as an important part of the story. *The Arunachal Times*, conversely, subverted the usual power hierarchy in media narratives by foregrounding the subaltern perspective. In doing so, it acted as what some communication scholars call a "*counterpublic*" medium providing a space for voices that challenge the hegemonic discourse.

The divergent framing found here also engages with development communication theory. Historically, mass media in post-colonial states were expected to act as agents of modernization, spreading pro-development messages. However, critical perspectives have argued for more participatory and pluralistic communication where media give voice to grassroots and enable public debate about what kind of development is desirable (Servaes, 1999; Melkote, 1991). The *Arunachal Times* coverage exemplified this participatory communication ethos by amplifying local advocacy and scrutinizing the inclusiveness of decision-making processes. It situated the abstract concept of "development" within the lived reality of a particular community where national media failed. On the other hand, *The Hindu* played a role of integrating local conflict into the *national conversation*, arguably a necessary function as well for a country's polity to be cognizant of regional issues. Together, the two illustrate the multi-layered public sphere in India where local and national publics may have different conversations about the same issue, overlapping only partially.

The differences in stakeholder emphasis reflect deeper framing orientations. *The Hindu's* inclusion of government and expert voices lends a multiperspectival aura to its coverage aligning with journalistic norms of balance but also aligning with its frame of treating the issue as one requiring policy deliberation. *The Arunachal Times'* saturation of local voices aligns with its frame of the issue as one of *community resistance and rights* thereby giving primacy to those directly affected and most opposed. These empirical observations resonate strongly with Escobar's (1995) view that resistance movements articulate alternative epistemologies. In the pages of *The Arunachal Times*, one can see that alternative worldview clearly. By consistently platforming the villagers and their self-expressed reasons for opposing the dam, the regional media narrative validates a reality in which cultural continuity, sacred geography, and ecological custodianship are paramount values overriding technocratic development. *The Hindu* does not dismiss these values, but by virtue of its more distant, varied sourcing, it frames them as part of a larger mosaic of considerations.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

While this study provides valuable insights into media framing of the Siang dam controversy, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 39 articles, while purposively selected, represents only a portion of the total coverage of the SUMP issue. Future research could expand the sample to include more regional newspapers from the Northeast, vernacular media, and digital platforms to capture a broader spectrum of voices. Second, our focus on English-language newspapers may have excluded important perspectives available in local languages, particularly those published in other indigenous languages that might offer unique cultural insights into the conflict. Additionally, this study's focus on print media could be complemented by analysis of broadcast media, social media platforms, and alternative digital spaces where indigenous activists increasingly organize and communicate.

Future research directions could include comparative studies of media framing across different dam projects in the Northeast to identify broader patterns in how center-periphery development conflicts are represented. Ethnographic studies of newsroom practices in both national and regional outlets could illuminate the institutional and professional factors that shape framing decisions. Moreover, audience reception studies could examine how different communities interpret and respond to these divergent media framings, providing insights into the actual impact of media narratives on public opinion and political mobilization. Together, the two

illustrate the multi-layered public sphere in India where local and national publics may have different conversations about the same issue, overlapping only partially.

## CONCLUSION

The content analysis of *The Hindu* and *The Arunachal Times* has illuminated the complex interplay between development narratives and resistance narratives in media coverage of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Dam. The study finds that national and regional media, by virtue of their distinct audiences and orientations, frame the issue in markedly different ways each capturing a piece of the truth about the project's implications. *The Hindu's* coverage contributed a broad lens, situating the Siang dam within discussions of policy, environmental oversight, and national interest. *The Arunachal Times'* coverage contributed a ground-up lens, portraying the dam as a lived crisis for local communities and a flashpoint for indigenous rights. Both perspectives, taken together, offer a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict.

Empirically, it documents the media narratives surrounding the contemporary development conflicts in Northeast India, thereby filling a gap in literature and contributing to the documentation of Northeast India's representation in the press. The study shows how frame contestation can occur between media at different scales, and how frames align with or challenge structures of power. Additionally, the study highlights that media frames do not operate in isolation but are part of broader *discursive battlegrounds* where multiple stakeholders vie to define reality. For practitioners and policymakers, the findings carry a clear message of inclusive communication and genuine engagement are indispensable in any development initiative, especially in culturally sensitive regions. When voices on the ground are not heard in official processes, they will find amplification through media and other channels, as happened with the Siang dam. This amplification can reinforce resistance movements and sway public opinion, potentially altering the course of projects. Moreover, bridging the gap between national narratives and local narratives through dialogue forums, participatory media, and transparent information-sharing may help in finding common ground.

In the Siang story, the dual role of media was apparent at times, reinforcing the state's rationale and at times serving as the conscience of democracy. Their role as "architects of consent" and "megaphones of dissent" is a fascinating dynamic that deserves continued scholarly attention. The insights from this study suggest that attention to media narratives is crucial for anticipating and managing such conflicts. It highlights the evolving role of regional media outlets where they increasingly serve as a watchdog of the democratic process and amplifiers of grassroots

concerns. Their ability to provide alternative framings to national narratives becomes crucial for maintaining the pluralistic character of public discourse. However, this also places greater responsibility on regional media to maintain journalistic standards while advocating for local interests.



## REFERENCES

- Baruah, S. (2020). *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford University Press.
- Baviskar, A. (1995). *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Oxford University Press.
- Bhuyan, A. (2015). Northeast in the National Media: Neglect and Marginalization. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(49), 10-13.
- Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. Oxford University Press.
- Cox, R. (2013). *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Dandekar, P., & Thakkar, H. (2010). *Dams, Displacement, Policy and Law in India*. South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People.
- Degu Belay, Y., Fantini, E., & Gagliardone, I. (2021). The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Media Narratives and State Building. *Contemporary Rupture Ethiopia*, 2, 28-49.
- Deka, A., Hazarika, N., Vij, S., Barua, A., & Fantini, E. (2023). Media Reporting on Conflicts and Cooperation: What Does It Mean for the Brahmaputra Basin? *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 39(5), 819-845. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07900627.2022.2163478>
- Delang, C. (2019). Media Discourses of Mekong Dams: A Thematic Analysis. *Problemy Ekorozwoju - Problems of Sustainable Development*, 14(1), 119-130.
- Entman, R. M. (1989). How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach. *The Journal of Politics*, 51(2), 347-370. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131346>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Entman, R. M. (2007). Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 163-173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00336.x>
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Fernandes, W. (2008). Development-Induced Displacement: The Class and Gender Perspective. *Social Change*, 38(4), 580-602.
- Fürsich, E. (2010). Media and the Representation of Others. *International Social Science Journal*, 61(199), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2010.01751.x>
- Ghosh, T. (2012). Lower Subansiri Dam and Power Station in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. In A. J. Das (Ed.), *Reporting Dams and Development: Strengthening Media's Capacity to Report Research in Northeast India* (Case study). Panos South Asia & Panos London.
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. University of California Press.

- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Goswami, U. (2014). Hydropower Development in Arunachal Pradesh: A Review of the Ecological and Social Impacts. *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 71(5), 639-655.
- Guo, L., Wei, J., Zhang, K., Wang, J., & Tian, F. (2022). Building a Methodological Framework for Media Dataset Tracking of Conflict and Cooperation Dynamics on Transboundary Rivers. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, 26, 1165-1185. <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-26-1165-2022>
- Jeffrey, R. (2000). *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press*. Oxford University Press.
- Matthes, J., & Kohring, M. (2008). The Content Analysis of Media Frames: Toward Improving Reliability and Validity. *Journal of Communication*, 58(2), 258-279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00384.x>
- Mawdsley, E. (2004). India's Middle Classes and the Environment. *Development and Change*, 35(1), 79-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2004.00343.x>
- Melkote, S. R. (1991). *Communication for development in the Third World: Theory and practice for empowerment* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Pezzullo, P. C., & Cox, R. (2017). *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Phadke, A. (2013). Development, Displacement, and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Indian Dam Debate. *Asian Ethics*, 19(2), 144-160.
- Pittock, J. (2010). Better Management of Hydropower in the Era of Climate Change. *Water Alternatives*, 3(2), 444-452.
- Reese, S. D. (2007). The Framing Project: A Bridging Model for Media Research Revisited. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 148-154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00334.x>
- Sainath, P. (2000). *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts*. Penguin Books.
- Scheufele, B. (2004). Framing-Effects Approach: A Theoretical and Methodological Critique. *Communications*, 29(4), 401-428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.2004.29.4.401>
- Servaes, J. (1999). Communication for Development. One World, Multiple Cultures. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.1.2113.7120](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2113.7120)
- Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2000). Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 93-109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02843.x>
- Sharma, M. (2014). Development, Displacement and Resistance: The Politics of Dams in Northeast India. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 29(3), 353-368.
- Taying, M. (2025). Indigenous Concerns on Dam Project over Siang River: A Landmark Effort to Save Ancestral Lands and Rivers and Environmental Degradation. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research and Innovations*, 13(1), 66-71.

- Tully, J. (1995). *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vreese, C. H. (2005). News Framing: Theory and Typology. *Information Design Journal*, 13(1), 51-62. <https://doi.org/10.1075/idjdd.13.1.06vre>
- Wang, J., Wei, J., & Tian, F. (2024). Are Transboundary Water Events Reported Differently in French and English News for Conflict and Cooperation Dynamics? *Water*, 16(5), Article 759. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w16050759>
- Wei, J., Wei, Y., Tian, F., Nott, N., De Wit, C., & Guo, L. (2021). News Media Coverage of Conflict and Cooperation Dynamics of Water Events in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, 25, 1603-1615. <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-25-1603-2021>
- Wu, S., Huang, S., Wei, Y., Duffield, C., Tang, W., & Zhao, Y. (2018). A Longitudinal Analysis of Major World Newspapers' Perspectives on the Three Gorges Dam Project (1982-2015). *Water Supply*, 18(1), 94-107. <https://doi.org/10.2166/ws.2017.088>