

Murderous waters of dams

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THE popular perception held till recently and carefully nurtured by proponents of big dams over the years, is that dams control or help moderate floods. In theory, it sounds possible. However, in practice that perception won't stand up to scrutiny if actual experience with dams is objectively assessed.

This June, we saw floods in Assam and in the eastern states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. And dams played a significant role.

In Assam, the floods severely affected Lakhimpur and surrounding districts due to a number of tributaries of the Brahmaputra, the big contributors being the Ranganadi and Dikrong. As the Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Kumar Gogoi, publicly stated the sudden release of large quantities of water from the upstream 405 MW Ranganadi hydropower project contributed significantly to floods in these two tributaries. The floods led to washing away of embankments, the National Highway and the submergence of vast stretches of land and houses, displacing thousands of people.

There is no doubt that the Ranganadi and Dikrong Rivers were experiencing floods due to rainfall in their catchment area. However, the surge of water added by the Ranganadi HEP in all probability exacerbated the situation and made the floods even more destructive. No information or warning was given to downstream areas before making these releases, nor was it deemed necessary to assess the flood status in the downstream areas and what the impact of such releases there would be. The Chairman of the North Eastern Electric Power

Company, the operator of the Ranganadi project said that it was not possible to inform the downstream areas before such releases!

Now information about rainfall and river flows in the upstream and downstream areas is easily available. Relatively accurate prediction of rainfall over the next shorter time period is possible. One would expect the operations of the dams to take these into consideration. That is the least one expects from dam operators, considering the huge destructive potential of releases from these large dams.

Sadly that is not the case today. Isn't this deplorable to the extent of being criminal?



