

India: Can an artist's graffiti breathe new life into Arunachal's anti-dam movement?

Monday 15 August 2022, by [ZAMAN Rokibuz](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2022).

Nilim Mahanta and Ebo Mili were arrested for painting 'No More Dams' on a wall of Arunachal's civil secretariat building.

"Art can be an effective way of protest but it has to be created in the right place," said graphic artist Nilim Mahanta.

Late last month, he had painted the message "No More Dams" across the mural of a dam on the walls of the civil secretariat building in Arunachal Pradesh and been arrested for his pains. Mahanta had also painted a fist, the traditional symbol of resistance, next to the slogan. The original mural was part of the "Wall of Peace" art project, meant to celebrate 50 years of Arunachal's statehood.

Mahanta and human rights lawyer Ebo Mili were charged under the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act and arrested on March 27. They were granted bail two days later. One of the conditions is that they would paint over the slogan and fist, restoring the original mural within 10 days.

About the week later, the words had been painted over, although the fist remained. However, heavy rains led to a breach in the wall and water came gushing out of the cracks, making the mural perhaps a bit too true to life.

Lol

Remember the anti dam graffiti on controlled river mural in [#Itanagar](#) that led to arrest of two? The [#hydropower](#) wall/dam breached because of heavy rain. PC: SM pic.twitter.com/gnWR9xPoo9

— Tongam Rina (@tongamrina) [April 4, 2022](#)

Despite the arrest and the removal of the slogan, Mahanta is not displeased. "I think the wall painting has achieved its objectives," he said.

Arunachal Pradesh has a long history of anti-dam movements, but it has rarely travelled outside the state. "The anti-dam message has reached all across the country making national headlines, which is a minor success," he said. "But we will consider it a success only if no more dams are built in the region."

The mural and the words painted over it have certainly opened up the place of dams in Arunachal Pradesh once more.

"If dams are a part of our reality as Arunachal Pradesh celebrates its 50th anniversary of statehood, the opposition to the dams is also part of the reality," said [a joint statement issued by 22 anti-dam](#)

[groups](#) on April 2. "If murals of a dam can be painted over walls of our cities, juxtaposed right next to our rich eco-cultural heritage, then appealing to protect and nurture our rich bio-cultural heritage, origins and history with art should also be part of the cityscape."

A woman who runs a school and belongs to the Idu Mishmi tribe from the Lower Dibang Valley was even more emphatic, although she spoke to *Scroll.in* on the condition of anonymity.

"The dams should not be there because in no way [do] the dams represent the 50 years of Arunachal's rich culture," she said. "The dams will displace indigenous people in countless numbers and destroy large ecosystems in the entire region."

The anti-dam movement

The woman who runs a school said many members of her family, including her elder brother and her uncles, had been part of Arunachal's anti-dam movement. Lower Dibang Valley, their home, is the site of India's largest hydroelectric project. It was cleared in 2015, with the [government overriding serious environmental concerns](#). The dam threatens to wipe out 4,577 hectares of forest, which is also home to the Idu Mishmi community.

Anti-dam activists say local communities have been protesting against massive hydroelectric projects since around 2007. The Arunachal Pradesh government [signed 153 agreements](#) with both private and public sector players. Earlier this year, the government announced it had terminated 44 memoranda of agreement with private players and handed them over to private players. The government has consistently argued mega dams are not only a way to generate power but to control floods in the region.

This wisdom has been [challenged by scientists](#) and activists alike. Apart from the collapse of fragile ecosystems, loss in biodiversity and the dangers of building in a seismic zone, they could intensify the impact of floods, scientists argue.

"The dams would not be able to regulate floods given companies try to maximise power generation - in fact, floods would be a monthly affair," said herpetologist and geographer Chintan Sheth, who has worked extensively in the region. "Quite possibly mega dams will lead to more bank erosion downstream as the river is sediment hungry."

The environmental threat came with allied anxieties, Sheth pointed out, since the livelihood and cultures of local communities were closely tied to the ecosystem.

An environmentalist based in Roing in Lower Dibang Valley who has been associated with the anti-dam movement said that the Dibang dam was likely to bring about 30,000 migrant labourers to the area.

"We will be a minority in our own place, which will threaten the culture and demographic pattern," he said. "The dam site is being built on our ancestors' land."

At times, protests led to [violent clashes](#) between agitators and the police. They also spread to downstream Assam. Protests here stalled the Lower Subansiri dam project for [eight years between 2011 and 2019](#). But construction has resumed, and two units of the dam are set to be operational this year.

A fading movement?

Over the years, the anti-dam movement may have lost some momentum. The government launched a

crackdown, branding [activists Maoists](#), [“anti-nationals”](#), [anti-development and affiliated to international](#) groups in China. The police [periodically opening fire on demonstrators](#).

Protesting communities were also riven from within, especially as some poor farmers took the compensation that was offered. “All communities of my district, Lower Dibang Valley, were against it,” said Mili. “But then politics came, things happened, people divided into factions, anti dam-pro dam within the affected community – you know how things work when the politics gets into it. A few took the compensation in the name of protest.”

At one point, Mili said, there was too much pressure to continue the protests. “We could not handle it,” he said.

The environmentalist from Roing agreed. “There is a lot of division in our own clan,” he said. “Many of my clan members are also supporting the dam. Money eventually breaks relationships.”

Art and protest

Both Mili and Mahanta argued that the protest movement was renewed every generation. The graffiti painted on the secretariat building had breathed new life into a dying debate, they felt. It suggested new modes of protest that could be more effective.

“We believe that art can be used to raise [our] voice and it could be the most effective medium of protest,” said Mahanta. “We have to express protest in the right way. Violence can’t solve the problem. We don’t believe in violence.”

Mili agreed, saying protest art may be more effective than protest rallies, or even social media posts and his work in the courtroom. “It does not get the attention of the young generation, it’s very hard to get their attention – but the graffiti really did wonders. Maybe I should start taking a course for that,” Mili joked.

Besides, Mahanta said, it is not as if the graffiti was against all dams in Arunachal Pradesh. “We wrote no more dams,” he said. “It was not written against the existing dams. We have not said or written against development. We are against mega dams. Mega dams will cause destruction in Arunachal and downstream in Assam”

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