

OPINION » COLUMNS

Published: October 27, 2015 00:12 IST | Updated: October 27, 2015 00:12 IST October 27, 2015

WORLD VIEW

We need to talk about the Brahmaputra

- [Anamika Barua](#)
- [Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman](#)



The Hindu

The 2,900 km long Brahmaputra River is trans-boundary river and one of Asia's longest rivers passing through Tibet, into India and Bangladesh before flowing into the Bay of Bengal. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar

India and China need to engage in co-managing the regions' rivers and ensure that development is not impeded by unnecessary posturing on the sensitive issue of water

The operational commissioning of the Zam Hydropower Station earlier this month on the Yarlung Zangbo river, also known as the Zangmu Hydropower Project, located in Gyaca county of the Shannan prefecture in China, and considered to be Tibet's largest such facility, has raised fresh concerns in downstream India, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. New Delhi had information about Beijing's plans of developing hydropower on the Yarlung Zangbo for over five years now, with other projects such as Dagu, Jiacha and Jiexu in different stages of planning/construction.

The reading of the Sino-Indian diplomatic engagement over the transboundary Yarlung Zangbo (Tsangpo)-Brahmaputra river system has largely been through the lens of suspicion and lack of information/data sharing on the shared river system. Any bilateral government-to-government interactions on the Brahmaputra are shrouded in bureaucratic secrecy, overshadowed by the baggage of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict and the ensuing territorial contestations over Arunachal Pradesh. This strategic straightjacketing accorded to the Brahmaputra has led to basin-wide co-riparian mistrust.

It is time for both India and China to go beyond the specifics of project sanctioning and commissioning announcements, and look at the larger issues facing the Brahmaputra basin as a whole, investing in multilateral intent and spirit. We need to understand how the existing asymmetry/ inequality in riparian relations of power can be addressed politically and economically, especially in the Brahmaputra case, where both countries are regional competitors, while the co-riparian countries of Bangladesh and Bhutan stagnate in the list of Least Developed Countries.

Engagement processes

India and China, therefore, need to move towards a framework of engagement and dialogue on the Brahmaputra, as a precursor to any negotiation. The dialogue needs to be inclusive, providing a platform to various stakeholders and identify new approaches to address the common problem. The Track 3 and Track 2 level dialogue process has the potential to enable greater people-to-people interactions, reducing trust deficit, changing the way Indians and Chinese talk, think and approach solutions.

While we may not see a formal treaty of understanding in the immediate future, we need to explore options on how New Delhi and Beijing can engage in alternate processes moving towards future treaties on the Brahmaputra. The dialogue processes need to lay the ground towards recognising the convergences and divergences, and go beyond the existing fear and notions of 'steal the river' and 'upstream hegemons'. The dialogue must address the concerns of various stakeholders and sub-national units within the respective riparian countries. The success of the internal dialogue processes will depend on how much of a voice sub-national units such as Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have in influencing New Delhi's engagement and dialogue with Beijing on the river.

Joint research

An attempt must be made through the dialogue to bring together the interconnected research on rivers, infrastructure building and other related aspects, ranging from politics, engineering, geology, economics, social scientists, hydrologists, environmentalists, activists forums, local stakeholders, which is now missing. The Memorandum of Understandings and Expert-Level Mechanisms currently existing between

India and China on hydrological data sharing are key building blocks, as information sharing between countries are a critical phase to any negotiation process.

Sub-regional cooperation groupings such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Cooperation Framework can create an enabling environment for mutually inclusive sub-regional participation and water resources sharing. The BCIM process can support and lead research on country specific infrastructure projects, their impact on the local eco-systems, the riverine communities and other local stakeholders.

The South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWaters), based in Hyderabad, has a flagship programme, 'The Brahmaputra Dialogue', aiming at a multi-stakeholder dialogue towards fostering transboundary water management in South Asia. In the past two years since inception, the research programme has found remarkable merit in the process through Track 2 and Track 1.5 participation of civil society members, academics and diplomats from Itanagar, Guwahati, New Delhi, Dhaka, Thimphu and Kunming.

The participants expressed concern that the lack of dialogue on the Brahmaputra has led to rising tension, speculation and apprehension among the riparian countries, as well as between provincial governments within India, for example Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. They emphasised the importance of holistic river basin management, transboundary joint river basin research, to enable discussion among the river basin stakeholders, which will in turn supplement formal mechanisms between the governments.

India and China need to engage purposively in co-managing the rivers of the region, and thereby ensure that the development of the region is not impeded by unnecessary posturing on the sensitive issue of water, which can impact other bilateral issues. The totality of Sino-Indian bilateral relations and mutual economic cooperation would largely depend on how they handle the issue of water, which will become even more scarce, given huge population growth in both countries, and in downstream Bangladesh.

Amidst the quiet and the disquiet of the Brahmaputra, the process of dialogue should rise, creating a participatory framework and roadmap towards a better understanding of the layers and dynamics of a truly regional river basin, having sustained civilisations along its unbounded flow.

(Anamika Barua is Director, SaciWaters, Hyderabad, and Associate Professor at IIT Guwahati. Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman is a Doctoral scholar of Development Studies at IIT Guwahati.)

Printable version | Oct 27, 2015 11:43:01 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/world-view-column-we-need-to-talk-about-the-brahmaputra/article7806587.ece>

© The Hindu