

Transnational policy dialogue for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River Country level dialogue

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Guwahati, India

The country level workshop for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River was jointly organised by Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG) and South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS), India on September 10, 2013 at Guwahati. The goal of the meeting was to create an enabling environment for a discussion on issues critical to the future of Brahmaputra River's water resources, the peoples and ecosystems dependent on them, and in the interest of the co-management of the Brahmaputra by Bangladesh and India. The program brought together researchers, academicians, water professionals, representatives from NGOs and CSOs, and the media to have a dialogue on policy issues related to co-management of the Brahmaputra and to exchange ideas regarding probable platform of mutual interactions in the future. The program was funded by The Asia Foundation, New Delhi under the project titled "Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River". The partner institutions in this project are: the South Asian Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS) and the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG) from India; and the Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET from Bangladesh. This workshop was preceded by a similar country level meeting in Dhaka in August, 2013. Carrying this effort forward, a joint dialogue of Bangladeshi and Indian water professionals working on the Brahmaputra River is being organised to discuss probable platform for future interactions. As mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal of the program is to provide a space to influence policies for joint management of Brahmaputra River by co-riparian countries through Track three and track four diplomacy efforts.

Dr. Anamika Barua of IITG welcomed the participants and opened the session by setting the objective of the dialogue. She said that the group's effort is to bring all stakeholders together on a common platform to discuss the issues around co-management of Brahmaputra River. Dr. Anjal Prakash of SaciWATERS presented the major issues around management of the transboundary Brahmaputra River. He said that there is lack of bilateral/multilateral agreements and treaties between Bangladesh and India and that none of the riparian countries signed the UN Water Convention 1997, indicating governments' apathy in understanding the fragility of the system. Widespread corruption, lack of transparency in fund management, and technological bias are some of the key features of the Indo-Bangladesh relations with respect to the river. Further, there is lack of sharing of scientific information and an absence of joint researches between the Bangladesh and Indian academic communities. The modification of river flow due to barrages, sluice gates and

water retention structures are affecting connectivity and river depth on both sides of the border. This dialogue will help in building confidence that collaboration between Bangladesh and India is possible.

Speaking on the 'Policy aspects and institutional processes towards multi-stakeholder participation and dialogue', Prof. Dulal Goswami of Guwahati University stressed on sharing of scientific data between the two countries. "There is a great disconnect between scientific knowledge and managing water resources of Brahmaputra, which is intolerable. The colonial legacy is guiding the way the river is managed, and the government's priority is to boost hydropower, agriculture and fisheries without understanding the basin management issues and dwelling on how to co-manage this river" he said. Taking watershed as a unit for planning and management would be the way for the future, Prof Goswami stressed.

Prof. Chandan Mahanta of IITG said that "we have enough knowledge on how we should manage the Brahmaputra River. We have to focus on how we should do it. Brahmaputra has a drainage pattern that runs in diametrically opposite directions and drains in diverse environments. No other river bank erosion hazard is as critical as it is for Brahmaputra. Despite being water rich, the average per capita income in Brahmaputra flood plains is 30 percent lower than national Indian average. The major issues around the river are partial and uncertain accessibility of water resource database resulting in lack of adequate scientific planning, water resource related institutional arrangements that are bureaucratically complex and that most of the projects for management of the river are planned nationally without any consultation with co-riparian states within India. There is no room for inter-state dialogue for the joint management of the river, where do we see a dialogue happening with Bangladesh", he said. He called for an integrated approach for the management of the river that takes a multi-stakeholder view while designing and implementing any program. He called for a joint techno-social umbrella organization spread between Bangladesh and India to manage the river.

Dr. Sanjeeb Kakoty of IIM Shillong said that "in today's time, we live in a globalised ecology where human beings are an integral part of water ways. Ecological citizens can transcend political boundaries and when we can talk of a globalised economy, why can't we talk of globalised ecology". This change of perspective will help in saving the river for future generations. Dr. Homen Thangiam from Shillong gave a historical perspective on the Brahmaputra River. He said that in 1977, there was a plan to link Brahmaputra with Ganges so as to feed the rich peasants in mainland India. Off late, the priority has been shifted to hydro-electricity. Poor are not being benefited from these developments. Prof. Monirul Hussain said "I am more concerned with flood and river bank erosion. How do they affect the river? Studies indicate that due to river bank erosion there is a 7% loss of soil every year which is an important issue for a thickly populated area". Due to erosion, people in the region are becoming floating citizens as they lose their livelihood, land, and

also the citizenship. These are the ecologically displaced people who work as labourers in the informal sector and migrate to other parts of India in search of jobs.

Mr. A K Mitra, Chairman Technical Advisory Committee, Water Resources, Govt of Assam shared his experience of the Mekong River Commission visit. He said that the countries who are part of the commission took 38 years to come together and form an agreement for sharing water. The commission has developed a mechanism which could be replicated in the Brahmaputra region also. Apart from trans-boundary dialogues, Mr. Mitra stressed on the need for inter-state dialogue for the management of the river. Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and West Bengal apart from Assam need to come together to understand the river and find ways to co-manage it. He alarmed the participants by saying that the erosion in the river is a recurring process. The recent floods have wiped out many villages. Some of the issues that need attention are knowledge management and data sharing, regional cooperation in a cooperative framework, a decision support framework, trans-boundary governance mechanism, trans-boundary river transport and a cooperation mechanism for flood forecasting through sharing of data.

The second session focussed on the civil society responses for improving transboundary governance of Brahmaputra River. Prof Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, Retired Professor, Dibrugarh University, Assam stressed that there are six areas of cooperation - water transport, irrigation, fish production, tourism, power generation and sand collection (river survey to find out where sand can be collected sustainably from). NGOs are doing good work but they are very few in numbers and microscopic in their approach. "How much influence they have on the state is a question that still begs answers", he said. Mr. Raju Mimi, of Arunachal Pradesh said that the civil society in Arunachal Pradesh (AP) is vibrant. However, the issue faced by AP at the moment is rampant projects for harnessing hydro power without looking at the fragility of the mountain ecosystem. There is no common platform in AP that discusses these issues without being branded as being Maoist. There is a need to understand these developments in the context of sustainability of the river ecosystem. Mr. Rabindra Nath taking these points ahead, called for a joint meeting of civil society organisations in China, India and Bangladesh to discuss the co-management of the river. Presenting the case of Majuli River Island on the banks of Brahmaputra, Mr. Mitul Baruah of Syracuse University dwelled on the floods and riverbank erosion in Majuli. He discussed the role of the Indian State in the production of hazard-scapes in Majuli and other such geographies, and explained how people are responding to the changes. He stressed that the techno-natural interventions are reproducing the disasters in terms of drying up of wet lands and increasing vulnerabilities of the people.

The third session dwelled on the sustainability aspects. Dr. Partha Das opened the session and listed out issues that affect sustainability in the Brahmaputra region. He said that the decision making is

top down and the project implementation is non participative, often technically flawed. He stressed that there is a huge policy gap which needed to be tackled. For example, Assam does not have a State Water Policy and there is no specific integrated flood & erosion management policy in the basin states in other parts of India. Institutions in general lack transparency, accountability, efficiency, coordination and flexibility and therefore the issue of sustainable river systems have to be placed within this context. He stressed on the need for inter-state management of the Brahmaputra River saying that floods in Assam cannot be tackled without intervention in Arunachal Pradesh.

Dr. Sanchita Boruah focused on the habitat variability in the Brahmaputra River. She stressed that the flow regime is of central importance in sustaining the ecological integrity of flowing water systems, and the river channel presents a three dimensional form defined by its slope, cross section and pattern. Five critical components of the flow regime regulate ecological processes in river ecosystems: magnitude, frequency, duration, timing and rate of change of hydrologic conditions. She called for an eco-hydrological approach to the management of Brahmaputra River by monitoring and control of hydrological processes towards enhancement of resistance and resilience of aquatic ecosystems to anthropogenic stress by restoration of their homeostasis and river valley and catchment restoration.

The last session focused on the defining key strategies for taking forward the transboundary dialogue process. Mr. Ratandeeep Chaudhury of Tehelka said that north-east will be moving in a situation where there would be violence over the control of resources if there is business-as-usual approach to management of the Brahmaputra River. Dr. Ranjan Raj Kumar Singh said that the increasing spatial and temporal interdependence, rise in population and other such developments along the river is stressing the riverine ecosystem. "Conflict will rise around transboundary water governance issues in future" he said. The house discussed that in order to take this issue forward, there has to be a movement to share correct data on the Brahmaputra River. The dialogue on management of the river needs to move from multi-lateral to bi-lateral and the communication channel needs to be open for people to discuss the ideas freely. This platform provided by the project has been useful in building confidence between the two countries and therefore must continue for future.