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# Country Level Meeting Bhutan

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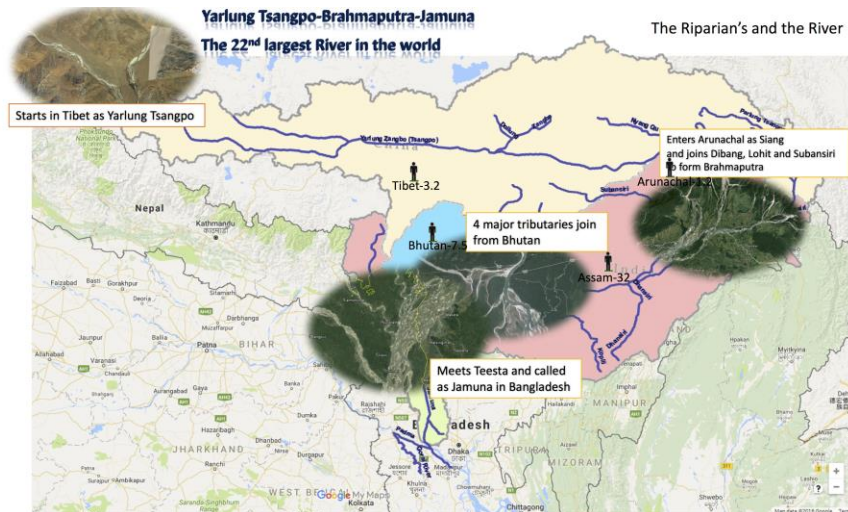
Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of the  
Brahmaputra River-Phase 3



29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016

Thimphu, Bhutan

The Brahmaputra River as the 22<sup>nd</sup> largest river shares its basin across four riparian countries (Bhutan, Bangladesh, China and India). The Basin is home to 130 million people and is considered one of the most critical transboundary river systems. The management of Brahmaputra waters is perceived through the lens of suspicion among the riparian States. It was realized that there is a strong need for dialogue and discussion across multiple stakeholders



(government, civil society organizations, funding agencies, academia, scientific community and media) to encourage integrated and coordinated basin management within the region. To support the co-management of the

Brahmaputra river basin, SasiWATERS initiated the project “Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance in Brahmaputra River” in 2013 with a bilateral dialogue between India and Bangladesh that became a multilateral dialogue in 2015 with the involvement of China and Bhutan. In its current phase (2015-2017), the project aims to develop a basin level institutional framework for strengthening the co-management of the Brahmaputra Basin.

Bhutan has four major tributaries – River Drangme Chhu; Puna Tsang Chhu, (Sankosh); the Wang Chhu; and Amo Chhu that play a significant role to form the mighty Brahmaputra in India. Although Bhutan participated in regional level dialogues among the riparian States, there was a need to understand country level specific issues of the usage and management of its rivers. It was essential to understand the views and opinions of the key stakeholders at a National level through country level meetings with different stakeholders. The meetings were organised from 29<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016 in Thimphu. The purpose was to understand the issues, challenges and opportunities of the rivers within Bhutan and also to identify and establish rapport with the key persons who can play an important role in the regional and country level dialogues.

## **Day I - 29<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

### ***Meeting with Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN)***

The first day of the meeting at RSPN was attended by:

1. Dr. Anamika Barua (Associate Professor, IIT –G)
2. Dr. Aditya Bastola (Senior Fellow, SaciWATERS)
3. Mr. Tshering Dorji (RSPN – Coordinator)
4. Mr. Tsheten Dorji (RSPN – Project Coordinator)

Dr. Anamika and Dr. Aditya introduced about the project - Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance in Brahmaputra River and the objectives of the Bhutan Country level meeting. The RSPN members shared some of the key persons with whom Brahmaputra Dialogue team could meet the next day, particularly the members from the Department of Disaster Management, Watershed Management Division and the National Environment Commission. The team at RSPN also shared their programs and activities related to Watershed Management.

The meeting with RSPN team helped to understand the Hydropower initiatives in Bhutan, Conservation Policy of the State, and the nodal agency responsible for management of river basins. The ongoing hydropower projects in Bhutan are assumed to generate economic opportunities for the Nation.

## **Day II – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

### ***Meeting at Secretary's Office, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MOAF)***

The meeting was attended by:

1. Dasho Rinzin Dorji, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan
2. Dr. Tsering Gyeltshen, Chief Forestry Officer, Watershed Management Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan
3. Mr. Sonam Gyelpo, District Environment Officer, National Environment Commission (NECS)
4. Mr. Jamyang Phuntsho, Senior Forest Officer, Watershed Management Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan

5. Dr. Anamika Barua, Associate Professor, IIT-Guwahati, India
6. Dr. Aditya Bastola, Senior Fellow, SaciWATERs, India
7. Mr. Tsheten Dorji (RSPN – Project Coordinator)

Dr. Aditya Bastola initiated the meeting with a brief introduction of SaciWATERs and the Project. He talked about how the project since its inception in 2013 has been successful in involving multiple stakeholders across all the four riparian countries. Dr. Anamika shared about the involvement of IIT (Guwahati) as a partner to the project.

Dasho Rinzin appreciated the initiatives of the project and partnerships, and shared that water resource is a national agenda for Bhutan. He also mentioned that Water Act of Bhutan 2011, the Water Regulation 2014 and the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) Plan are the key instruments that have helped to design the water road map for Bhutan.

The national Hydropower initiatives have generated several benefits; it has controlled erosion to a large extent and has created avenues for economic growth. The Secretary also shared that while constructing hydropower projects, downstream impacts are taken into consideration. Early warning systems are in place in case of flood and silting processes.

After the establishment of the Watershed Management Division in 2009, under the Department of Forests and Park Services within MOAF, it carried out a rapid assessment of the entire watersheds in Bhutan. Due to strong conservation policy for 60 percent of total land area of the watersheds to be under forest cover and low population, most watersheds in the country (out of the total 186) are considered to be in good conditions. Except 2 watersheds (Wangchhu & Punatsangchu watersheds) are considered as critical due to road construction and other anthropogenic activities.

The Secretary expressed that Bhutan has a good relationship with India in regard to sharing of International Waters. The Secretary of the Ministry once again appreciated the idea to bring multiple stakeholders to a common understanding for the co-management of the Brahmaputra River Basin. He encouraged SacWATERS and IIT (G) to continue the initiative and expressed his full support to participate at regional and national level dialogues/meetings. He mentioned that the



Watershed Management Division would be the nodal agency to participate in such forums.

### ***1. Meeting with Tenzin Wangmo (Chief Environment Officer), National Environment Commission***

Dr. Anamika and Dr. Aditya shared the purpose of travel to Bhutan with Ms. Tenzin Wangmo who is the Chief Environment Officer, handling the Water Resource Coordination Division at the National Environment Commission (NEC).

Ms. Tenzin shared that NEC is an autonomous body of the Royal Government of Bhutan, with a mandate to formulate, review and revise environmental protection Laws/Acts. It is the highest body in decision-making and coordinating matters related to protection, conservation and improvement of natural environment. She further shared that though the NEC is bestowed with the task of coordinating, they have no decision-making authority.

Ms. Tenzin emphasized on the fact that the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) Plans are in place but it is yet to be implemented. The Plan primarily focuses on coordination between different sectors within a watershed. The NEC is mandated to establish River Basin Committee (RBC) under the Water Act 2011 and the Water Regulation 2014. The RBCs are empowered agencies within a basin to manage water resources and to enhance its economic values. The primary function of RBC is to ensure community participation in the protection, use,

development, conservation, management and control of water resources in its area of operation. The RBC includes a representation of Governors of all the four districts that cover the basin, local elected Chairman of Development Committees, Environment Officers, and Member Secretariat of NEC.

Ms. Tenzin highlighted that for the management of the river basins in Bhutan, a total of 10 ministries (Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Education, Bhutan Electricity Authority, Dzongkhag Tshogdu, Gewog Tshogde), and two autonomous bodies (Department of Hydro-met Services and National Environment Commission) are involved. Representation from these Ministries and Departments form the Bhutan Water Resource Board. She agreed to participate in the upcoming Regional Workshop on Co-Management of Brahmaputra Transboundary River Basin on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2016. However, she requested to formally invite the Secretary, NEC.

## ***2. Meeting with Ms. Sonam Deki (Senior Program Officer), Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs.***

Members present:

1. Ms. Sonam Deki (Senior Program Officer), Dept. of Disaster Management
2. Dr. Anamika Barua, Associate Professor, IIT (Guwahati), India
3. Dr. Aditya Bastola, Senior Fellow, SaciWATERS, India
4. Mr. Tsheten Dorji (RSPN – Project Coordinator)



Like the earlier meetings during the day, both Dr. Anamika and Dr. Aditya shared the purpose of their visit to Bhutan and explained about the Project to Ms. Sonam Deki. She highlighted that Bhutan is faced with a multitude of hazards: Earthquakes; Glacier Lake Outburst Flooding (GLOF); Seasonal Flooding; Land

Slides/Windstorms; Forest Fires and Epidemics. To address these, she stressed the need for Department of Disaster Management to coordinate with different Ministries and their Departments such as Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Bhutan Police, Engineering Design & Contract Department and many others. The challenge being that disaster is often considered from a response perspective.

In 2005, Disaster Management was established as a division under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. With the increasing incidence of disasters in Bhutan, the division was considered a full-fledged Department in 2008. For strategic purposes, today the Department has three divisions – Risk Prevention and Reduction; Preparedness and Response and Rehabilitation and Recovery. It conducts activities to generate awareness and builds capacity of community members and district officials on disaster threats and preparedness including GLOF. To enhance emergency response, the department directly works with the School Authorities in preparing school specific disaster plans and conducts mock drills for disaster preparedness.

The officer explained that the Disaster Management Act, 2013, largely governs the functioning of the Department. The Act directs establishment of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), endowed with the responsibility to review and approve policies, conduct vulnerability mapping, and allocation of funds among others. The NDMA is composed of Secretaries from all the Ministries/Public Sectors, representatives from Private Sectors, the head of the Department of Disaster Management and the Prime Minister as the Chair. The NDMA meets once in every two years to review policies and programmes.

Ms. Deki shared that the Department is struggling with several challenges to draft the Disaster Contingency Plans for the Districts, integrate bottom-up approach, address emerging issues. They lack in awareness on new strategies and tools and also in equipment for preparedness and response including urban disasters such as earthquakes.

The meeting with different Stakeholders from the Government helped to understand the challenges in managing its water resources particularly on coordination mechanisms, decision-making and implementation. Although Bhutan is strongly committed towards protection of environment including its water resources, much of these have evolved through a strong leadership led by the Monarch.