

Ecosystems for Life

Advisory Meeting held on 29 January, 2014, at Guwahati (Landmark Hotel)

In an earlier meeting, held at Calcutta Research Group's office, on 6 January, 2014, it was decided that extensive field work has to be done in the states of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh. In this leg, study on Barak valley was felt to be an inseparable part of the whole project. Tripura was believed to be crucial in terms of cross-border sharing of resources. It was also agreed that another important part of the study would be the issues of resistance or anti-dam movements. Apart from these, the issues of ecology, floods, riverbank erosion, livelihood concerns, everyday life in chars and border areas, migration, trafficking would be addressed. Further, it was also decided that all the issues/problems would also be addressed from a gendered perspective. In order to have expert opinion about the tentative plan of research work in India's Northeast, it was decided to have an advisory meeting at Guwahati, where activists, researchers, academics and journalists of India's Northeast would participate and help us chalk a concrete plan of action.

As decided in the earlier meeting, an advisory meeting was organized at Guwahati. Participants included, Ranabir Samaddar (Professor and Director, Calcutta Research Group), Monirul Hussain (Professor, Department of Political Science at the Gauhati University), Neeraj Vaghlikar (Kalpavriksh), Rajat Roy (Senior journalist), Jayanta Bhattacharya (Senior journalist, PTI, Tripura), K K Chatradhara (Activist, People's Movement for Subansiri and Brahmaputra Valley), Bharat Bhushan (eminent journalist), Patricia Mukhim (Editor, Shillong Times), Sajal Nag (Professor, Assam University, Silchar), Bodita Acharya (WinG, Assam), Arup Jyoti Das (Director, Centre for Koch Rajbanshi Studies and Development and Northeast Correspondent of International Institute of Social History), Anirban Roy (journalist), Sayantani Chatterjee (TISS, Guwahati), Babul Gogoi (Media person and online activist), Dileep Chandan (Editor, Asom Bani), Atig Ghosh (Honorary Research Associate, Calcutta Research Group and Assistant Professor, Viswa Bharati University) and Madhurilata Basu (Research Assistant, Calcutta Research Group)

The meeting started with Prof Samaddar thanking all the participants for taking part in the advisory meeting. The reason for organizing such a meeting was also made clear to them. Introducing the theme, he talked about the current research endeavour.

The first session was on 'Flood, Displacement in Brahmaputra Valley: State of the Research and Media Response'. The speakers were Prof Monirul Hussain and Neeraj Vaghlikar. The session was moderated by Rajat Roy. Prof Hussain highlighted that no study on Brahmaputra would be complete if one fails to take into consideration the unique life experiences of the people living along its banks or its tributaries and distributaries. People dependent on the river system have a different way of looking into the issues of ecology, development etc. He suggested that lives in charlands would become important in understanding issues like ecology, resource crisis, migration, livelihood issues. Neeraj Vaghlikar, while talking about the construction of dams in the Himalayas in the north eastern part of the country he emphasized, the drastic daily variation in river flows, which will take place after these dams are commissioned, particularly in winter. He also explained how the flow

during peak load water releases in the major rivers in winter will be equivalent to average monsoon flows and will cause a 'winter flood', drowning those areas that are used by both people and wildlife on a daily basis in winter. The downstream livelihoods and activities likely to be impacted by this human made flow fluctuation in the eastern Himalayan rivers include: fishing, flood-recession agriculture, river transportation and livestock rearing in grasslands for dairy-based livelihoods. Thus, he was of the opinion that while doing research on river basins or on dams, the technical aspect should be highlighted. Arup Jyoti Das, making an intervention stated that unfortunately, much of the technical aspect gets ignored while reporting for newspapers.

'Rivers, Resources, Regions: Assam, Arunachal and Tripura', was the second session. K. K. Chatradhara, pointed out that a rise in population has resulted in the shrinking of natural resources, which has given rise to disputes over natural resources in many parts of the world. He further argued that development works undertaken by the state, benefits one community and pauperizes another. In Northeast India, this divides the already fragmented society making things worse. Jayanta Bhattacharya mentioned that cross-border sharing of resources can be turned into a reality if India and Bangladesh agree to connect Gumti with Meghna and Howrah with Titas, to facilitate movement of goods between the two countries. Another way by which this region has been able to share resources across borders, is by setting up border haats. The decision to set up border haats in different parts of the north-east was taken in the meeting between the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh in January, 2010.

The next session focused as to how trans-border natural resources cutting across jurisdictional boundaries (trans-boundary rivers, lakes, wetlands, protected ecosystems national parks, game reserves, mountains, minerals, oil gas etc.), are vital for the survival of a highly populated region like South Asia. Countries sharing such resources, should have mutual concern for the shared natural resource, area, eco-system, livelihood of the poor etc. The idea of equitable utilization of shared natural resources, states cooperate with a view to control, prevent, reduce or eliminate adverse ecological effects, which may result from the utilization of such resources should have to be adopted. Otherwise, resource crisis and environmental hazards would trigger a protracted nature of injustice, in the form of migration for a considerable section of the population, who are heavily dependent on the nature for their survival. Patricia Mukhim, again brought to the fore, that communities have to be involved when it comes to sharing of natural resources and monopoly of state or other private companies have detrimental effect on ecology. Bharat Bhushan, citing the cases of Indian fishermen caught on crossing the Indo-Pak border and the failed Teesta river water treaty, he emphasizes that national jingoism should take a back seat, while dealing with people, livelihood issues, resource sharing etc. Bondita Acharya noted, that conservation of nature is crucial for achieving sustainable development, guaranteeing secure livelihoods for the poor and building a green economy. She further mentioned that attack on nature means attack on women, as in rural areas, it is their responsibility to run the household and they are heavily dependent on nature for running their household. The session was on 'Migration, Sustainable Livelihood and Trans-border Cooperation' and was moderated by Prof Sajal Nag.

The next session primarily aimed at locating the cultural resources. Cultures living along the rivers have all developed their own systems for understanding, managing, and valuing natural resources, systems which are, to varying degrees, interdependent. One's understanding of rivers as living systems would be seriously jeopardized if the local cultures and social sensibilities or the world views at the grass-root level are marginalized. The usefulness of rivers as life sustaining systems has been reflected through various cultural resources like literature, music, films, art etc. Any study of river as a living system would be inadequate if we cannot fathom the importance of river beyond socio-economic-national needs. Prof Sajal Nag, while briefly talking about the history of Barak valley, shared with the participants many anecdotes. Babul Gogoi, talked of some of the Assamese films that had centered around rivers. The session was moderated by Atig Ghosh.

The meeting ended with Prof Samaddar thanking all the participants for their participation and inputs.