

Ecosystems for Life

Advisory Meeting on 6 January, 2014 (Kolkata)

Participants: Sutirtho Bedajna, Keya Dasgupta, Kalyan Rudra, Biswajit Roy, Rajat Roy, Ranabir Samaddar, Atig Ghosh and Madhurilata Basu.

The Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna (GBM) basin comprises a huge system coming second to that of Amazon and is made up of the catchment areas of 1.75 million square kilometers, stretching across five countries – China, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal¹. Rivers throughout history have enabled prosperous settlements along its banks and have decided the fate of the people living by its sides. These three rivers play pivotal roles in sustaining life and the environment.

The 2011 Bonn Conference, “The Water, Energy and Food Security Nexus – Solutions for the Green Economy”, highlighted the need to realise that water, energy and food security are connected in critical ways and urged involved parties to address the issues in an integrated way through close collaboration of all actors. Though the Indian National Water Policy 2011, states that matters of international/trans-boundary river water sharing and management should be solved on bilateral basis through consultations among riparian states, the reality is that the issue of national interest gets primacy.² But this hampers the process of reconciling the competing demands for international river water. This relegates matters of ecology and sustainable development and international river water becomes property of riparian states, where no party is willing to compromise.

The participants unanimously stated that while conducting the study (on GBM basin), the following questions/things have to be kept in mind:

- When governments are more interested in signing treaties with regard to transborder river water sharing or formulating policies to inter-link the rivers, it becomes pertinent to ask, what about the river itself?
- Populist policies of government ensure laws or acts that play to the crowd. However, whenever a policy has to be made with regard to a particular river, one has to keep in mind the principle of basin as a unit of development.
- While forging treaties or making domestic water policies, the issues of biotic and abiotic metabolism of river basins should given due importance.

Keeping the short duration in mind, it was decided, that the current endeavour would be divided into two legs. There would be two teams, comprising researchers, journalists and activists focusing on the Ganga and the Brahmaputra basins respectively. The two legs would focus on the following areas:

Ganga Basin

West Bengal

Sunderbans-

Here the study would try to find as to how people negotiate with nature and other vulnerabilities. The researchers would look into the issues of livelihood, resource sharing and resource crisis and the issues of migration and trafficking. The research would also try to show why Sunderban is important when it comes to the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna basin

Nadia-

In Nadia, river water pollution is a serious problem, leading to the decay and slow death of the main river, Churni. Pollution of river Churni, riverbank erosion are serious issues that need to be addressed. How people survive along the banks of the river would also be an important part of the study. Further, it was felt that researchers should look into the brick kiln industry in the district, which is one of the contributing factors for the slow death and decay of rivers.

Malda & Murshidabad-

Floods and riverbank erosion are a constant problem for Murshidabad and Malda. The need was felt that going to different flood affected or erosion affected areas, interviewing the government officials, the people living along the banks would be important for the overall study.

Activist and river water expert Kalyan Rudra, Biswajit Roy, senior journalist and Sutirtha Bedajna, researcher, were of the opinion that in order to do justice to the entire project, the river systems along with issues of ecology, culture, livelihood, resource sharing, river bank erosion, floods have to be taken into consideration. All these issues should be seamlessly woven or inter-linked. Any study about a river would be incomplete otherwise. Thus, it was decided that Sunderbans, would be crucial for the study. Prof. Ranabir Samaddar was of the opinion, that issues of migration and trafficking should be addressed in order to have a real understanding about life in chars or life in deltaic Bengal and particularly the border districts of West Bengal.

Brahmaputra-Meghna Basin

India's Northeast

It was decided that the states of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh should be the focus. 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.

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.

ⁱ Ahmad, Q.K. et al eds., 2001. Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Region: A Framework for Sustainable Development. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

ⁱⁱ Government of India Ministry of Water Resources .2012.NATIONAL WATER POLICY (2012), at <http://wrmin.nic.in/writereaddata/linkimages/NWP2012Eng6495132651.pdf>