



India-China Transboundary Water Cooperation

Challenges and Opportunities.....

The mighty Himalayas are the home 10 major rivers of the region. The Brahmaputra river has a total length of 2,880 kilometres and is the 22nd longest river in the world, its total drainage area is 5,73,394 square kilometres, and is shared by China, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh as co-riparian basin countries. The Brahmaputra is the lifeline for communities living along its banks.

The Brahmaputra is truly a frontier and trans-border river which has seen little conversation or dialogue among its co-riparian countries. Riparian communities have learnt to live in harmony and move along the meanders of the mighty river over centuries. One of the popular composition, asks the mighty Brahmaputra the reason for its quiet and unbounded flow, amidst the suffering and pain of the people living by its banks. This song can be re-contextualized in the backdrop of the great uncertainty and fears among the communities living in the Brahmaputra river basin. The fears about possible conflict over the trans-border waters of the Brahmaputra in the future stems from the lack of conversation between the riparian countries and sub-national stakeholders, and this feeds into the hype and hysteria of unilateral interventions on the river.

The way forward is to bring about a larger understanding of rivers in this frontier space through joint research and monitoring, and generate a trans-Himalayan consensus on utilizing shared rivers in the region, and this will require a riparian leadership role by both China and India. Lower riparian anxieties can only be allayed through a framework of engagement and cooperation and India must push for more that the current Expert Level Mechanism with China.

At a time when rivers are likened to mere 'taps' by nation states, which they imply can be turned on and turned off, across borders to fulfil strategic objectives, we need to think about the larger ecology of the source of such trans-border rivers. The ability to negotiate successful trans-border arrangements for mutual benefit depends on how we integrate our core national development interests with a measure of ecological sense. China and India need to engage in sustained dialogue, and the Trans-Himalayan Development Forum can be a good platform for multilateral engagement of nations sharing Himalayan rivers.

The increased understanding of the Brahmaputra through a mix of modern research methods and traditional community-based knowledge systems is central to any dialogue being meaningful between and within the riparian countries. An emphasis on dialogue, multilateralism and cooperation will dispel the prevailing notions of conflict. The layers of understandings of the Himalayan ecosphere in a time of development rush by nations has to be nuanced in a combination of strategic foresight and ecological caution.

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The Brahmaputra River, termed as a moving ocean, is an antecedent snow fed river which flows across the rising young Himalayan range. Geologically, the Brahmaputra is the youngest of the major rivers in the world. The Brahmaputra river basin is the principal drainage of the North East India which flows across unique geo environmental and bio-physical settings with numbers of tributaries and sub-tributaries having local, regional and international ramifications. The basin is thickly populated and disaster prone and does not have any control throughout its journey. Management of such a unique river basin is not only complex but also a gigantic task. With advances in the scientific understanding of river eco-systems and long term river basins scale process, new river management approaches need to be developed that allow for integration of flood-erosion management and water resources development objectives with protection and conservation of the riparian and flood plain ecosystems.

Brahmaputra is the one among the mightiest rivers of Asia. It is a transboundary river. River Brahmaputra is called Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet. It emerges from Angsi Glacier, on the northern side of the Himalayas in Burang County in southwestern part of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) at an altitude of 4877m. it flows, through southern Tibet in easterly direction for a longer length, at an average height of 4000m at its easternmost point, the river bends around Mount Namcha Barwa and forms the Yarlung Tsangpo Canyon. The total length of Brahmaputra River is 2906 km and the river drains an area of 5,80,000 sq km.

Brahmaputra is most challenging Transboundary river which has not been managed in its truest perspective for sustainable development in the riparian countries. It is highly essential to have a pragmatic approach with international consensus for co-management of this river basin for mutual benefit among the shared countries. Various National and International countries are working to create a dialogue /consultation process to evolve a rational and acceptable approach for solving the common problems of Brahmaputra river basin and to achieve the goal.

In order to design sustainable solutions for flood management and water resources development for a complex river system like Brahmaputra it is imperative to ensure that management approaches and technical decision making are grounded in a good understanding of the nature to balance the developmental process particularly to ensure water security for the future.

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