

# Consolidated Report

## Nadi Baithaks in India and Bangladesh

***Assam, West Bengal, Tripura (India) & Bangladesh***

### Introduction

Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) is a five-year (2016-2021) regional programme supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam. The TROSA programme plays the role of a catalyst for community-led initiatives to uncover the root causes of the most pressing concerns and foster partnerships with an aim to achieve inclusive and equitable solutions. The programme's ultimate goal (impact) is to reduce the poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to and control over water resources.

Under the flagship of this work, Oxfam in Bangladesh in 2018 came out with the concept of conducting Nadi Baithaks or River Meetings (also known as 'Nodi Boithok' in Bengali), to raise and address the issues faced by the riparian communities. Oxfam implemented these Nadi Baithaks with the support from two partners – Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS) and Gana Unnayan Kendra in Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.

Observing the success of the initiative in Bangladesh and understanding its importance in raising concerns of local indigenous communities, the concept of Nadi Baithak was adopted by [CUTS International](#) in 2020.

In January 2020, CUTS International along with Jookto (an organization working at grass root level in India) and Oxfam in Bangladesh organised Nadi Baithaks, along the Kushiyara river bank in Fenchuganj, Sylhet district in Bangladesh with around 20 participants of fishermen and boatman community.

As part of year-4 activities (2020-21), CUTS International organised 20 Nadi Baithaks, along the trans-boundary rivers of North Bengal (West Bengal) and North-East India (Assam and Tripura), namely Barak, Raidak (Doodhkumar), Jaldhaka (Dharla), Gumti, Manu, Feni, Khowai and Muhuri rivers.

In total 21 Nadi Baithaks (between 2020-21) were organised along the trans-boundary rivers where approximately 480 participants were actively engaged in the discussion. Nearly 295 women participants were engaged in these baithaks who actively and strongly voiced their difficulties and issues.

## Overview of the Nadi Baithaks in Trans-boundary Rivers

### Kushiyara River (with the local communities of Fenchuganj, Bangladesh)

The Kushiyara River is a distributary river in Bangladesh and Assam, India. It forms on the India-Bangladesh border as a branch of the Barak River, when the Barak separates into the Kushiyara and Surma. The waters of the Kushiyara thus originate in the state of Nagaland in India and pick up tributaries from Manipur, Mizoram and Assam. Altogether, the Kushiyara runs about 160 kilometers, it is the deepest during the rainy season. The river can reach a depth of 10 meters.



*Nadi Baithak near Khusiyara River, Fenchuganj, Bangladesh*

### Barak River (with the local communities of Assam)

The Barak river is a 900-kilometer-long river and the main river in the Barak Valley, which is located in the southern part of Assam. This river can be considered as the lifeline of Barak valley. People inhabiting in the Barak Valley have been using the river for their various needs, especially for their livelihood. One of the major ethnic groups in the Barak Valley is the fisher-cultivator community who also earn their livelihood through fishing and agriculture.

### **Raidak (Doodhkumar) and Jaldhaka (Dharla) river (with the local communities of West Bengal)**

River Wong Chhu, or Raidak, originates in the Himalayas. In its upper course, it is known as the Thimphu Chhu at its origin point in Bhutan. The main river is a rapid stream, running over a bed of large boulders. The river debouches into the plains in Jalpaiguri district and then flows through Cooch Behar and Alipurduar districts in West Bengal before its confluence with the Brahmaputra at the Kurigram district in Bangladesh, where it is sometimes referred to as 'Dudhkumar'.

The Jaldhaka river is a trans-boundary river with a length of 192 kilometres, originating from south-eastern Sikkim. Flowing through Bhutan, it enters India from the Bindu village in the Gorubathan block in Kalimpong district in West Bengal. In Bangladesh, the river is known as Dharla river.

### **Gumti, Muhuri, Khowai, Manu, Feni Rivers (with the local communities of Tripura)**

The river Gumti rises from the range connecting Longtharai and Atharamura. After entering into the plains, the river generally flows in west and south-west direction and it enters into the Bangladesh territory at Sonamura. The total length of the river from origin to Indo-Bangladesh border is 167.4 km. The river then flows through plains of Bangladesh and meets the Meghna river system near Daudkandi.



*Nadi Baithak near Gumti River, Tripura*

Muhuri River is one of the prominent transboundary rivers of Tripura located in the southern part of the state. It originates from the Deotamura hill range, crosses the undulating plains of southern district of Tripura and then enters into Bangladesh. However, the frequently changing course of the river prevented the two nations from demarcating the boundary.

The River Khowai is the third longest river of Tripura, which is flowing through the Khowai District of Tripura. It emerges from the Longtarai hill range and enters into Bangladesh after flowing a distance of 133 kms in India.

Manu River originates from the Kahoisib peak of the Sakkanklang range located in the hills of Tripura (India) and for some distance passes through various narrow gorges with escarpments of naked rock rising often 30 m and more; cutting into deep and clear pools. As it descends into the more level plain near Kailashahar, it becomes a broad sluggish stream with a meandering course.

The Feni River, which forms part of the India-Bangladesh border, originates in the South Tripura district, passes through Sabroom town on the Indian side, and meets the Bay of Bengal after it flows into Bangladesh.

The trans-boundary rivers of India and Bangladesh are mostly perennial in nature. Overtime, due to flood and various other natural and man-made calamities, the river banks have been shifting continuously. Siltation, pollution and mining (sand) activities, have caused these rivers to lose their depth and capacity.

## **Key Issues and Challenges**

### **Impact on livelihoods**

River erosion severely affects livelihood of riparian population with many residents becoming homeless overnight. Many of the erosion-affected people are still living near their already eroded places with a hope of re-emergence of new land.

### **Severe bank erosion**

Bank erosion tremendously affects cultivable lands and settlements near to the rivers. Over the years, the change in the course of the river has changed the socio-economic conditions of the neighbouring settlements along the river, creating pathetic conditions to some by eroding away their living places and agricultural lands.

## **Impact of Barrage**

Barrages are constructed across the rivers to provide irrigational facilities in the agricultural fields, especially in dry seasons. Besides, it plays vital role to control flood during high discharge. But barrages have negative impact on character of the river.

## **Concerns over Water Sharing, especially in the Feni River**

Given the meandering course of Feni, which more or less zigzags along the international border of Bangladesh and India, it is hard to differentiate water sharing among Indian and Bangladeshi citizens at times. The border security forces on the Indian side have been strictly prohibiting the local dwellers to use river water for any sort of agricultural purposes or otherwise.

## **Creation of alternative livelihoods, distorting ecology**

Other than people who manage to secure Government jobs, which are limited, people migrate out in search of livelihood. People have now started creating alternative opportunities in the likes of stone and sand mining from the river beds. This has negatively impacted the river health and distorted the overall ecology in the area.

## **Same Work – Varied Wages**

There are growing concerns relating to differences in the wage structure of local men and women, who are involved in stone lifting and sand mining activities. Although, works assigned to both men and women are similar, payments of women labourers (Rs 250/100 CFT stone) are less as compared to men (Rs 350-400/100 CFT stone). The major reason behind such differences can be attributed to the fact that women take more time (approximately 10 hours) to finish a given daily assignment as compared to men (approximately 8 hours).

## **Key Entry Points towards Sustainability**

### **Practicing Community-based ecological restoration strategies**

Practices such as restoration of fish and replant eroding river banks with native trees to stabilise the soil and improve the quality of the river as a whole.

### **Strict restrictions on illegal activities:**

Although mining and stone-lifting is essentially unsustainable in maintaining the river ecology in the long run; given the ongoing practices, lesser usage of machine excavators in sand and stone mining would have manifold benefits in favour of the community and the larger society.

### **Existing dams to be renovated:**

Most of the dams constructed to prevent the havoc destructions caused by floods are under-maintained and require renovation.

### **Renovation of pumping stations**

Pump sets, which are installed in parts of the river banks for the purpose of crop irrigation are not in usable states, everywhere. The primary reason is lack of regular running of these pump sets along the year.

### **Prior information regarding the opening of lock gates of dams:**

The construction of dams in upstream of these rivers has obstructed water flow, leading to water scarcity in downstream areas. The local communities face the problem of artificial floods, and when the lock gates are suddenly opened to release excess water downstream. The communities claimed that they do not receive any prior water sharing or charging information from the local administration.

### **Creation of local jobs:**

People residing across these rivers do not have enough employment opportunities as they are remotely located. There are no effort to promote the local artisans and handicraft sector to facilitate in employing the people, especially women. Furthermore, animal husbandry, poultry and cage fish farming can be practiced in these regions.

### **Women specific employment programmes:**

Women generally work in fields during the seasonal paddy cultivation period, which happens twice a year. Earlier, women of the fishermen community would make hand-made fishing nets; but with the emergence of machine-made nets most of them have lost that work. Women of the riparian communities expressed that they can work in packaging and labelling industries, make incense sticks, promote hand-made handicraft items, and stitch uniforms for nearby schools with proper training.

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