

Nadi Baithaks

Platform to raise community concerns

Local and indigenous communities living near the transboundary rivers of South Asia are often detached from the water governance systems. Their participation in river-related issues is often neglected at the policy level. Under the Transboundary Rivers of South Asia programme, the concept of conducting Nadi Baithaks (River Meetings) along the river banks proves to be an effective method to raise and address issues these riparian communities face. In this context, this Learning Brief discusses the problems, challenges, and key findings of the Nadi Baithaks organised in India and Bangladesh.

Evolution of the Concept of Nadi Baithak

Transboundary rivers in South Asia, are governed as state-owned common pool resources. Over an extended period, local communities such as fisherfolk, boatmen, and women living in these river basins have been detached from the water governance systems, despite their livelihoods being dependent on water resources. This has increased the vulnerabilities, socio-economic inequalities, and poverty among river-dependent communities.

The concerns of local communities on river-related issues include, but are not limited to, grievances over encroachment of river banks, demand for protection from flood and erosion, resilient and green infrastructure, access to water for irrigation, agriculture, fishing, and drinking. Even in such contentious issues, the initiatives often get neglected at the

grassroots, mainly because they are weakly represented in discussions on water governance.

The regional programme Transboundary Rivers of South Asia ([TROSA](#)) intends to address this gap. 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 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 aegis of TROSA, Oxfam in Bangladesh introduced the concept of *Nadi Baithaks* or River Meetings (also known as '*Nodi Boithok*' in Bangla), in the Bramhaputra and Meghna basins to raise and address the issues faced by the riparian communities.

The *Nadi Baithak* is a process through which civil society organisations (CSOs), local organisations, local government officials, media, women, youth and vulnerable local and indigenous communities work collectively to identify water governance challenges and opportunities at the grassroots level.¹

The programme is designed to build the capacity of communities so that they can be engaged in influencing the policy at the state and national levels.²

Replicating *Nadi Baithaks* in India

Observing the initiative's success in Bangladesh and understanding its importance in raising concerns of local and indigenous communities, the *Nadi Baithaks* were replicated by CUTS International, a regional implementing partner of the TROSA programme in India, since 2020.

These *Nadi Baithaks* were conducted by consulting community leaders, representatives and members of local-self government.

In January 2020, CUTS International alongwith Jookto³ (an organisation working in the Barak Valley of Assam, India) and Oxfam in Bangladesh organised *Nadi Baithaks* along the Kushiya river bank at Fenchuganj, Sylhet district in Bangladesh, with around 20

fishermen and boatman community participants. Similar meetings were organised later along the banks of Khusiyara river in the Barak Valley of Assam, India.

In 2021, CUTS International organised 14 *Nadi Baithaks*, along the transboundary rivers Raidak (Doodhkumar), Jaldhaka (Dharla) of North Bengal (West Bengal) and Gumti, Manu, Feni, Khowai and Muhuri rivers of North-East India (Tripura).

In 2019, a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) was signed between India and Bangladesh on data collection and water sharing in the rivers Manu, Muhuri, Gumti, Khowai, Feni, Raidak (Doodhkumar) and Jaldhaka (Dharla).⁴ The broader objective of such MoUs are intended to benefit local communities.

The purpose of organising the *Nadi Baithaks* at these locations was to understand whether local communities are aware of such policy level actions and their response in this regard.

These *Nadi Baithaks* showcased information asymmetry at the grassroots and the socio-economic and livelihood challenges that people face in their everyday life. *Nadi Baithaks* engaged people from various local and indigenous communities, including women.

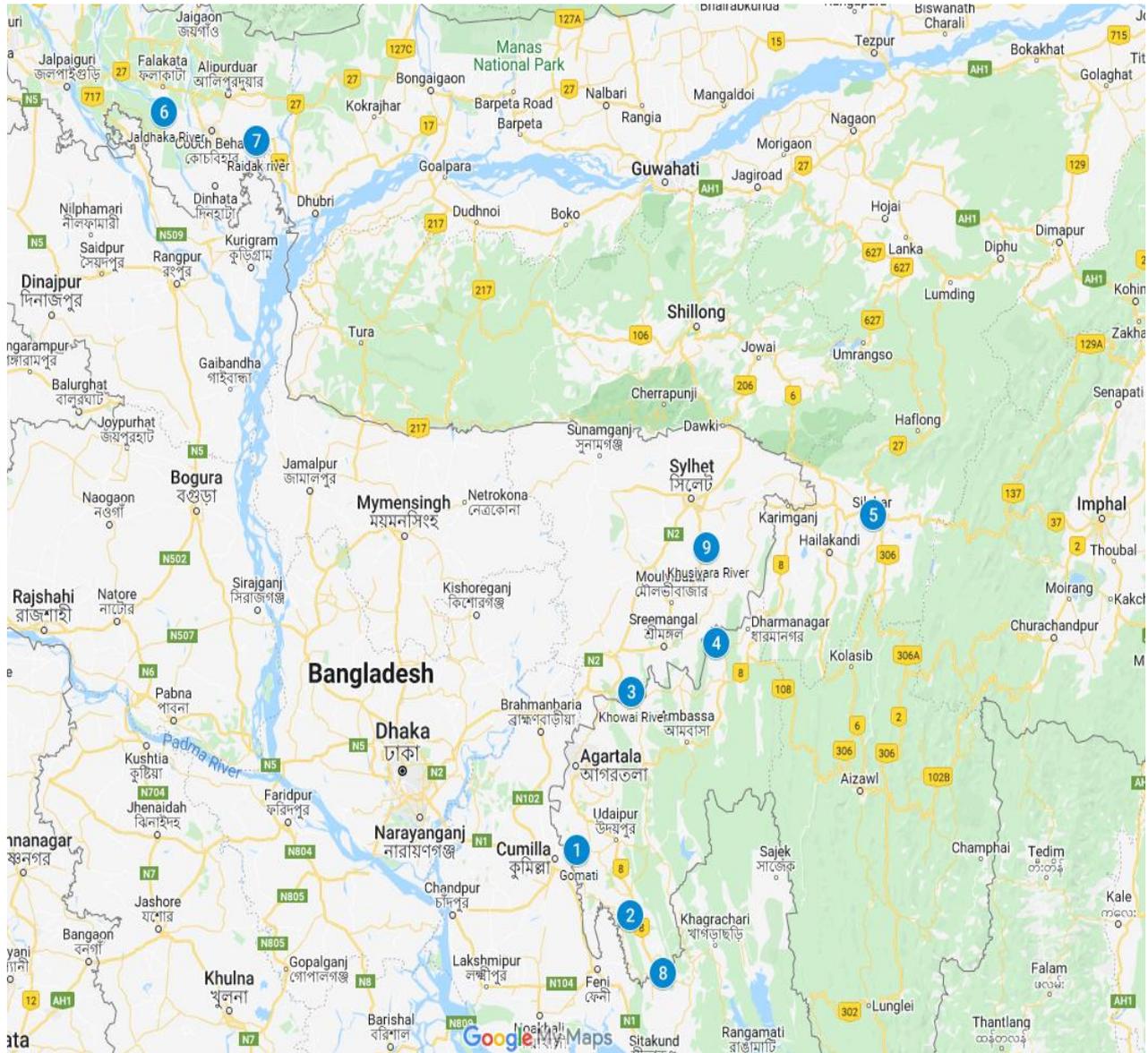
¹ <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/uncategorized/river-communities/>

² <https://www.readkong.com/page/hilsa-watch-trosa-learning-brief-evidence-based-advocacy-9334945>

³ <http://www.jookto.in/>

⁴ <https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/law-order/1496282-india-bangladesh-meet-on-river-water-sharing-on-mar-16>

Figure 1: Locations of Nadi Baithaks in India & Bangladesh



1. Gumti River, Tripura
2. Muhuri River, Tripura
3. Khowai River, Tripura
4. Manu River, Tripura
5. Barak River, Assam
6. Jaldhaka River, West Bengal
7. Raidak River, West Bengal
8. Feni River, Tripura
9. Kushiya River, Bangladesh

Key Issues

Prior information regarding release of water

The local communities face the problem of artificial floods when the lock gates are suddenly opened as they do not receive any prior information regarding releasing of water from the local administration.

Strict restrictions on illegal activities

Excessive sand mining and stone lifting activities have reduced the depth and capacity of these rivers. Local people expressed that government should impose more strict restrictions on such illegal activities.

Practising community-based ecological restoration strategies

River stabilisation works needs to be undertaken to prevent bank erosion and to improve the quality of river water. Also, appropriate measures and actions need to be taken to prevent unusual and unfair fishing techniques (for instance, diffusing poisons) to protect the river environment and ecology.

Creation of local jobs

People residing along the banks of these rivers do not have enough employment opportunities as there are no industries.

There is little effort to promote the local artisans and handicraft sector to facilitate employing the people, especially women. Women of the riparian communities expressed that they can work in packaging and labelling industries, make incense sticks and hand-made handicraft items, and stitch uniforms for nearby schools with proper training.

Key Learnings

Nadi Baithaks reveal that communities are unaware of the decisions taken by the respective government of India and Bangladesh with regard to water sharing. Hence, community consultations and dialogues are required at sub-national and sub-regional levels to ensure inclusive policy making.

Voices of local communities are weakly represented in decision-making. Constant engagement with communities will empower them to raise their voices, concerns and demands in local self-government/ union meetings.

Engaging media is crucial to facilitate informed discussion at community and policy level on transboundary water governance. This will enable demystifying the misperceptions that prevail in the context of transboundary water governance.



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