

TransPath: Water Transformation Pathways for Inland Water Navigation in the Brahmaputra Basin

Report on the Inception Workshop

Workshop date: April 10, 2023, 9:30-17:30 IST

Venue: The Metropolitan Hotel, Delhi and Zoom (hybrid workshop)

Workshop objectives:

- to determine participatory, pro- active, and transformative pathways for better water futures in Brahmaputra River Basin
- navigating diverse agenda to bring about equitable, just and sustainability-based transformations

Session1: Introduction of Team Members and Project

Facilitated by Bipul Chattopadhyay, Executive Director, CUTS International

The four-year-long duration of the case study seeks to reframe narratives around Brahmaputra River Basin Management. Our work is going to contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the balance between equity and ecology. He was cognizant of how Governments of India and Bangladesh: working on how to make the Brahmaputra more navigable waterway as economically viable, more ecologically sound and more equity among various stakeholders.

Anamika Barua, Professor, IIT Guwahati

She emphasized that we are not looking at the outcome of this project; in fact we are examining the process of arriving at state-level agreements and protocols. We need to have a participatory process to implement any state-level agreement/protocol. Transformations in the water sector are crucial to address the lack of livelihood opportunities overlapping with information asymmetry for communities. The scope of uncertainty is incorporated under the narrative of transformation. Inland Water Navigation remains the cheapest and most eco-friendly mode of transportation.

Session 2: Reflections from Experts

Facilitated by Veena Vidyadharan, Fellow, CUTS International

Jayant Singh, Vice Chairman, IWA

The emphasis by the government in India should be on making the overall inland waterway system cost-effective and making it more hi-tech needs to be ensured. Learnings from Bangladesh can provide a constructive possibility. Lack of good connectivity with railways and roadways, especially the last mile connectivity is lacking on the Indian side, the entire transport ecosystem needs to be synergized. He asserts that it takes decades for inland waterways to develop. He brought attention to the lack of on-ground human resources such as hydrological engineers for the Inland

Waterways Authority of India (IWAI). He ruminated about poor communication channels between Indian and Bangladeshi counterparts.

Sharmila Khanam, Deputy Director (Foreign Transport), BIWTA

BIWTA has been playing a vital role in multimodal connectivity. The government aims to revive 10000 km of waterways and restore navigability across the year. Communities need to be made more aware of the conservation of river systems. Merging traditional knowledge with technology usage is a constructive solution for enhanced community involvement.

Bangladesh shares 54 transboundary rivers with India, however, by way of inland water navigation has facilitated closer trade between Bhutan and Bangladesh; hence, cooperation with India when it comes to inland water navigation is inevitable as evident in Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT). She highlights tourism as a major sector for employment via inland navigation.

Partha Pegu, Director, IWTA

He discussed the deep involvement of AIWTA in Jibondinga, a World Bank-funded scheme for owners of country boats. Encouragement for women boat operators should also be part of the narrative of inland water navigation. Huge sediment deposits flow in from neighboring states in the Brahmaputra in Assam. Assam will be the first state in India to work with the Green Voyage 2050 to encourage the building of a green shipping ecosystem. AIWTA is also working on improving night time navigability by keeping passenger safety as a priority.

Session 3: Feasibility of Inland Water Transportation to Bring Transformative Change

Facilitated by Anamika Barua, Professor, IIT Guwahati

Syed Monowar Hussain, Independent Consultant & Former Director, BIWTA

He spotlighted the prominence of the informalized inland navigation sector. Domestic waterway traffic is dominated by non-standard boats. Non-certified boats of small capacity are allowed to operate in Bangladesh which is reflective of the majority of the inland water navigation in the country. Cross-cutting issues between fisheries and inland navigation are also often ignored. He suggested the introduction of floating border haats (weekly market) across India and Bangladesh through the transboundary rivers. He observes that the cross-border trade with Bhutan has opened a new window. Riverine border management leads to impediments to voyage permits, cross-border trade and local economies. Jute cultivation is entirely dependent on inland water navigation. The preponderance of sand mining mafia keeps the livelihoods of fishermen endangered.

Subhankar Dandapat, Independent Consultant & Former Chief Engineer, IWAI

He highlighted how every year dredging work needs to be done which sustains only for two-three months, dredging stands nullified after a couple of months. Studies related to river morphology, and sedimentation patterns in the Brahmaputra basin are essential but hard to come by. Traditional boats/country boats owned by marginal communities not only have no legal backing but institutional financing for buying the boats is also negligible. Manually operated boats, which are also most often non-mechanized, are passed on inter-generationally. Interestingly, he points to the absence of any clear

census about ports and terminals across India and Bangladesh. Elaborating more on the paucity of data, he again emphasizes the absence of any data on this unorganized sector of inland water navigation. Since the river banks are not stable, could we possibly have floating terminals for inland water navigation?

Malik Fida Abdullah Khan, Executive Director, CEGIS, Bangladesh

He expressed hope that BIMSTEC and BBIN can act as catalysts for furthering cooperation regarding inland waterways navigation. Conditions of waterways are poor: sedimentation (1 billion tonnes), declining navigability, morphological dynamics of river systems and climate change is hampering navigability. Inland Water Navigation cannot be perceived in silos – he focused on the significance of multi-modal transport.

Mandakini Kaul, South Asia Regional Coordinator, World Bank

South Asia is the least integrated region and given the expensive nature of container shipment in India, for Indian traders it is 15 percent cheaper to trade with a company in Brazil than with neighboring states. Elaborating on the feasibility studies conducted by the World Bank, she stated that Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out by the World Bank but such studies have never been bilateral, rather they are restricted to national level studies. The World Bank has sought to make inland water navigation as gender inclusive by providing sanitation facilities for women on boats plying on the navigational routes as well as infrastructure that are friendly for physically disabled operators and tourists. Creating linkages with coastal shipping is significant for ensuring seamless waterways. The motto is to make project designs more inclusive of gender and ecological dimensions.

Jyotiraj Patra, Climate Change and Adaptation Specialist, UNDP

He emphasized on the interface between science and business that cannot be ignored when it comes to the role of the private sector in inland navigation. Multimodality of the transport sector need not mean that railways and roadways suffer at the cost of development of inland waterways. We also need to ruminate on how inland water navigation can translate into progress for SDGs? He anticipated that the challenge is to not only bridge the information gap but also to seamlessly execute research and policies from the information gathered from on-ground.

Session 4: Gender and Social Dimensions in Water Governance

Facilitated by Sumit Vij, Assistant Professor, Wageningen University & Research

Sushanta Talukdar, Editor, NEZINE

He took to a hypothetical scenario wherein if all the small boats were to disappear, the changes that would be experienced to the entire landscape, will it be bearable? Elucidating on the resilience of the communities he brings the oft invisible women of the fishing community to the fore and how decarbonizing of fisheries market not only involves traders but women folk who are deeply engaged in the fish markets and very often compensated poorly. He took the instance of women getting as meagre payment as ₹5 to fill sacs for temporary construction of embankments. Therefore, the prominence of women in the informal economy in the inland navigation sector is unmissable.

Nuzhat Nueary, Program Officer, OXFAM

She remained skeptical of the seasonal unplanned dredging activities that can have adverse impacts for biodiversity. The adversity brought by big trawlers and vessels sabotage the inter community trading. While there are hardly any registered women traders, what is striking is the absence of women oriented sanitation facilities in terminals and boats. Boat registrations implies copious amounts of paperwork that requires anchoring of the small traders and potential boat owners who get no such formal support and thus have higher propensity to get exploited by information intermediaries. Transboundary inter community trading faces numerous impediments owing to narratives of securitization.

Mandakini Surie, International Development Consultant

She focused on going beyond token representation of women in the processes of making the water governance as more gendered and thus transformative in scope. Deepening of women's engagement needs to be executed rather than formal representation alone. She steered the discussion towards the gendered landscape of Brahmaputra itself. Upstream region with its greater availability of land has more well off male inhabitants while as you travel along the river downstream, marginalized people occupy the congested spaces. Most of all our feminist lenses must be intersectional that perceive Women of minority ethnic communities dalit women, women from religious minorities as part of diverse agendas. The agenda of enhancing inland water navigation should not revolve around increasing trade volume, lest the volume of Trafficking in Persons (TIP), illicit trade and Gender Based Violence become obscure notions in the dominant narrative.

Partha Jyoti Das, Head, Water, Climate & Hazard Division, Aaranyak

The centralization of particular waterways caused due to their nationalization subverts attention from regional and localized inland water routes that are unregulated but continue to sustain heavy traffic. If the distributaries and tributaries of Brahmaputra get blocked, the self-cleansing mechanism of the river will get disrupted thus becoming a reason for deteriorating health of wetlands across the Brahmaputra basin. The domination of Brahmaputra itself in the narrative for inland water navigation in theory must not sideline the realities of inland water navigation across its tributaries and distributaries. Trade imbalance in favor of India implies that empty boats can also be seen from Bangladesh that loads commodities from India. We, therefore, need to access the commodities export in part of India.

Medha Bisht, Associate Professor, South Asian University

She brought attention to feminist methodologies and how they enrich a researcher's framing of research questions and development of conceptual framework. One need not limit the conceptual framework to colonized narratives. In fact, postcolonial and post-structuralist conceptual frameworks problematize masculinities and add to the typologies of feminism that come to address the realities on-field. Centralizing women in the water sector in South Asia, she points out how women are knowledge holders and knowledge producers; but that the knowledge they hold is often deemed as unscientific and dismissed. Overall, her assertion is towards perceiving water governance across South Asia through a gendered lens.

Session 5: Reflections from Partners

Facilitated by Joydeep Gupta, South Asia Director, The Third Pole

Sumanta Biswas, Senior Programme Officer, CUTS International

Bottom up approach is crucial to bring about community engagement since we see that regulation of the waterways sector is centralized. Managing the sediment is not adequate, but we need to engage the community in managing sediment for multiple purposes. Without any incentives, the community will be reluctant to bring about transformations of river economies. We need innovation in order to get communities and women more deeply involved in bringing transformation in inland waterways.

ATM Zakir Hossain, Executive Director, JJS

There are people who are living without any access to services and governance in Bangladesh. Informing and communicating about misconceptions to the communities to reframe the narratives on ground regarding inland water navigation will be the central focus of JJS. When it comes to expanding the inland water navigation sector, land acquisition and compensation remains a massive challenge, given that laws in India and Bangladesh are distinctive as per their national legislations. In fact, land acquisition and compensation do not have uniformity across national boundaries itself. Inter-departmental synergy in Bangladesh and India is missing not only at the vertical level from national to state to local levels but also the various departments at the localized level.

Vani Bhardwaj, PhD Candidate, IIT Guwahati

Indigenous and dalit and ethnic minority masculinities and femininities can only be discerned when our on-ground way of researching keeps the narratives of women, girls, boys and men at the centre. The way we measure transformation itself is subjective given that what might seem as incremental change to us must be a massive change for the women on-ground. For instance, a homemaker who speaks up about her everyday routine for a researcher is finding her voice, recognizing that it is equally important. In such a small manner, feminist methodologies must inform all our research exercises.

Muhammad Monowar Ul-Haq, Junior. Specialist, CEGIS

In contrast to the Ganges Basin, the harnessing of navigation has not been efficient in the Brahmaputra basin. To bring about the transformative change, the hydro-morphological aspects need to converge with socio-economic dimensions in order to be synthesized at the grassroots as well as national and transboundary levels. The project will help inform the planning and processes of implementation of water governance levels. It will enhance regional cooperation as we adopt innovative solutions as the findings of the project bring transformation in policy planners for inland waterways.

Workshop Attendees

Civil Society

Bipul Chattopadhyay, Executive Director, CUTS International
Veena Vidyadharan, Fellow, CUTS International
Sumanta Biswas, Senior Programme Officer, CUTS International
Deepmala Ghosh, Research Associate, CUTS International
Vandana Sharma, Programme Officer, CUTS International
Vijay Singh, Assistant Director, CUTS International
Ram Saran, Programme Associate, CUTS International
Malik Fida Abdullah Khan, Executive Director, CEGIS, Bangladesh
Muhammad Monowar Ul-Haq, Jr. Specialist, CEGIS, Bangladesh
Nuzhat Nueary, Programme Officer, OXFAM, Bangladesh
ATM Zakir Hossain Executive Director, JJS, Bangladesh
Mandakini Surie, International Development Consultant
Partha Jyoti Das, Head, Aaranyak
Moitrayee Mondal, Programme Coordinator, Oxfam India

Media

Sushanta Talukdar, Editor, NEZINE
Joydeep Gupta, South Asia Director, The Third Pole

Private Sector

Md. Amadadul Hoque Molla, Trader, Rahman Navigation Company, Bangladesh
Atowar Rahman, Trader Dhubri, India

Academia

Anamika Barua, Professor, IIT Guwahati
Divya Tati, IIT Guwahati
Medha Bisht, Associate Professor, South Asian University
Sumit Vij, Assistant Professor, Wageningen University & Research
Tania Debnath, University of Allahabad
Snehasish Mitra, Postdoctoral Fellow, IIT Guwahati
Gitima Das, Research Scholar, IIT Guwahati

Vani Bhardwaj, Research Scholar, IIT Guwahati

Government

Jayant Singh, Vice Chairman, IWAI

Subhankar Dandapat, Independent Consultant & Former Chief Engineer, IWAI

Partha Pegu, Director, IWTA

Partha Gogoi, IWTA

Sharmila Khanam, Deputy Director, BIWTA, Bangladesh

Syed Monowar Hussain BIWTA, Bangladesh

Pritha Bhattacharya, Consultant, National Water Mission, Ministry of Jal Shakti

International Organizations

Mandakini Kaul, South Asia Regional Coordinator, World Bank

Jyotiraj Patra, Climate Change and Adaptation Specialist, UNDP