

Nadi Baithak
Feni River, Tripura, India
23 September, 2021

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. In a recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) Bangladesh allowed India to withdraw 1.82 cusecs (cubic feet per second) of water from the Feni River. It was expected that the MoU would come as a relief to the people of Sabroom in southern Tripura because it will ease a severe drinking water scarcity in the border town.

As per experts, India withdrawing 1.82 cusecs of water from Feni is likely to have little impact downstream in Bangladesh. However, there have been recent concerns about the monitoring mechanism of this withdrawal. Some experts apprehend that if India withdraws more water than anticipated, it may have an adverse impact on the Muhuri-Feni irrigation project in Sonagazi area, which provides water to some 230 hectares of land in Bangladesh.

Around 250-300 families (20 villages) dwell on Indian banks of Feni, where the ‘*Baithak*’ was conducted. Livelihood options for these villagers are not many as Sabroom is far from the central location of the state capital, Agartala. However, physical connectivity through roadways has massively improved over the last couple of years with a subsequent increase in the domestic footfall in these regions. Main livelihood options include seasonal paddy cultivation (twice a year) during the summer and winter seasons. Although the young population is interested in farming activities, not many are working on the fields owing to issues and challenges of accessing their cultivable lands, and are hence, working as migrant labours in parts of Tripura and even outside states. The situation has worsened after the COVID pandemic as MNREGA work has completely stalled in the Indian fields, post lockdown.

Key Issues and Challenges:

- ✓ **Concerns over Water Sharing** - There have been earlier concerns that India was lifting water from Feni to irrigate farms; as in some areas, Indian agriculture lands are located right beside the river which comes under the Indian territory. 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 has been strictly prohibiting the local dwellers to use river water for any sort of agricultural purposes or otherwise, owing to instructions from concerned authority.

However, concerns are manifold due to such adhoc-ism in decision making, as per locals. There are huge amount of cultivable lands, owned by the Indian farmers beyond the 500 meters of wired fencing on Bangladeshi side. Although owners are allowed to enter those plots during daytime with submission of necessary documents to the BSF, locals complain about lack of proper irrigational facilities within the fenced premises, since

drawing water from river is strictly prohibited. There are also growing concerns of over-securitization in these lands, which are considered '*sensitive*' for regular visits and cultivation purposes. Refraining regular farming activities in these plots have made the area barren and unproductive for almost years now.

- ✓ **River refrained from being used on a regular basis:** Owing to restrictions and prohibitions, water of Feni is hardly used by the local dwellers of Sabroom area for farming activities or otherwise. Ground water is generally filtered in the local plants and used for drinking purposes. There are multiple pumping units (13 pump-houses between Sabroom and Amligarh) on the Indian side of the river Feni with provision of drawing river water for irrigation. Those are hardly being used for watering the winter crops, although water is available in Feni throughout the year.
- ✓ **A shift in the nature of river Feni:** River has broadened over the years, shifting its natural course more towards the territory of Bangladesh. As a result of that, many farmers and residents have lost their land on both sides and are forced towards undergoing relocation without any support or financial assistance from the Government. The reduction in the river depth owing to siltation has not been strategically addressed by authorities.
- ✓ **Impact of Barrage:** Barrages are constructed across the river 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.

This impact of Sonagazi barrage in Bangladesh has quite a significant impact on the upstream and downstream segment of the Feni River. The main intension behind establishment of such a barrage was to primarily prevent the rivers to meet the sea in the estuary region. Although, such a barrage is significantly responsible for keeping the salinity of rivers intact, consequential environmental impacts of creating such obstacles in the natural flow of Feni are many. Some of the issues faced by the upstream users of river in India follow:

- Eventual reduction in the productivity of soil, as less sediments are carried if rivers are not allowed to meet the sea
- A river's estuary is a rich, natural ecosystem with 80 percent of world's fish catch coming from these habitats. Once the barrage is made, it has intensely reduced scopes of traditional fishing practices in the upstream of the river with a loss in livelihoods
- Barrages delay and reduce chances of flood. However, floods are responsible for high fertility as it deposits the needed nutrients on the land. Reduction in floods has also caused reduction in land

Key Entry Points towards Sustainability:

✚ **Embankments across the banks of river Feni** - Growing concerns of local communities regarding construction and necessary supervision of concrete dams on either side of the river stream has been duly noted. It has been narrated by the locals that no concrete embankments have been installed post 2010. In such conditions, villagers are compelled to construct temporary embankments made of bamboo structures on a yearly basis, all of which gets flushed out in the monsoon floods.

✚ **Connectivity Initiatives** - For connecting Sabroom (in Tripura) to Ramgarh in Bangladesh, a 150-metre long, 4-lane bridge, across river Feni titled “Maitri Setu or Indo-Bangla Friendship Bridge” has been conceived to directly open up access to Chittagong, Bangladesh’s largest seaport on the Bay of Bengal. The distance from Sabroom to Chittagong port is about 70 km, whereas distance



between Sabroom and Agartala, the state capital is 130 km. Presently, India’s northeast is connected to the rest of the country through a narrow corridor in West Bengal known as the ‘Chicken’s Neck.’ It is anticipated that a direct road to Chittagong port will accelerate India’s trade with southeast and east Asia. Although the bridge is inaugurated early this year, commercial movements are yet to begin.

✚ **Ideation of Sabroom SEZ:** As per 2019 notification, Tripura Industrial Development Corporation Limited (TIDC) would develop a agro-based Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Sabroom at an estimated cost of Rs 147 crore. The authorities are now hoping to draw an investment of Rs 1,550 Crores, resulting in creation of 12,000 skilled jobs in South Tripura, mostly aiming Bangladeshi investors. Rubber based industries like tyres, surgical threads, textile and apparel industries, bamboo industries, agri-based processing industries are expected to be set up at the SEZ. Once operational and with increased footfall, the river and its people would get better traction towards attaining their grievances to the equitable authority, which are often ignored at present.

✚ **Rightful invigilation** – Requirement of rightful invigilation by the Border Security Force with better access of Indian farmers towards entering their cultivable fields beyond the fenced border has been perceived. Although, people feel more safe with strict actions of BSF in terms of maintaining cross border security aspects, the often-over-controlling attitude of the authority is inhibiting the farmers to earn their livelihoods through cultivation in those fields and plots.

- ✚ **Practicing Community-based ecological restoration strategies** like restoration of fish and replant eroding river banks with native trees to stabilise the soil and improve the quality of river as a whole.
- ✚ **Addressing the upcoming environmental concerns** - the most significant environmental impact will be the excessive generation of waste from the plants established in SEZ, especially from the rubber-based industries, which will eventually flow in the rivers Feni and Muhuri. It will be almost impossible to stop the factories-generated waste entering in the Feni river, which will in turn, have disastrous implications for the riverine communities dwelling downstream.

More importantly, with the establishment of SEZ, more water will be required by the industries in SEZ, with the downstream population facing water crisis, especially in the winters. Given the MoU of water sharing between the two nations, a stricter, pro-people priority list should be made in terms of using Feni water in the best possible manner before such initiatives becomes a reality.

Although it is apparently understood that the present discourse of water sharing would not affect either countries, creating a sustainable mechanism for accurate measurement of withdrawal of river water from Feni would have longstanding impacts on the geopolitical relationships of the two countries. In a nutshell, signing of this MoU raises hope that some kind of water-sharing mechanisms will be created and implemented in word and spirit.

