



## Building Trust and Confidence

# Fostering a Spirit of Cooperation Among the Brahmaputra River Basin Riparians



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**CONTEXT:** The Yarlung-Tsangpo-Brahmaputra-Jamuna River (the “Brahmaputra”) originates in the Chinese Himalayas and flows through India and Bangladesh, with flow contribution from Bhutan. Its challenging topography and hydrology and complex geopolitical environment make its basin one of the most difficult in the world to sustainably manage.

The Brahmaputra Basin is home to 130 million people, of which about 86 percent live in rural areas, and is a major source of livelihood. It is prone to major flooding and rapid geomorphological changes in the wet season, which threaten life and property.

Brahmaputra Basin



In the dry season, low water availability and an uneven spatial distribution of water cause water stress and competition among users. Climate change is expected to increase evapotranspiration (increasing water demand), alter the spatial and temporal distribution of precipitation, increase the frequency of floods and droughts, and accelerate glacier melting.

Development in the basin has historically been piecemeal, and undertaken on a project-by-project basis at the country level. The complex geopolitics between downstream and upstream countries has been amplified by an incomplete basin knowledge base, the varying professional water resources management and technical capacities of the basin countries, and power asymmetry among the riparians. The absence of a basin-wide cooperative framework has translated into missed opportunities for regional economic growth, including in agriculture, hydropower development and trade, inland water transport, and disaster risk reduction.

**APPROACH:** Part of the South Asia Water Initiative's (SAWI) early engagement on the Brahmaputra Basin included leading study tours for high-level and technical delegations to the Yellow River Basin in China (2014) and the Mississippi River Basin in the USA (2015), where participants discussed pressing Brahmaputra governance issues and learned practical management approaches from basin organizations facing similar water resource management challenges. Notably, the delegations recommended that a "Brahmaputra Forum" be formed at the national level in each riparian country and at the basin level. While the national forums would explore local and national solutions to basin challenges; the regional forum would focus on working toward a "joint response mechanism" for issues such as navigation, hydropower investment and food management. For such a dialogue to be effective, they expressed, the process would need to increasingly extend to higher levels of stakeholders and be nimble enough to deliberate on emerging windows of opportunity for cross-border cooperation.

During this period, the policy research institute South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS), with The Asia Foundation and supporting partners, started a dialogue process in the Brahmaputra Basin, of which SAWI was largely an early observer. The first phase of the dialogue process (2013-14) included six consultation meetings in Bangladesh and India at the Track III diplomatic level (CSOs, NGOs and academics/ researchers). An initial status report on water management practices and policies for the Brahmaputra Basin concluded that "the innumerable channels and tributaries, varied topographical and climate regimes, and multiple water uses across countries unequal in size and power dynamics have made a straightforward management strategy seemingly impossible; concerns and voices of legitimate stakeholders have largely been neglected in previous basin dialogues and forums; basin dialogue is only bilateral in nature; and negotiations are largely formed by virtue of adversarial positional bargaining." A Track III Bangladesh-India joint dialogue meeting reflected on the country-level consultations and called for movement in diplomatic participation from Track III to Track II, to include more influential non-government stakeholders, including prominent ex-bureaucrats that interact regularly with government officials, and to bring in stakeholders from all four riparian countries to enable a more holistic conversation on Brahmaputra management issues.

In phase two of the dialogue (2014-2015), SAWI was a behind-the-scenes influencer, helping to heighten riparian government awareness of and confidence in the dialogue process, and to secure participation. For the first time, Track II stakeholders from India (Arunachal, Assam and Delhi) and Bangladesh and Track III stakeholders from Bhutan and China came together in a multi-country dialogue to share ideas, knowledge and experience for good governance of the Brahmaputra Basin. The importance of a multi-country dialogue process on the basin was reinforced, with a call to action to move the process from Track III and Track II modes

to Track I½ mode (where government and non-government actors deliberate together) and to create a single dialogue platform with participation from all four riparian governments.

The potential for formal collaboration between SAWI and this dialogue process was identified at a Brahmaputra regional workshop in Dhaka in 2015, where SaciWATERS presented findings from the first two phases of operation and expressed need for support to sustain the dialogue and expand its reach. For SAWI, partnering with SaciWATERS on a third phase was an opportunity to advance the recommendations coming out of the study tours with a credible partner, building on the dialogue's early achievements, and to disseminate evidence generated through SAWI's basin modeling and analytical activities. SAWI funded and helped implement the demand-driven third (2016-2017) and fourth (2018-2020) phases of the dialogue, aimed at providing the means, mandate and resources necessary to facilitate formal and informal knowledge exchange and interaction among key basin stakeholders, fostering a spirit of cooperation to develop and manage the basin optimally, holistically and sustainably.

Combined Track III, II and I½ country-level dialogue meetings took place in Bangladesh (June), China (July), India (August) and Bhutan (September) in 2016. Discussions were structured around three themes: knowledge sharing and review of water resources management legal instruments from international experience; economic opportunities that would help address issues of poverty and food and energy security; and disaster management, such as flood risk management and bank erosion control. These country meetings helped identify key people and institutions that can play an important role in advancing the dialogue and further understanding of country-specific views and opinions on potential co-management of the basin.

"The Brahmaputra is a unique river system, and if managed well, it can provide enormous economic opportunity and can also lead to regional development. But what it doesn't have is a basin-wide approach of managing this river. So this was one of the main reasons why the Brahmaputra Dialogue project was initiated."

"The Brahmaputra Basin Dialogue is necessary for stakeholders to discuss issues, challenges, and opportunities for improved co-management of the complex river basin, while also allowing civil society and media to build a common vision on the Brahmaputra Basin."

— Dr. Anamika Barua, Associate Professor,  
IIT-Guwahati, and Team Lead of the  
SaciWATERS-led Brahmaputra Dialogue



A regional workshop in Singapore in October 2016 aimed to lay the groundwork for political commitment to a basin-wide multi-purpose institutional framework for managing and developing the Brahmaputra Basin. The small event drew senior government participation from Bangladesh, as well as high- and mid-level stakeholders from Bhutan, China and India, marking a breakthrough in track diplomacy in the basin, and signifying the quality and importance of the dialogue process. Convening this level of participation required a sustained effort by SAWI and SaciWATERs, including several rounds of national-level consultations with high-level stakeholders (including across the multiple Indian states that share the Brahmaputra Basin).

The momentum in the third phase led to the Brahmaputra River Symposium (BRS), held in Delhi in September 2017. The BRS brought together 150 delegates, including, for the first time, prominent stakeholders from all four basin riparian countries (including senior government officials from Bangladesh, Bhutan and India and academic institutions with close ties to government agencies in China) exemplifying the strides this dialogue process has made in terms of credibility and importance. The Symposium delegates identified several recommendations to combat the challenges of developing and managing the Brahmaputra Basin. The recommendations focused on generating and sharing knowledge to close the science-policy gap and inform evidence-based decision making in the basin, strengthening institutions, and integrating investments. One of the major outcomes was consensus among the delegates that this dialogue process has the potential to navigate the geopolitical complexity hindering good governance in the basin, and that it must be sustained to rally stakeholders, from community to cabinet, in each of the four basin countries to champion the movement.

*"We couldn't have imagined a convention like this, in South Asia, ten years ago."*

*— Professor Ainun Nishat, former Member, Joint Rivers Commission, Bangladesh, and key figure in the Brahmaputra development discourse for more than 20 years*

Preparing and organizing the BRS involved holding meetings in China with academics acting as advisors to government to ensure there was strong Chinese representation at the Symposium. SAWI engagements in India were instrumental in the strong Indian presence at the event, including the Commissioner, Brahmaputra and Barak Basin Wing, Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation.

The call to action agenda set at the BRS sparked the fourth phase of the Brahmaputra Dialogue, which was launched in May 2018.

This phase has seen the dialogue process institutionalized, with a consortium of institutions connected to government in each riparian country taking facilitation roles in collaboration with a range of partners working to advance sustainable Brahmaputra Basin water resources management.

Significantly in the fourth phase, a regional workshop on south-south cooperation and the climate-water-energy nexus was held in Shanghai, jointly organized by Shanghai Institute for International Studies and IIT-Guwahati. This workshop was the first multilateral international workshop held within China under the Brahmaputra Dialogue, signalling China's increasing interest to engage with the other riparians in this space. Feedback from workshop participants noted that the forum continues to strengthen the built network of government officials, academicians, researchers, NGOs, CSOs and media toward co-management of the basin.

*"As a co-organizer, I was very glad and honored to be part of this meaningful event. There were fruitful discussions on identifying common challenges facing the three countries in the water and energy sectors, especially under climate change, as well as necessities and opportunities for enhanced regional cooperation. It is imperative to have a consistent platform for discussions like this in order to further identify actionable plans and projects."*

*— Dai Lei, Director of Global Governance Research Center, Hainan Institute for World Watch, Hongyuan, China*

Dialogue processes on international river basins are closely linked to the geopolitics of the region, and political development in any of the riparian countries could hinder opportunities for dialogue. The Brahmaputra Dialogue has managed political sensitivity risk through the manner in which workshops and discussions are structured. Country-level workshops are held so participants can speak candidly about national and transboundary basin management issues. The regional event discussions are focused on thematic areas that are of common interest to all riparians and relatively apolitical (such as disaster risk management, inland water transport and the water-energy-food nexus).

**OUTCOMES:** The early phases of the dialogue process comprised a small group of stakeholders at the Track III and II diplomatic levels. The dialogue has since morphed into an expanded and engaged group up to Track I½. To achieve this transformation, riparian country-level workshops and meetings—supported by informal one-on-one follow-ups with key stakeholders—established the political connection, commitment and momentum long needed for dialogue breakthroughs.

The nature of the dialogue discourse is evolving beyond technical management issues, opening up thinking toward common understanding across sectors and geographies, and on policy viewpoints. Events are starting to serve as a marketplace of ideas, bringing together the producers and consumers of knowledge, and Brahmaputra Basin knowledge partnerships are emerging.

“Countries should manage their water resources along the principles of IWRM. Learning from the best practices of other countries and engaging in dialogues with co-riparian nations could provide a framework for better management of river basins.”

— G.K. Chhopel, Chief Environment Officer (PHPA-I) and Ex-Chairman, Bhutan Water Partnership

“In one of the dialogues we had members who had come from Bangladesh. We had a discussion and both Assam and Bangladesh have one very crucial issue that is erosion management. And a lot of work has been done in Bangladesh, so far as erosion management is concerned, models have been developed; and we have been able to share those and joint research [Assam and Bangladesh] has been started.”

— Pradipto Changkakoti, Former Secretary, Water Resources Department, Assam

The dialogue is working through and with a range of partners, which has expanded over time and is central to SAWI’s long-term sustainability strategy. The dialogue process is now institutionalized across the basin, with a consortium of institutions connected to government in each riparian country taking facilitation roles. While various CSOs are engaging on the Brahmaputra through multiple activities, they are working largely in isolation of one another. A CSO meeting in Guwahati, India, in November 2018 was held to bring the major CSOs together to discuss convergence of activities and identify gaps that need to be filled, potentially through future activities under the dialogue. The first-of-its-

kind meeting has stemmed fruitful and ongoing discussions on identifying CSO synergies and areas for collaborative work.

This first multilateral international workshop on the Brahmaputra in Shanghai in 2018 marked the Brahmaputra Dialogue’s full active engagement in all four riparian countries. It also showed China’s increasing interest in regional cooperation in the basin, which will be critical to move the dialogue process forward, with legitimacy.

Looking to the future, SAWI is planning to continue to work closely with all Brahmaputra Basin riparian countries to build on this momentum, and support implementation of the recommendations toward good governance of the Brahmaputra Basin through various World Bank-backed initiatives for lending, technical assistance and analytical work.

A book, *Perspectives on the Yarlung-Tsangpo-Brahmaputra-Jamuna River Basin*, is being co-produced by institutions in each of the four riparian countries and has contributions from other stakeholders from the countries. This book is a first attempt at documenting the Brahmaputra as one river system and presenting a multi-layered, holistic perspective of the full basin from the viewpoints of the four riparian countries.

**ABOUT SAWI:** The South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI) is a multi-donor Trust Fund supported by the UK, Australia and Norway and administered by the World Bank. SAWI supports a rich portfolio of activities designed to increase regional cooperation in the management of the major Himalayan river systems in South Asia to deliver sustainable, fair and inclusive development and climate resilience. It does this through four complementary outcome areas: strengthening awareness and knowledge on regional water issues; enhancing technical and policy capacity across the region; dialogue and participatory decision processes to build trust and confidence; and scoping and informing investment designs. Its work, structured across three river basins (Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra) and the Sundarbans Landscape, spans seven countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan.