

China interventions on Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra



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Mubina Akhtar 24 October 2011 7173 views



Absence of exchange in summer time data continues to be a major concern in managing natural disasters in the Brahmaputra basin. In a media workshop on Climate Change effects in the Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra Basin organised by the Third Pole Project and Internews Earth Journalism network in Kathmandu last week, Chinese scientist Dr Yang Yong said that a major disaster could have been averted ten years back had there been proper exchange of data in place. The scientist from the Hengduan Mountain Research Institute said that scientists from China predicted flash flood on the basis of rising of water level in Yigong Zangbo river (a large tributary of Tsangpo in the east of Tibet) and accordingly informed the Indian authorities of a possible disaster in April 2000. Indian authorities however ignored the warning. Some 300 m cubic meters of displaced debris, soil and snow dammed the Yigong Zangbo river. The impact caused disaster downstream. On June 10, 2000, the Yigong disaster caused havoc of flash flood in the river Siang in Arunachal Pradesh with an estimated property loss of a billion rupees, 30 deaths, 100 missing and about 50,000 rendered homeless in five Arunachal districts.

In Assam, Jonai in Dhemaji district was adversely affected.

The Yigong flood remained a watershed in Sino-Indian hydro diplomacy.



The Northeast region of India alongwith Bangladesh share a major water connectivity with China in the form of the river Brahmaputra known as Yarlung Zangbo/Tsangpo upstream and Jamuna when it leaves for the Bay of Bengal. The states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh which are on the immediate downstream stretch bear the brunt of the adverse impacts of interventions (natural or manmade) upstream. It may be mentioned here that China's reported move to divert the Brahmaputra westward to benefit its dry Xinjiang area remain a grave concern with people of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India as well as neighbouring Bangladesh because it is assumed that the intervention besides affecting the low-water regime of the Brahmaputra will also have serious implications on the fragile as well as unique ecosystem in the downstream region. There has been constant fear that drastic changes will occur in the socio-economic scenerio of the region as the diversion will impact the rich, diverse ethnic and cultural resources. Dr Yong, however, denied such interventions. He assured that the diversion at the Great Bend, which is still in its proposal state, will have no serious implications downstream. Even if the plan is carried out the downstream countries will not face water shortage. Dr Yong claimed that the water storage in the downstream part of the river is more than its upper stretch. The river is fed by glaciers which is merely 12 percent upstream while the source of water for the other 88 percent is from rain. It is noteworthy to mention here that while India expressed possible cooperation opportunities with China in building dams last year (the then environment minister Jairam Ramesh wanted to bring Chinese experts to construct dams in India according to reports available in the Chinese media) the issue of the proposed Chinese projects on Brahmaputra/Tsangpo continues to be a formidable challenge in Assam. The Assam Government even constituted a committee sometime back to study the impacts of the Chinese projects. However, it is interesting to

note that the Water Resources Department of Assam did not receive any vital scientific and technical data on the Chinese side of the river from the Government of India which are available with the Central Government as part of a protocol agreed upon by India and China in 2008. Without such data no assesment can be made of the impacts of such projects in the downstream areas.

Crucial Issue:

Whether diversion or damming, projects on the river Brahmaputra/Yarlung Zangbo continue to be a crucial issue for the riparian countries of the Brahmaputra basin. While scientists from India have suggested time and again that the Government of India should engage China proactively in a serious dialouge over the issue of the intervention with the system of the Brahmaputra river, scientists from China and Bangladesh call for regional cooperation and firm policies and programme at home. Dr Yang Yong while stressing on a transparent mutual side communication of disaster information with effective alerting mechanism as well as earthquake and geological points study also called for a scientific foundation among the countries of the Brahmaputra basin to monitor the events and work closely.

The Chinese scientist's contradictions would definitely ease some of the growing apprehensions in the northeastern states of India. However, it lies largely with the policymakers in the Chinese side as to how they contradict the "diversion" and "damming" claims.

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BY MUBINA AKHTAR

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