

Muddy Brahmaputra? Listen to Chinese expert



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Chandan Kumar Duarah 14 December 2017 Updated 14 Dec 15611 views

The recent [tremor](#) that rattled Tibet is to be blamed for the change of colour of the river [Brahmaputra](#) water if the Chinese experts are to be believed. Writes Chandan Kumar Duarah.

The change of colour in the [waters](#) of the [Brahmaputra](#) runs in to a hail of speculations in Assam which have reached [New Delhi](#) to be in touch with Beijing. Many theories seem to have surfaced beneath the entire scheme of things. But there is no conclusion.

The recent [tremor](#) in Tibet, may be the prime cause of muddy water flowing through the [Brahmaputra](#). Yang Yong, a geologist and Yarlung Zangbo (known as in China) expert revealed that muddy water might highly be caused by the recent earthquake in Linzhi, Tibet. Linzhi region of Southern Tibet is popularly known as Ningchi. The Yanglung Zangbu river scenerary spot as well as the Yarlung Zangbo Grand Canyon was closed due to the quake. No one is allowed to enter the region for last two weeks.

China has escalated military control [over](#) Tibetan borders, expanded [mining](#) based on the rich resources of the Tibetan plateau in order to [fuel](#) China's economic development and has dramatically expanded infrastructure with a strategic road and rail network. It seeks to raise the productivity of the industrial cities of Xi'an, Chongqing and Chengdu at the foot of the Tibetan plateau and to address the progressive scarcity of water resources in the North and North-East of China with water sourced in Tibet.

Moreover, rampant [mining](#) threatens both [indigenous](#) Tibetan and their motherland. A large lithium mine not only desecrates the sacred grasslands, villagers say, but spawns deadly pollution. The river used to be full of fish. Today, there are hardly any. Hundreds of yaks, the villagers say, have died in the past few years after drinking river water.

China's thirst for mineral resources — and its desire to exploit the rich deposits under the Tibetan plateau — have spread environmental pollution and anguish for many of the herders whose ancestors lived here for thousands of years. The land they worship is under assault, and their way of life is threatened without their consent, the herders say.

A strong 6.9 magnitude earthquake has shaken China's Tibet region. There was no immediate detail given on the damage caused or number of casualties. No casualties have been reported following a 6.9-magnitude earthquake that hit Nyingchi in southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region at 6:34 a.m. Saturday. However, the quake caused power [failure](#) and building damages in a number of villages in the epicenter in Nyingchi City.

The epicenter was detected at 29.75 degrees north latitude and 95.02 degrees [east](#) longitude, according to the China [Earthquake](#) Networks Center. The [US](#) Geological [Survey](#) said the quake hit at a depth of about 6 miles about 36 miles northeast of Nyingchi. China's official Xinhua News Agency put the magnitude at 6.9 and said it struck at 6.34am local time.

The quake struck at a depth of about 10 km. Four minor aftershocks measuring between 5 magnitude and 3.1 magnitude were felt in the city's rural areas. Sources with the regional power grid said the power grids of both Tibet and Nyingchi are operating normally, though it had [launched](#) an emergency response mechanism. The China Seismological Bureau has [launched](#) a third-degree emergency response mechanism, holding a teleconference to monitor an investigation into the situation and sending experts to the quake-hit region.

The bureau observed that the highest seismic intensity of the quake affected an area of 500 square meters, which is sparsely populated. The tremors triggered falling rocks, blocking a highway linking Nyingchi's city proper with Tangmai, one of the quake-hit townships. Armed police transport troops are clearing the road.

The Ministry of Transport dispatched staff to investigate the safety condition of bridges in the quake-hit area. The Tibet subsidiaries of Chinese telecom providers China [Mobile](#) and China Tower said that their networks are now operating normally. But the Tibet branch of China Telecom reported the disruption of an optical cable for broadband service in Pome and Zayul counties.

The Nyingchi government said in a statement on its microblog that the quake's epicentre was in an uninhabited region and that it had yet to receive any casualty reports. The epicentre was within 150 miles of the Indian towns of Along, [Pasighat](#) and [Tezu](#), the USGS added.

Southwestern parts of China are frequently hit by earthquakes. A huge quake in Sichuan province in 2008 killed almost 70,000 people.

The [Brahmaputra](#) flows about 1,600 kilometres as Tsangpo river through the Tibet plateau before entering [India](#) in [Arunachal](#) Pradesh. The river becomes [Brahmaputra](#) after it flows into Assam near Sadiya. As per media reports from Guwahati, the [waters](#) of [Brahmaputra](#) in some places are also beginning to turn muddy, firming up the suspicion that China may have begun construction upstream.

The water of [Arunachal](#) Pradesh's river [Siang](#) has turned muddy in the last two months at the point where it enters [India](#) from Tibet. The change in the colour of the water, which was first noticed near Geling in the northeastern [state](#)'s Upper [Siang](#) district, has triggered many local residents and conscious citizens to suspect a 'Chinese hand' in it.

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Responding to Indian media reports, on December 2, China denied any role in muddying the [waters](#) of [Siang](#). "South Tibet is the territory of China, which has the duty to preserve local environment... [India](#) should not point its finger at China on hydrological issues to incite anti-China sentiment, which cannot help repair the ties of the two countries," the [state](#)-owned The Global Times said in a report quoting Chinese analysts. China criticised the role of Indian media on account of its negative reporting about China.

The alleged 'Chinese hand' was reportedly first hinted by former Union minister and [Congress](#) MP from [Arunachal](#) Pradesh, Ninong Ering, in a letter to Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) in November. In the letter, he mentioned the unusually low [level](#) of the water, pointing out that the situation has not improved for weeks together, and that the river is "usually crystal clear" post monsoon showers. Ering also placed the issue under Rule 377 for a discussion in the parliament. "Since the House is not in session, I am requesting you to use your good office to seek the reason for the river turning muddy in this season, when the water is usually crystal clear," Ering wrote to the prime minister.

[Arunachal](#) Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu paid a visit to the river near Yingkiong in East [Siang](#) district on December 2 and asked the local administration to file a detailed report on the situation. In a tweet later that day, tagging the prime minister's office, the Bharatiya Janata Party's official handle, external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and the Union Ministry of [Environment](#), Khandu wrote, "Inspected the [Siang](#) river today near Yingkiong, whose water has turned muddy and black - making it unfit for drinking and aquatic life. Have asked the local administration to furnish detailed report on the situation."

Media reports quoting laboratory test results of samples taken from the [Siang](#) by the [state](#) water quality testing laboratory in [Itanagar](#) mentioned high turbidity in it. The report said, "A high turbidity [level](#) of more than 425 NTU, if exposed for a long period, may affect fish survivability as it leads to choking of gills resulting in death."

Importantly, the Daying Ering memorial wildlife sanctuary, situated between [Siang](#) and its tributary Sibia, witnesses many migratory birds at this time of the year. Divisional forest officer (wildlife) of the sanctuary R. Riba told local media that the number of sightings of migratory birds has been lower this year. It is believed that the birds have avoided the sanctuary as they are unable to spot fish in the muddy [waters](#).

Some domestic animal and aquatic wildlife have allegedly died after drinking the river water in the downstream areas. Responding to the developments, Arjun Ram Meghwal, Union minister of [state](#) for water resources, river development and Ganga rejuvenation, said on December 3 that it could be due to an earthquake that shook Tibet on November 18. “There is a strong possibility that the colour of the water has changed due to natural reasons,” the minister reportedly said. In a letter to the minister, Ering has termed the reason “completely absurd”.

On the other hand , the Bogang Students' Union has threatened to launch a mass agitation if the central and [state](#) governments do not take steps to check the contamination of the [Siang](#) river in [Arunachal Pradesh](#) owing to alleged upstream construction carried out by China.

Union president Lungkang Ering said on Wednesday that the [Siang](#) is "our lifeline". "I have never seen muddy water in the river. Every year thousands of migratory birds come to the [Siang](#) valley but they are nowhere to be seen this year. Dead fishes are floating every now and then in the river. It is happening because of contamination of water," he said.

The Yarlung Tsangpo after flowing through southern Tibet enters [India](#) near Tuting in [Arunachal](#) Pradesh's Upper [Siang](#) district to become the [Siang](#), which is called the [Brahmaputra](#) after entering Assam. A delegation of the union met [Siang](#) deputy commissioner Tamiyo Tatak on Monday following which he ordered the public health [engineering](#) and water resources departments to test the quality of the river water.

Water unfit for Consumption

The water of the [Siang](#) river in [Arunachal](#) Pradesh, which has turned [dark](#) and muddy, has become unfit for human consumption, the State Water Quality Testing Laboratory (SWQTL) has said in a report. The river enters [India](#) after flowing through the Tibetan plateau as Yarlung Tsangpo. It flows through [Arunachal](#) Pradesh for about 230 km to reach [Pasighat](#) and then joins the Lohit and the [Dibang](#) to form the [Brahmaputra](#) river in Assam.

The laboratory under the [Arunachal](#) Pradesh Public [Health](#) Engineering and Water Supply (Sanitation) department, in its report, has said the water of the [Siang](#) is unfit for human consumption. The report stated that the Nephelometric Turbidity Unit (NTU) content of the water sample was 482, while the iron content was recorded at 1.65 mg/litre, which was beyond the permissible limits.

The water sample of the river was sent to the laboratory by the Water Resources Department's Executive Engineer, Tamo Jamoh, on November 29, an official report informed. According to experts, at [normal level](#), iron is not deadly for the aquatic animals, but unusually high amounts of iron in water may [lead](#) to adverse changes in its colour, odour and taste and also have negative effects on the aquatic animals' behaviour and health.

The [Siang](#) river, [Arunachal Pradesh](#)'s primary water source, has turned black in the past two months, baffling residents. The [Siang](#) is the main tributary of the [Brahmaputra](#) river that connects to the Yarlung Tsangpo, as the [Brahmaputra](#) is called in Tibet, where it originates.

According to a report prepared by the [state](#)'s public health [engineering](#) department, the turbidity [level](#) of the [Siang](#)'s [waters](#) is several times higher than the permissible limit. Bimal Welly, an executive engineer in the department, said a sample he tested on November 27 showed a Nephelometric Turbidity Unit – a measure of the concentration of suspended particulates in a liquid – of 425. Permissible turbidity for potable water is 5.

But with even the [waters](#) of the [Brahmaputra](#) downstream in Assam starting to turn turbid, criticism of the Union government's apparent [failure](#) to identify the problem is growing. "It is highly disturbing that for days together we have not been able to ascertain what the cause is," said environmentalist Dulal Chandra Goswami, who has studied the [Brahmaputra](#) extensively. "It shows how vulnerable people in the downstream are because of the whims of our politicians."

Goswami said the current atmosphere of suspense and confusion was symptomatic of the government's [failure](#) to govern an international river like the [Brahmaputra](#). "Ideally, this was a phone call away, but then the basin partners just [don](#)'t interact," he said. "When they do, they argue. This is just no way to handle an international river. This current [crisis](#) exposes that there is no framework to negotiate and solve problems so far as the [Brahmaputra](#) is concerned."

In the meantime, speculation of possible reasons for the river turning black is mounting. Officials and residents believe China may have something to do with it. This suspicion stems from a widely cited news report about the Chinese government's purported plan to build a tunnel to divert water from the Yarlung Tsangpo in southern Tibet to the parched Taklamakan desert area in the province of Xinjiang. [Arunachal Pradesh](#) Chief Minister Pema Khandu has reportedly asked the Central government to take the matter up with Beijing.

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BY CHANDAN KUMAR DUARAH

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