



Dong

Drains that binds communities





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The urgent need to address Transboundary waters conflicts


Acute water scarcity is staring at the face of the world, limiting availability of even drinking water to several communities across the globe. While overall mitigation measures need to be implemented urgently, settling of global transboundary water conflict is likely to resolve half the water crisis problem. For global transboundary river basins (TRBs) cover about 47 percent of land surface and 52 percent of the world's population.

The United Nations states that the management of transboundary waters is vital to promoting peaceful cooperation and sustainable development, especially in areas vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and where water is already scarce.

Effective management of transboundary waters directly affects the sustainable development goals within and beyond a country's border. The UN had also observed that efficient, cooperative management and development of shared waters and adjacent floodplains can boost food and energy production, helping to reduce poverty and control rural-urban migration. To narrow down the issue and highlighting a particular region, this report focuses on the Saralbhanga River and that flows from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan to India, and has been the lifeline for thousands of families residing along both sides of the border for generations, especially the Saralpara Forest Village in Kokrajhar district of Assam.



The TROSA Program



The Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) is a regional program implemented by Oxfam and its partners to understand and address the aforementioned challenges and work to create the conditions to reduce poverty in river communities. Oxfam believes that reducing poverty in transboundary basins can be achieved by increasing the communities' access to and control over water resources, and by collaborating with governments, the private sector, and civil society in the region to reach this goal.

TROSA seeks to inform and influence transboundary water governance policies and practices at the local, national, and regional levels. Through partnership and innovation,

the program aims to contribute to progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Like in other transboundary river basins of South Asia, TROSA is working with the North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN), a regional NGO, in the Indo-Bhutan border areas of Assam to address the acute water crisis of the region. This is done by strengthening the capacity of the forest communities to influence transboundary water resource governance. TROSA is also actively working to strengthen the profile and influence of women in dialogues and decision-making on water management and water infrastructure.

The sustainable **Dong** system of water management



The Indo-Bhutan border in Assam stands in stark geographical contrast to each other in that, while the border areas towards Bhutan are covered in healthy green foliage, most areas in Assam are denuded of the forest cover, mostly covered in semi-consolidated and unconsolidated rocks.

Nature's irony is such that, despite being located in the foothills of the Himalayas and having 56 rivers flowing from across the border to the region, several areas of these border districts of Assam are deprived of sufficient water for drinking and irrigation due to hydrogeological reasons.



To overcome the acute water crisis, the locals of the regions have evolved a traditional water management and distribution system that has been in practice since the **early 20th century**. The system is called Dong.

A dong is a channel that is made in the middle of the river to divert the flow of water toward the villages. A series of triangular structures made of tree branches, stones, and boulders are erected on the river to form a crude dam to divert the mountainous river water to this big channel. The diverted water is stored in ponds locally called pukhuri. From the dong, the water is distributed to every village and further to every household through a labyrinth of sub-canals called shakhas and prakhashas.

The dam regulates the flow of the water. And the water is released into the sub-canals at specific times of the day, usually twice daily by the committee in charge of the canals. One dong can cater to approximately 30 villages.

A dong-bandh committee, comprising of members of every community, administers and operate the system which includes canal repair, labour mobilization from each village, conflict resolution, and other activities.





Reportedly, there are about 17 such committees along the Assam-Bhutan border regions.

The dong network has to be constructed every year as the canals are washed away by the strong current during the monsoon season. Additionally, maintenance work needs to be undertaken about six to seven times annually to ensure a smooth and sufficient flow of water to every corner of the villages.

It takes about 500 villagers five to six days to reconstruct an entire network. To gather the manforce, it is mandatory that a male member participates from every household of all the village communities. Each beneficiary family needs to pay a minimal fee to get a connection. The amount thus collected funds the construction and maintenance of the entire dong system.

Apart from connecting the households, the dong system also irrigates the



paddy fields and other water-intensive crops like potato, maize, areca nuts and others.

The dong, apart from providing water to every household is a critical system of water sharing that binds the otherwise ethnically conflicting tribes and communities into one.

The Saralpara Forest Village



India shares a 699 km (434 miles) long boundary with Bhutan, of which Assam shares 267 km (166 miles) along the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, and Chirang. Saralpara, a forest village in the Kokrajhar district shares a 40 km (25 miles) long international border with the Himalayan country.

Saralpara has a diversified population of about 10,000 comprising over 500 Nepali families, over 400 Bodo households, about 250-300 families of the Santhal community, about 72 Rabha and 45 **Orang** households.

Every community resides in a distinct separate cluster within the village, yet the harmony amongst the communities is revealed in the villagers' respect for each other's religion and temple. Strolling across the Saralpara with a group of young Bodo and Nepali men, they seemed more than delighted to guide us to all the different places of worship - from a Bathou shrine to a Buddhist temple, and then to a Shiva Mandir (a Hindu temple). Hoping from one to the other, the team also visited the village Church on the way.

Agriculture being the main source of livelihood, majority of the villagers are dependent on paddy and areca nut cultivation, a few others working as daily wage labourers.



A walk down the village reveals the intricate network of the dong water system that connects to every single household. While the males attend to cultivation, the women and children busy themselves with the never-ending household chores. Women washing clothes, cleaning utensils, and carrying water from the drains or the prakhashas are common sites, engraving the importance of the water network in the mind of a visitor.

In the absence of any electricity connection, every household is equipped with a solar panel that supports a fan and about two bulbs.

Being a forest village, the inhabitants of Saralpara are deprived



of even basic facilities like electricity, toilet, and water supply connection; for, compared to revenue villages, the forest villages are difficult to penetrate due to legal restrictions under the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980. The Act restricts the dereservation of forest or use of forest land for non-forest purposes by any state government or authority except with the prior approval of the Central Government. Here, 'non-forest purpose' means the breaking up or clearing of any forest land or portion thereof for any purpose other than reafforestation.



Installation of water tank



The water crisis prevalent in the Indo-Bhutan border areas of Assam is equally pervasive in the village of Saralpara. While the dong water system has been sustaining in the area for decades, the dramatic behavioral change of the rivers flowing from Bhutan in the last few years has rendered the water flowing downstream unfit for consumption.

For decades, the downstream residents of the Indo-Bhutan border have been solely dependent on the mountainous water flowing through the dong. However, the construction of dams in Bhutan for hydropower projects, along with climate change leading to long periods of dryness, shallow flow, flash floods, followed by massive amounts of silt, sand, sediments, stones, and boulders have slowed down the river current and contaminated the water. As such the inhabitants are compelled to look out for alternative sources of drinking water.

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) along with the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) and the district administration of Kokrajhar constructed a water tank (a

temporary syntax tank lodged on top of four slim concrete pillar with a pump below) in the vicinity of the village in 2014, despite being in the forest area. But as the population grew, the one water tank has proven insufficient to cater to the needs of all 10,000 villagers.



In search of water



Residing with the villagers of Saralpara for three days, a common site witnessed by our team members was villagers carrying along empty gallons. While the women and children commuted at least 2-3 kms every day to get each household's share of drinking water from the tank, the men have adopted the habit of carrying along empty jars to procure water for home from wherever possible.

As seen in the photographs, plastic gallons are seen tied on the back of bicycles- in hopes of returning home with filled jars for the family. For as the water level gets shallower downstream, the families at the very end of the shakhas and prakhshas are deprived on even a single drop.

And these are not always due to natural reasons...

The Problem



To ensure water for the population of Saralpara, the **Nwngwr Kwmtagwra Bandh Committee** of Saralpara has been constructing the dam on the Saralbhanga transboundary river. This committee comprises of 21 village headmen. The jamphwi, which is the point of diversion to the dong is about 200 meters on the Bhutan side of the river. Till 2019, for decades, the community members from Assam would go to Bhutan to reconstruct the dam and maintain the dong from the very diversion point. Such maintenance work needs to be undertaken about six to seven times annually, which involves a man force of a minimum of 400 individuals to reinstate the entire dong network.

And with regular maintenance, the force and flow of water were maintained at a steady level to ensure supply to the very last villager. However, the Bhutan government restricted the cross-border commute like most countries during the COVID-19 pandemic as a preventive measure. The border which was sealed in 2020 has not yet been opened; making the

mere 200 meters distance to the jamphwi beyond the reach of the Saralpara villagers.

Without maintenance for the past two years, the dong network in Saralpara is on the verge of collapse. The force of water has slowed substantially, with very shallow water on the village drains. While the households or communities nearest to the border receive ample water, the amount gradually decreases downstream.

Since the pandemic, as the Indo-Bhutan border remained sealed, the dong committee had been seeking help from the Deputy Commissioner of the district of Kokrajhar, who would relay the issue to his counterpart in the **Sarang** district of Bhutan. Considering the transboundary friendship in the border areas of India and Bhutan, the **Sarang** district administration had been engaging a handful of men to repair the jamphwi and the dong in Bhutan periodically in just a phone call.

However, a job that demanded a workforce of hundreds of men is now being done by just a few in the last two years. The consequences are obvious- the shallow flow of water due to damaged drains and the rising of the drain bed due to the accumulation of silt.

Although the border district administration of Bhutan had been sympathetic to the cause of the villagers across the border and provided support, significant work remains to be done to revive the entire water management system that was once sustainable.

Presently, most downstream communities are left foraging for the last drop from the drains.

Ethnic clashes adding to the water crisis woes

The Bodoland has witnessed years of unrest and violent clashes amongst the different communities leading to mass exodus in the last decades. The year-on-year bloodsheds have displaced majority of the residents of the Saralpara forest village who have only gradually returned in recent years.

And with the retuning of these displaced masses, the traditionally sustainable water management system that catered to a limited populace has failed to provide for all with its shallow flow. And so has the sole water tank that was constructed after the homecoming of hundreds to Saralpara.



The economic hardship

As is the case in most conflicts, the underprivileged and the marginalized are the major sufferers. As normalcy returns in Bodoland, so have several displaced families, most of which belonged to the far-flung villages inside the forests of the four **BTAD Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD)** of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri, bordering Bhutan. And so have the original inhabitants of Sarlpara, but with expanded numbers as the families have grown.

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the Assam government have dovetailed Central government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Jal Jeevan Mission with the rehabilitation program for the returnees.

However, those who returned to secluded forest villages, many after an exile of about 25 years, have a different narrative. In this case, the people of Saralpara- the Santhal, Bodo, Rabha, Nepali, and **Orang**, are left at the mercy of Bhutan, facing economic hardship alongside an acute water crisis. About 70 percent of the downstream population on the Indo-Bhutan border are food and energy deficient, and among the poorest in the region.

Despite being annually lashed out of their livelihood by flash floods, and subsequently facing water scarcity due to massive amounts of silt, sand, sediments, stones, and boulders hurtling downstream from the river through the drains, these backward villagers have no other means but to be dependent on the same waters.

In the larger picture, the Bodoland conflicts might have subsided amid political and strategic understandings; yet diving deep into the forest

localities one becomes aware of the sentimental clashes amongst the different communities that continues to be at par with the original apprehensions of losing of identity. These internal conflicts often manifest when one community blocks the drain of water flowing to another community residing downstream; thus depriving the latter of water.

As the main dong reaches the village, it gets further segregated to several canals or shakhas, each meant for a particular community- a separate one for the Nepali, Bodo, Santhal, Rabha, and Orang communities. As the community habitats are not in a linear form, the shakha of the downstream communities often passes through the land of the upstream communities. In any mere quarrel or conflict, the drain is blocked by the upstream community, restraining the flow of water below. Similar measures are undertaken even when there is a shortage of water- the upstream households resort to sabotaging the drains in order to hoard water for themselves.

The villagers speak



For 45-years-old Habil Kinduwar, fetching water drop by drop from the drain has become a daily ritual. Habil, hailing from the Santhal community, and his family resides toward the end of the dong network. Every time the water recedes, Habil and his community are amongst the first sufferers.

“We are the downstream residents. Before reaching us the drains pass through hundreds of households of the Nepali community. Since the others have the privilege of residing upstream they get more share of the water. Our turn comes only after they have availed their fill,” said Kinduwa. Our team witnessed Kinduwar and his brother sitting along an almost dried up drain, trying to salvage the little water that had somehow trickled down to the community. Surprisingly, there is enough flowing till a few meters ahead, before the drain enters the Santhal community. The others have blocked the flow due to recent clashes. While the community awaits

the dong bandh committee intervention, to redress the grievances, the households have to survive on the limited resources from the tank and the trickles to the drain.

Kinduwar had been cultivating only rice until a few years back. But the shortage of water and siltation in the agricultural fields have forced him to resort to other crops like ginger, areca nut and black lentils that can be cultivated on a rotation throughout the year.

However, without enough to drink, Kinduwar’s paddy cultivation and even the areca nut plantation remain neglected. A father to two daughters- both students of class six and nine respectively, Munru fears that the loss of a crop would hit hard on his daughter’s education and his family’s survival in the coming days.





Dharmeswar Basumatary, Secretary of the **Nwngwr Kwmtagwra Anchalik Saralpara Dong Bandh Committee** explains the dependence of the villagers on Bhutan, and the urgent need to reopen the international border.

“Our village is deprived of even the basic facilities from the Indian government as we are considered forest dwellers. It’s our decades-old friendship with the people on the other side of the border and the support of the NGOs like NERSWN that keep us going,” he said.

“When we returned after a two year exile in 2016, it was these organizations who provided for us. The All Bodo Student Union helped

me with land to settle. For the daily water requirement, we rely on the rivers flowing from Bhutan. So any decision made by the Bhutan government on the border impacts us directly. A simple order to seal the border and prevent us from moving just 200 km on their side has caused us so much hardship.

“In the last two years that the Indo-Bhutan border has remained sealed, our entire course of life in Saralpara has been transformed. Foraging for water has suddenly become a daily ritual for us. There is understanding and friendship to a level on both sides of the border. But that is not enough. We urge the authorities to request the Bhutan government to consider our plight,” he requested.

The sexagenarian farmer informed that while he initially cultivated rice in all 12 bighas of land that he owns, the gradual degradation of the soil has forced him to adopt areca nut cultivation in 5 of the 12 bighas. “Till a few years ago boulder mining was a flourishing trade in the Bhutan border. The sand and silt from the mines eventually flowed downwards with the water and settled in the our land across the border, degrading the soil quality entirely,” he added.

“I planted the areca nut saplings six years back. This year the first crop was yield, about 8 bags of betel nuts, that brought home Rs. 4000 per bag.”





Sharmila Murmu, a transgender person of Saralpara, who has been actively working as a NERSWN mobiliser, not to support herself and her entire family but also to volunteer to educate the villagers on teamwork and capacity building.

30-years-old Murmu is a government ASHA worker and has been raising her three younger brothers and her old mother since her father's death years ago. Being educated till the 12th standard, Sharmila understands the utmost need for the community to come together to overcome the water crisis and work for their economic growth.

“I have been engaged with NERSWN for a few years now, and I work as a mobilizer of the approaches that are proposed by the organization. I also work on my family's agricultural land, and during free hours I go around the village campaigning and teaching my fellow villagers to adapt to more sustainable methods of pig rearing, and other cultivations that are provided to us by NERSWN and TROSA,” she said.

Pramila Rabha has a family of six to look after including her three children and an ailing mother-in-law. Her husband is a mason who works as a daily wage labourer outside the village. In his absence, Pramila is left to shoulder the responsibilities of working in their paddy field alongside managing the daily household chores.

“When the water flow is normal, it is easy to manage the remaining work. The dong directly supplies water to the cultivations, and we also get enough for the family. I still have to travel about 3 km for drinking water, but we have

somehow adapted it as part of our daily routine. But without sufficient water in the drain, I and the neighbouring women have to spend a lot of time to get water from far away,” she said.

“When the flow of water from the river decreases, the clear water that runs through the drain gets diluted with water that seeps in from the paddy fields. This water is contaminated with silt and mud from the cultivations. We often get skin rashes and have to keep on itching. The clear mountainous water does not cause such irritation or ailments,” Rabha narrated.



Saving lives through WhatsApp Messages

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) along with the Bhutan-India Friendship Association (BIFA) has devised a process of sending flood warnings through WhatsApp groups to alert the people downstream.

The Indo-Bhutan border areas of Bodoland have always been prone to flooding given the large number of mountainous rivers flowing into the region. Villagers along both sides of the border also share a history of communal harmony and friendship.

Given the harsh nature of the rivers and also the sudden releasing of water from the hydropower project dams in Bhutan without prior notice, flash floods are a common occurrence that could wreak havoc downstream.

The BIFA along with NERSWN has started the process of WhatsApp messaging whereby people of the Bhutanese villages monitor the flood situation and would send alert messages on the group to the Indian side. BIFA and NERSWN members on receiving the warning would immediately relay it to the villagers. Such early warnings give the villagers precious lead time to prepare and escape much before the flood hits.

The process is purely based on humanitarian grounds and the long-standing friendship of the border communities and is not sent

through official channels. The official process is a long one whereby the administration of the border districts of **Bhutan sends the warning to Guwahati**, from where it is sent to Kokrajhar and finally reaches the villagers. The entire official process is long and loses much valuable time due to a lack of proper communication infrastructure.

Instead, the unofficial way adopted by NERSWN has proven itself more feasible in saving the lives and movable properties of the villagers time and again. Today the downstream communities rely completely on this friendship.

Dharmeswar Basumatary, Secretary of the Nwonwgwr Kwmtagwra Anchalik Saralpara Dong Bandh Committee informed that a meeting of BIFA and NERSWN along with authorities of the border districts was held at Kokrajhar district a few years back. A treaty was made so that during floods and other calamities, bandh committees from India could travel to Bhutan to reinstate the dong system as required. The agreement had been going on well until in 2019 the borders were sealed due to the pandemic situation. "Prior to the pandemic, we also had regular trade practices with the nearest township and markets of Bhutan."

Tourism prospects of Saralpara



Until a few years back, Saralpara was an unheard place to the people of Assam and outside. While tourists and travelers would cross the international border to visit Bhutan, the scenic beauty of their secluded forest villages along the border remained unnoticed, except to a few researchers or government officials who worked in the area.

After organizations like TROSA and

NERSWN took up the responsibility to support the indigenous people of their region through their various projects and educational programs, the organizations have also been hosting volunteers and internship certificate programs, whereby interested students are given a chance to serve humanity. As the beautiful scenic land and the tranquil lifestyle of these villagers went viral across social media

platforms through these youths who visit for internship programs, these Indo-Bhutan border areas are gradually becoming the most sought-after places to visit.

With the growing number of travelers and picnickers to the areas, the organization hopes to develop ecotourism and rural tourism in the

region as a sustainable livelihood form for these backward communities. But to turn it into a reality, government support and funding is an important aspects.

Covered in semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forest, the reserve forest is a “Haven of Butterfly” and a vast variety of orchids alongside other flora and fauna.

Members of TROSA and NERSWN working in the border areas have opined that developing ecotourism in the reserve forest and the neighbouring border villages will not only benefit the villages financially but will help in bringing out the issues of the villagers to the authorities and to the world.

Learning from Saralpara



The photograph was taken on our last day at the Indo-Bhutan border village of Saralpara; a tragic site of villagers pleading with the border forces to permit them a few meters into the other side to repair the dong, but to no avail. While the men in uniform understand the villagers' plight they are bound by government orders and have a duty to fulfill. What little help is offered is insufficient in the severe crisis.

The ruthless pandemic has changed the dynamics of human relations to a great extent. Inhabitants of the international border areas who had open access to each other's hands and lived in communal harmony are now beyond each other's reach. A mere 200 meters into the territory of Bhutan that was accessible any time of the day to the people living along the Indian side has now become unreachable.

And as mentioned in the beginning, the struggle for water is real.

The photograph was taken on our last day at the Indo-Bhutan border village of Saralpara; a tragic site of villagers pleading with the border forces to permit them a few meters into the other side to repair the dong, but to no avail. While the men in uniform understand the villagers' plight they are bound by government orders and have a duty to fulfill. What little help is offered is insufficient in the severe crisis.

"The border residents have never considered themselves different from one another. We all are closely knit, having trade and other friendly relations. Our products were sold on their markets and we buy goods from the Bhutanese. Our young men have been playing friendly football matches with the communities across the border. Even our customs and traditions have mingled," lamented a villager who had been pleading with the border forces.

"The friendship is still there and we are surviving as the Bhutanese border administration and our friends there have been supportive of our cause. But that is not enough. We need access to just 200 meters across the border which is anyway not inhabited. Yet government policies are such that the point (referring to the jamphwi) that is right

in front of our eyes is impossible to reach.

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) has been working across administrative and political borders for a positive impact on the transboundary river basins, conducting training, knowledge-sharing events, and exchange visits on hydro-diplomacy for key government officials relevant to transboundary river governance.

Yet action research and evidence-based advocacy for international cooperation on inclusive water governance and responsible consumption of water is the need of the hour.

These marginalized forest dwellers are beyond the reach of government policies and schemes of any of the two countries. It is evident that policies and orders implemented for the greater benefit of the taxpayers overlook the basic requirements of these border villages; rather have often adversely affected them, and in this case, the latter's decades-old sustainable water management system has been affected.

It is time that more discussions are held by the governments of both countries on transboundary issues; with deliberation on the necessities of the border inhabitants.



About NERSWN

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) has been working towards sustainable and holistic change mainly in the North East region of India. NERSWN is a secular, not-for-profit, gender-just, non-political organization set up in 2004; led and managed by a group of committed and dynamic young people from the region. It seeks to reach out with social endeavour to the doorsteps of people, to realize development and rights of the marginalized by building capacities of communities and strengthening their knowledge network.

Presently, the organisation is involved with six thematic areas viz. Health, Education, Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Advocating for the Rights of the Marginalized, and Research and Networking.

NERSWN has been providing basic livelihood for the thousands who were

displaced due to the ethnic conflicts in Bodoland. It has been working to-

- i. collectivize the farmers for building skills, increasing organic agricultural products, and creating marketing linkages.
- ii. promote non-farm, livestock-based livelihood activities with marginal farmers and landless farmers, mainly among the displaced population.
- iii. ensure effective implementation of agriculture-based schemes by lobbying, partnering, and converging with the related government departments.

With the current water crisis due to the sealed Indo-Bhutan border, the Saralpara communities have been getting support from the organization, which has been conveying the people's cry for help across the border to the authorities in Bhutan.



TROSA

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