

FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

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Challenges and opportunities of river management

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The NRPC has started functioning in the form of "Coordination Bridge Ties", as stated by them. Some commendable steps have been taken by the commission, where one of it is making a list of 42,423 persons who have encroached upon rivers all around the country (Prothom Alo, August 26, 2019). It also appears that the NRPC has a very challenging task ahead with limited resources. There have been criticisms already at the early stages that have pointed that the NRCC is simply a recommending body without any statutory power of implementation. Placement of this important organisation under the administrative control of the Ministry of Shipping has been another debatable item. This has been questioned by several professionals, since river and water bodies fall in the sphere of the Ministry of Water Resources



File photo of Teesta River.

PHOTO: ANIMESH PRAKASH

In the overall management of the river system, a number of organisations are responsible. Overlapping areas of responsibilities by stakeholder groups need to be clarified by proper coordination. River management is very important to control flood water, embankment erosion and navigability.

as per related rules of business. However, the country is yet to see its potential in making positive headway under specific vision covering comprehensive mission with a timeframe. It is important that this institution is manned by dedicated, trained and efficient staff who can really work as per the set objectives.

Currently, the deplorable state of rivers besides the major cities of Bangladesh, say eight divisional cities/towns, speak of the true story about the respective stakeholders' concerns to the available legal framework. Worst performers so far

noticed are in Dhaka, where damages on three adjacent rivers, Buriganga, Turag and Balu are notoriously visible. Lately, the river Dhaleshwari is also being polluted at a faster pace due to the ill management of tannery factories' treatment plants. Rangpur district town, though never marked by anyone for harming the almost dead river Ghagat nearby, deserves to be listed along with the capitol city for not doing enough to protect the river. Mymensingh also has the responsibility to give life support to its already half dead river called the old Brahmaputra. Recent initiative to conduct some dredging to revive it by the government is appreciated. Similarly, all other rivers on the banks of which urbanisation has taken place need to be maintained and conserved up to a standard acceptable by any safety authority for health, environment and infrastructure. The cities which have grown more industrial are on the top

of the list having polluted rivers and potential land grabbers. Presently, offices of all the district administrators are having colourful websites, which could be asked to electronically publish the quality of waters of respective rivers along with other important information on a regular basis. This can help monitoring activities and general people would also know the standard of river water management.

In the overall management of the river system, a number of organisations are responsible. Overlapping areas of responsibilities by stakeholder groups need to be clarified by proper coordination. River management is very important to control flood water, embankment erosion and navigability. Rivers need to be controlled which is an important task for social scientists, environmentalists, along with civil and water resources engineers. In reality it is an expensive affair which is found

to be difficult worldwide. That is why there are many unsuccessful stories on river management. But what has been successful around the globe is sharing water resources by countries through cooperated actions under good political intentions. Over and above, if strong political will and control backed by peoples' aspiration and support is not there from national and international organisations, every endeavour may fail.

A quotation from the former Secretary General of United Nations reminds us of the importance of rightful sharing of international rivers. He said, "Fierce national competition over water resources has prompted fears that water issues contain the seeds of violent conflict. If all the world's peoples work together, a secure and sustainable water future can be ours". Through fair politics and diplomacy all possible areas of cooperation may be explored to take maximum benefit from the natural

resources of the region.

Management of natural resources in general and river water in particular are among the very critical challenges encountered by most developing countries in the world and Bangladesh is no exception. Severe competitions in exploitations of resources and improper handling of the issues by political masters have been cause of conflicts in many places. Mistrust, lack of governance, mismanagement and non-cooperation on equitable sharing of river waters may damage harmony, peace and slow down long-term development within the country or the region. With change of climate there is again urgency for strengthening water governance, which must be addressed with due care.

Now, the most important step for proper management of rivers is preparing human resources to deal with the issues for both short and long term. Education and training on use and maintenance of rivers along with appropriate legal framework is a must. We need to prepare experts on water resources engineering and management, legal experts on dispute negotiation and resolution. Political strength should be utilised properly to engage all concerned with riparian and domestic water users' groups. Water resources professionals have to learn how to plan, design, build, and operate structures that together with non-structural measures increase the benefits people can obtain from the water resources contained in aquifers, lakes, rivers, and estuaries. Bangladesh needs to have her rivers (life-lines) well protected against all threats for the benefit of its economy and for the survival of millions of its people.

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