

# Flowing with the river

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**I**n its flow is its life and in its freedom lies our existence. All of us who have over the years sought the power to intervene in this river philosophy have done so with our own vision for river systems. This might be through proactive alteration of a river's trajectory or by being beneficiaries of its use. We have justified this, first through the creation of river civilisations and at a later stage by feeding our unending aspirations of growth. Rivers and their basins have continued to be used to meet consumptive targets in agriculture, industry and energy generation, all of which are only on the rise.

When a group of activists, river basin planners, scientists, researchers and media representatives met for a dialogue on river basin planning in New Delhi from 9 to 11 August this year, the human induced crisis was foremost on their discussion agenda. While some river basins have already been built upon extensively, others have been subjected to years of pollution. And then there were those rivers they had in mind which were extremely vulnerable in current times, ones where human intervention so far have been minimal.

This meeting organised by River Research Centre (Kerala), Gomukh, (Maharashtra), Manthan Adhyayan Kendra (Madhya Pradesh), Legal Initiative for Forests and Environment (New Delhi) and International Rivers deliberated on the possibilities of river basin planning. While the title of the meeting threw open the need to mainstream river basin planning, the three-day discussions went into deeper questions about what the practice of mainstreaming has meant till date. Further, are the current models of planning the way ahead to resolve multiple river crises? If not, can new models be evolved which make possible a more inclusive and holistic process of river basin planning?

While the meeting raised some very crucial questions about the future of rivers, what was challenging was the diverse understanding of what a river is, how far its basin extends and what planning for it implies. For some a river is the essence of nature and even though it has supported human beings from the time of our existence, we don't have the right to alter its flow for irrigation, power generation or extrac-



Kashang Nala in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh

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tion in a way that would artificially modify the ecological functions of a river.

But ever since rivers have been viewed as instruments of human desire, we have managed to find scientific logic which seeks to "balance" river functions. And this has also to a large extent determined what rivers should be planned for. There are those for whom river basin plans always have to do with tapping the potential of the river keeping human requirements in mind. In this situation the river has to be under extensive management and control. But the core issue which kept resurfacing in the Delhi dialogue was the need to talk about plan-

ning within hydrological and ecological limits rather than the potential use of rivers.

A river and its plan would both have a bearing on its basin which most often extends beyond national boundaries and throws up issues of upper and lower riparian rights. What would a Nepal limited plan for the River Kosi mean for India and how does Bangladesh view India declaring the Ganga as a national river? Is it actually possible to bargain for dams exercising methodologies like cumulative impact assessment of the construction of dams on the river Teesta or Brahmaputra without taking into account how China is tapping waters upstream and how Bangladesh will be impacted downstream?

With varying perceptions of a river, its basin and what planning for it means, the dialogue was not conclusive in its recommendations. But it flagged some uncomfortable questions that we would have to engage with if the many river world views are to be reconciled in the light of current time threats facing the rivers of the world. In many ways then any intervention in a river cannot be regarded as one with a large or small impact. Number crunching cannot alone determine how much one can risk a river's flow depending on the convenience of our intentions.

Therefore, even as we attempt to mainstream river basin plans from our own river visions, do we look for out-of-the-box solutions? Here it was felt that the present focus of tapping the hydrological potential of rivers needs to be replaced by the planning premise which looks at the ecological limits to hydrological alterations. Any legal, governance and institutional reforms that follow would be based on such foremost planning priorities.

Rivers are also socio-cultural and political spaces other than being ecological entities, and river science should not isolate itself from this while attempting to plan or manage a river and its basin. It also cannot wish away the fact that planning will throw up uncomfortable questions and require negotiated trade-offs, many of which might only complicate the river planning process rather than be able to resolve it. ■

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