

[Navarun Varma, who is affiliated with TERI-HI-AWARE, presented a paper at the 6th Conference of the International Society for Integrated Disaster Risk Management (IDRiM 2015), entitled “Disaster Risk Reduction: Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Growth” in New Delhi, India, on October 28-30, 2015. The abstract of his paper is presented below.]

Blurring boundaries for seeking desirable and feasible solutions - Use of social learning process in a context of Brahmaputra basin in India

Navarun Varma¹

¹ *Centre for Global Environment Research, Earth Science and Climate Change Division
The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), New Delhi <navarun@teri.res.in>*

ABSTRACT

The Brahmaputra in India is a paradox; it has been a source of fear, jubilation, prosperity, aspiration and misery in different times among different cultures. Flood control in the basin has been part of two different debates within their respective epistemic boundaries. On one hand it is argued, using the ‘dynamic geomorphology’ framework, as a reaction of a new polity to a crisis following the 1950 earthquake with its positive feedback to flood problem gaining attention from late 90s. While on the other hand, the ‘political economy’ framework explains it, as a legacy of an institutional practice to control the river for serving elitist goals. There have been instances of regime shifts within agro-ecosystems in the basin; like from prosperous paddy cultivated region to sediment deposited waste lands, in north bank of Upper Brahmaputra Valley. But there has been a continuation of engineering solutions without deeper understanding of their influence on social dynamics, typifications of community behavior with an ignorance of cultural legacies, and lack of prioritization of adaptation needs in novel social-ecological conditions. The conceptual frameworks explaining nuances of flood control in the basin context have also been feeding into distinct discourses influencing policy and praxis in problem situations like that of Upper Brahmaputra Valley. While, the discontented resource using community, has been deriving motivation from actors influenced by identity and space politics for mobilization towards political autonomy. Such influences of opposing discourses in the context may reinforce the narrative of trust gap between the Indian polity and its North East region.

In this context, a participatory modeling exercise was designed with stakeholders uttering different narrative of the problem situation in Upper Brahmaputra Valley. The dialog in the course of four days was coded to derive certain psychological boundaries inhibiting identification of linkages across elements of different narratives and also certain factors enabling negotiations towards innovative solutions. This exercise finally helped in identifying key research, policy and institutional needs for an integrated disaster management planning in Brahmaputra basin.