

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON

River of the People, River against the People: Conceptualizing livelihood, identity & society of Assam through the Brahmaputra

To be held at
Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research



Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Sponsored by
North Eastern Council, Government of India
Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR)
&
Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL)

23rd – 24th September, 2019

The organizing committee invites abstract of 500 words on or before 08th August 2019, the abstract should be submitted to conference email brahmaputraseminar2019@gmail.com or chetry.bikash@gmail.com

Concept Note:

Perhaps one of the most repeated sentences about rivers have been that they are the 'cradles of civilization'. Throughout the history of human development, rivers have acted as one of the singularly important resources facilitating the growth of multiple other resources; be it agriculture, trade, industry or as basic as human settlement. Rivers have defined not just the trajectory of human development but have assigned character to such development in the regions which they drain. Rivers are complex systems in themselves because they assimilate lives around them- and often in highly interconnected networks so that the river in itself becomes the repository of multiple histories and geographies of the society that it meticulously builds. The society of Assam has been defined and determined, in a similar way by the river Brahmaputra. Understanding a society through its river provides a unique vantage point for research queries integral to the society with a fresh perspective.

The theme of rivers as an influential system, governing life around it and as a sufficient paradigm of conducting research has already become globally relevant today. Worster's work '*Rivers of Empire*' provides an insight of such research wherein he argues that a social structure or the social space of any region is shaped by the relationship between humans and the environment. The significance of such a river system is visible in the impact that it generates- in the form of linkages, dependence and prospects; and the Brahmaputra of Assam is both famous and infamous for its role in determining life and economy of the region. Water as a structural framework to understanding any region has been a continuous engagement among academicians, administrators and planners throughout the world. Within the discipline of geography, the approach of regional geography is entirely dedicated to understanding such relationships and its resultant spatialities.

The role of rivers in shaping economic regions, resource-use regimes and culture of societies cannot be more emphasized; which has also ensured that rivers be the sites of profound anthropogenic activities. Rivers have always been socially significant; the Brahmaputra however became more than a social asset with its inclusion into the Imperial economy when it became a colonial icon for Assam. The colonial economy transformed Brahmaputra into the passage through which the region was governed- through identification of resource use regimes around it, mapping out the region in terms of its economic utility, establishment of administrative centers along the river to govern and finally utilizing the river as the channel of transportation for all the resources that the Imperial hunger needed to devour. The questions of identity and belongingness, of citizenship and rights are integrally connected to the complex spatial transformations brought about by colonial administration centered round the economic utility of the Brahmaputra. Such questions have become prime issues of the people living in the charlands of the river, which also extends into the broader pan-Assamese identity of the region. The river assumes the character of centrality as it determines livelihoods of the agrarian population (more

than 75% of the valley is rural) so that it can be argued that livelihoods are embedded in the river and its annual flood cycles.

The Brahmaputra valley as a region has evolved with what the river had to offer-- in all its wealth and woes. Starting with agriculture, which is the mainstay of the people of the valley, the river has found its importance celebrated through the valley's festivities and folklores, cultures and rituals. It has simultaneously also been driving force behind the region's fertility as well as the region's displacement issues through floods and erosion. Unplanned extraction of water resources, damming the river in geologically fragile zones, flooding and erosion have dovetailed into environmental fragility, displacement and migration. With growing environmental consciousness, protests against the building of hydro-electric dams have found its way into the already existing plethora of issues associated with the Brahmaputra.

What needs to be realised is that the Brahmaputra is not just a drainage basin carrying voluminous amounts of water; it is the facilitator of the agrarian economy, the determinant geographical feature of the region's identity, the decisive factor for char livelihoods, the harbinger of flood and fertility. It would not be wrong to argue that the Brahmaputra assigns a singularly irrefutable identity to the region it drains, as does other rivers throughout the world. The importance of a conference, therefore, on the role of the Brahmaputra in shaping Assam's history, economy, politics, culture and communication is conclusive.

The endeavor to enhance knowledge often requires the intervention of new vantage points of studying the mainstream and subaltern narratives about a society. This conference is about bringing together different resource persons associated with studies centering round the Brahmaputra, albeit through different disciplines.

The aim here is to provide an inter-disciplinary platform, where knowledge about the Brahmaputra can be discussed and debated in order to generate a multi-disciplinary narrative centering round it.

Themes for the National Conference:

- Political Economy of Development
 - Identity Politics and belongingness
 - Environment, Ecology and Disasters
 - Brahmaputra: Spatialities, Regimes and Governance
 - Colonial and Post- Colonial geographies of the Brahmaputra Valley
 - Role and relevance of the Brahmaputra
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The papers presented will be compiled to bring out a book which can be utilised as a tool to enrich research on river as a social system, river ecology and livelihood and labour within river basins. The presented papers will generate debates and discussions in the conference about how the impact of the river on the region is being studied, so that the papers are published in the book in the best of its capacity.

Expected date & Venue: 23th & 24th September, 2019, Conference Room, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia.

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Panel of 3 members shall evaluate all the submitted abstracts. Authors of only shortlisted abstracts will be contacted to prepare the full paper for the conference and possible inclusion in an edited book.

