Community-led Water Museum of Bangladesh

*From dystopia to futures*

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Ground Realities

- Bangladesh is predominately a riverine country (±800 rivers)
- +100 rivers shared with Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal
- 23.46% contribution to Bangladesh’s GDP is from agriculture
- Surface water (mostly trans-boundary rivers) major source of irrigation
- Life of people dependent on agriculture is ‘governed’ by rivers
Challenges

- Barrages and river-linking projects have disrupted **river flow**
- Low (or extremely high) influx of **sediment** affecting ecology
- Dependence on ground water for **irrigation**, industry increasing
- Sundarbans forest **threatened** due to salinity & lack of sediment
Impacts

• Ground water level and deep aquifer reserves are **depleting**

• +100 rivers **dried up** and many polluted by industrial waste

• Agriculture, fisheries, ecology & human health are **hugely affected**

• Temperature balance, rainfall, erosion, vegetation are **critical**

• Cost of agricultural goods (production, shipment) **rising**

• Govt. water resource management providing **no solution**
Why Water Museum?
Why Water Museum?

- **Upholding** the concerns of river beyond political boundaries
- **Re-Imagining** river in humane and ecological point of view
- **Sharing** (as opposed to dividing) the rivers and its waters
- **Joining** the multi-country ‘Water Commons’ campaign
- **Driving** the regional campaign towards international policy
- **Searching** for solutions for people dependent on rivers
Water Museum

- The first ever water museum in Asia.
- Launched on 29 December 2014
- Location: Pakhimara Bazar (Kolapara, Bangladesh)
- Aim: To create a sense of awareness among the stakeholders especially the policy makers and also to create a strong basis for policy advocacy on “Water Commons
- Two CBOs, a local NGO, & ActionAid co-manage the Museum.
Our call for action

- Ratify UN Law on Non-Navigational use of Water Course 1997
- Include River-Basin management agenda in SAARC
- Set a regional River Commission instead of JRC
- Set Basin wise management Authority
- Enact a River Law considering supreme court order that River is a living being.
- Free flows of river without contamination; remove all kinds of obstructions.
- Industries to be shifted far from river
- Sewerage lines to be disconnect with river & Water bodies
- Increase forestation and stop deforestation.
- Increasing irrigation by surface water instead of ground water
Features of Water Museum

- **Water sample** of 57 trans-boundary rivers (also from Nepal, Myanmar)
- **Visuals** on river system, water bodies and people’s lives
- **Artifacts** that represent culture and heritage in the flood plains
- **Symbol** such as a life-size boat stuck on dried up riverbed
- **Model** of local river system (Andharmanik), flora & fauna
- **Map** that identifies Bangladeshi and trans-boundary rivers
- **Digital** recourses such as documentaries, songs, dramas etc.
- **Publications** featuring policy, reports and people’s lives
Video of Water Museum

- Water Museum Video-

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge6kEGb58A
Key Activities

- Display & open for visitors 6 days in a week.
- Learning space for students & academics.
- Sharing community experience, idea generation and taking actions.
- Annual conference on right to river and defending commons.
- Promoting activism.
- Policy advocacy.
- WM [website](#) and [Facebook](#) page.
Video: Patuakhali Water Museum Bangladesh: A case study of community-led action
Water Walk
Free flow of rivers and precipitation are the main source of fresh water in Bangladesh and ninety percent of fresh water comes from rivers. In recent times people of our country are affected by the interruption in free flow of fresh water from upstream during dry season. As a result, some of the districts in North Bengal region are showing signs of desertification. Natural resources including the Sundarbans are damaged because of salinity intrusion.

The Human Rights Convention gives special emphasis on taking development plan while ensuring the political, social and cultural rights of the people. Apart from that Helsinki Rules on the Uses of Waters of International Rivers were issued in the UN Watercourse Convention in 1998, which was later approved as Helsinki Rules by the General Assembly (United Nation’s convention, 1997). As per the convention, there are specific provisions to ensure protection, preservation and management related to the uses of those water-courses and their waters. For any construction in a trans-boundary river, all related countries, nations, societies and stakeholders must be included in planning & implementation. Bangladesh, India and Myanmar are yet to ratify the convention.

There are 880 rivers and tributaries in our country of which 150 are trans-boundary. However, bilateral negotiations with the neighbouring countries helped recognize only 57 rivers as trans-boundary. Some of these recognized trans-boundary rivers are facing obstruction due to construction of dams in several places. Some rivers from upstream have already dried up. It has an adverse effect on the people living around the places. They are suffering from both flood and drought. Underground water level is going down due to decreasing flow of water in water-body and too much extraction of ground water. It has a negative impact on our agro-based economy, cultural heritage, psychology and social infrastructures. River is a precious asset for mankind. It is our duty and responsibility to ensure conservation and maintenance of this resource properly.

We do not want to confine our water-centric cultural heritage and traditions within the scope of water museum. Rather we hope to preserve and uphold this heritage. Under these circumstances, we have following demands and proposals to the concerned authority:

**Internal Water Management**

1. To secure equitable flow of water in rivers, strong legislation should be made to remove all kind of constrictions and prevent future disruption.
2. Prioritising our local knowledge and cultural heritage for the greater interest of people, we should refrain ourselves from taking any harmful projects instigated by international donor organisations.
3. As per international practice, before initiating any project, we have to make sure that all related parties and stakeholders are included in the decision making process, hence adequate measures and remedies are taken for the affected people from the implementation of such projects.
4. In any bilateral and regional discussion on water issues, public should be informed. Planned discussion session with the community people should be organised to create consensus.
5. All harmful sluice gates, dams and other establishments around the rivers and other water bodies should be removed to ensure environmental sustainability.

**Regional Water Management**

1. The government should ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses 1997 as soon as possible and encourage neighbouring countries to do the same.
2. Joint River Commission requires to be converted into the South Asian River Commission, so that the relationship based on mutual trust can be put together on water issues among the SAARC countries.
3. By amending the Water Law-2013, the conservation of rivers, environmental and ecological sustainability and people’s right over water should be secured followed by the prohibition of any commercialization of water.
4. We should stop reallocating the wetlands and create new wetlands to reduce our dependency on ground water and increase the use of open water bodies.
5. Water resource is being affected and free flow of water is being interrupted because of water governance in the name of water management program, unlawful possession of river banks in the name of development and excessive pollution. Authority should immediately take appropriate measures against such harmful and (to some extent) illegal activities.
6. We should consider issues relating to free flow of water, rightful use of water, prevention of any kind of pollution, food security, disaster management and climate change while building any massive and permanent establishments.
Water Conference

- Total 6 Water Conferences took place on the following themes-
  - Right to Water and Defending Commons
  - Water Democracy
  - Water Roots Innovation
  - River a Living Being
  - Legalising River Rights: People, Politics and Practices
  - Water, Climate and Justice in the Wake of COVID-19
Achievements

• +2K people including Govt. officials visited the Museum.
• Appreciative, visitors demanded expansion in terms of structure and contents.
• The online portal and media reports have helped reach policy makers. Community people consider themselves a part of the ‘Water Commons’ campaign.

Publications

Rights, River & the Quest for Water Commons
The Case of Bangladesh
Imtiaz Ahmed

People of Many Rivers
Tales from the Riverbanks
Imtiaz Ahmed
Views of a Fisherman
Title: **Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges**

Date: 20-22 January 2020

Venue: RDRS, Rangpur (hybrid)
Join Us!

Water Museum needs to be replicated across the country. We are inviting funders to support the development of a bigger facility and a replication across the country. We also invite donors to make donations.

Hopefully, the hubs in strategic river-centric locations will generate discourse in favour of water-centric development and stop the ongoing man-made water crisis in South-Asia.

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Water Museum on Facebook page
Thank You