



MEKONG-BRAHMAPUTRA CONVERSATION:
Learning and Ideas for North East India and Bangladesh
Case Study: Cambodia

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CASE STUDY: CAMBODIA

Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation:
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Produced & Distributed by: Divya Jeevan Foundation 2019

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Background and Context:

The Mekong region has a history of regional cooperation amongst the nation states through frameworks such as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) and MRC (Mekong regional Cooperation). As a part of the MRC framework, regional cooperation over the Mekong river has made further progress.

The more recent Mekong Council Study is an initiative towards an integrated, cross-sectoral, comprehensive and state-of-the-art study bent on ensuring sustainable development in the Mekong Basin and focusing on cooperation among the MRC Member Countries – Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, to that end. The North Eastern region of India comprises a substantial part of the Brahmaputra basin, and is presently evolving strategies of regional cooperation. The Act East Policy of the government of India is an overarching policy framework aspiring to enhance connectivity of the north - east of India to the South East Asian and Bay of Bengal region while at the same time developing the region itself by putting into optimum use its rich water and biodiversity and human resource potential.

Thus, drawing on the experiences of the Mekong region which has had a history of transboundary institutional and community cooperation and where the local communities and the civil society have found a greater voice, the Brahmaputra region can draw strength towards formulating a more inclusive people friendly mechanism in managing water resources effectively.

In the follow-up to the project “Flowing Boundaries” executed successfully in 2017 by the Asian Confluence with support from the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, India, the “Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation project” aimed to take forward the process of engagement and sharing between experts and civil society leaders from the Brahmaputra/ Jamuna (India, Bhutan and Bangladesh) and Mekong regions. This involved field visits to Cambodia and Thailand for interaction among civil society organisations, experts and institutions working on various aspects of water resources management, including the regulatory frameworks that governs such management. The various issues discussed included transboundary regulatory frameworks, mechanisms and institutions, the links with communities, livelihoods and natural resource management at the ground level and how the micro aspects on the ground link with the larger regulatory and institutional framework.

This Case Study is prepared under the “Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation” project. The endeavour is to create opportunities for learning and exchange between the two basins and put in place a strong foundation for collaboration, which can be recommended to governmental and civil society organizations in the respective countries for timely implementation.

Phnom Koulen and Tonle Sap- key facts, insights and possibilities

Siem Reap offers a unique opportunity to look at a watershed system in its entirety, commencing with the hills of Phnom Kullen, flowing through the flood plains of Siem Reap and finally draining into the Tonle Sap lake. Several interesting initiatives regarding water resources have taken place in the province, but the ones that stand out in terms of the possibilities of collaborations with and adaption by the Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, are the cases of Koulen National Park and the Kompong Plouk community in the Tonle Sap area. Both these cases present ample opportunities for engagement with communities in order to achieve wider economic benefits (WEBs), gender inclusion while at the same time creating a positive ground level discourse around sustainable and equitable management of water, natural and cultural resources.

Phnom Koulen National Park

The Phnom Koulen (Mountain of the Lychees) Park, officially known as Chaya Vorman Norodom Phnom Koulen National Park, is located in Svay Leu District of Siem Reap Province of Cambodia. It was declared a National park in 1993 and offers an interesting ensemble of heritage, culture and natural resources. The range stretches for about 40 km and is considered as a holy mountain in Cambodia with both Hindus and Buddhists visiting it for purpose of pilgrimage. The park is managed jointly by Departments of Forestry, Environment and Fishery. Tourism activities are co-managed by private entities and communities as well.

The Phnom Koulen is steeped in history. During the Angkorian era the mountain was known as *Mahendraparvata* (the mountain of Great Indra). Jayavarman II, the 9th-century king of Cambodia, had reportedly laid the foundation of the Khmer empire in these mountains by proclaiming independence from Java and christening himself as the *Chakravartin* (King of Kings).

Koulen mountain is a crucial watershed for the entire Siem Reap flood plain and contributes around 40% of the water resources, which ultimately drains into the Tonle Sap lake. While the mountains do not usually suffer from any water shortage, there was a drought in 2016 which alerted both authorities and communities about the danger of degradation of the forest and natural resources. The threat imposed by climate change may have also contributed to the degeneration. In the face of such threats, reforestation initiatives were taken up by the concerned authorities, communities and NGOs. The reforestation initiative was also linked with tourism activities offering tourists the opportunity to buy saplings and plant them in designated plantation parks.

Small villages nestle along the mountain and the main livelihood activities of these folk include subsistence agriculture, forest gathering, livestock and tourism.

Various organizations are involved in the management of the Koulen mountain national park. These include departments under the Ministry of Environment and Ministry Of Culture And Fine Arts; Local authorities at the provincial district and commune levels; Angkor institute, which is responsible for tourist management in Koulen mountain; Apsara authorities which are involved in the protection and management of the area; NGOs such as The Archaeology and Development Foundation (ADF), which contributes to research on opportunities for buttressing incomes of the local communities and Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodivers (ACCB), which contributes to research on conservation and protection of flora and fauna of the region; and the Norkor Kor Thlork Company which has obtained the right from government to oversee tourist management in Koulen resort for a period of 30 years, of which 20 remain at present.

Phnom Koulen is a well known destination for tourists both domestic and international, and the main attractions include:

- *The “Valley of a thousand Lingas”, along the Kbal Spean River, which is a tributary of Siem Reap River. The site has many figures of Yoni and Linga as well as other figures engraved on the rocks on the riverbed and along the banks which get fully exposed and become discernible in the dry season once the river dries up.*
- *The waterfalls on the Kbal Spean River.*
- *Terrace of Sdach Kamlung is a plain terrace at the centre of which lies a small ruined temple made of bricks.*
- *PreahAng Thom is an 8 meter tall statue of the reclining Buddha attaining nirvana. The statue is carved out of a huge sandstone boulder. Preah Ang Thom is the sacred God of worship for Phnom Koulen.*
- *Chup Preah is located in the mountain’s valley and has a big Buddhist statue and many other small statues crafted during the 16th century. There is a rare big tree at Cham Pa having a diameter of 0.7 m and a height of 15-m.*

The Koulen National Park has an interesting ensemble of heritage, culture and natural resources. It bears resemblance with some places in the Brahmaputra-Meghna basins e.g. Unakoti in Tripura. Both Koulen and Unakoti harbour heritage sites and sculptures, they are both forested areas. Further research will perhaps reveal finer points of resemblance. The nature of the entire watershed area from the Koulen Mountains to the Tonle Sap flood plain and lake is also similar to the waterscape in the hills of Meghalaya and the flood plains of Bangladesh.

The national park is facing challenges with regard to the management of natural resources and wildlife conservation, commercial tourism, community and livelihoods, and also in respect of waste management. Though local communities are involved in tourism related activities, the community involvement in

management, conservation and tourism is not sufficient. This is mainly because of lack of awareness, reachout and skills. Low levels of community engagement compound the challenges to protection of wildlife and natural resources. The communities are involved in providing tourist services like food, small souvenir and gift shops, etc at places of interest. To a less extent they are involved in conservation activities. The forest officials undertook campaigns to sensitise them about the need for retaining forest covers, maintaining natural resources, etc., particularly after the 2016 drought and have also taken them on board and involved them for the preservation and protection of natural and national resources through various activities. These include:

- *Patrolling the area in keeping with guidelines issued by the Ministry of Environment (MoE)*
- *Using national/natural resources in keeping with technical guidelines of MoE*
- *Contributing to re-plantation or afforestation thereby rehabilitating forestry*
- *Reporting to environment officials about illegal or offensive activities that are damaging to national resources*

Key ideas on exchange and collaborations that can be explored:

- *Koulen-Kaziranga Conversation - Koulen is facing challenges in terms of joint working and management of the cultural and natural resources involving government, private entities and communities. It can learn from the experience of Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India about forest and wildlife management through cooperation and participation of local communities and private entities.*
- *Souvenir Plantation Park -Koulen has introduced an interesting idea of the Tree Planting campaign, which is an attraction for tourists visiting the national park. It not only contributes to conservation and reforestation efforts, but also strengthens the public discourse on the importance of natural resource management and conservation in the wake of climate change. The idea of a “Souvenir Park” where visitors plant saplings as their contribution to this effort is an idea that can be adapted in the parks and forests of the Brahmaputra-Meghna basin for purposes of generating awareness about conservation.*
- *Tourism as a tool for conservation - There are prospects for culture and heritage linked exchange, research and collaborations. For instance the Kbal Spean river has a bed with a thousand lingas and such engravings can be engineered on natural rock formations in Assam, India. Collaborative research and exchange can in particular look at how tourism can be leveraged as a tool to complement conservation efforts. Harmonisation of such efforts can culminate in greater consensus on ways to address climate change for purposes of conserving heritage and natural resources of the land.*

Tonle Sap- Kampong Plouk

Kampong Plouk is a village built on stilts on the Tonle Sap in the Siem Reap province of Cambodia. The name means “Harbor of the Tusks” possibly reminiscent of the thriving trade that used to happen with the aid of elephants in the region in historic times. The entire area is under water for 6 months(May - October) in a year and the communities living there have adapted their lives, livelihood and culture to work around this unique traits.

The communities living in this region look upon the flood water as an asset rather than a liability. Instead of recurring investment on prevention and containment of the floods, the community thrives on fishing throughout the wet season. They take recourse to farming in the dry season, mainly for subsistence and also indulge in ecotourism and other small business activities. The share is approximately fishery (70%), tourism (20%) and small businesses (5%). The community also has thrift activities in the form of “Savings Groups” that, in addition to providing loans for commercial activities, take up community development projects including preservation of flood forests and biodiversity that are major attractions for tourists. The community ensures sustainable systems through well-managed benefit sharing mechanisms, gender inclusion and emphasis on natural resource conservation. The small boat services in Kampong Plouk are a wonderful example of community-regulated, participatory tourist services with fair benefit sharing.

Community-Regulated and Participatory Boating Services for Tourists with Benefit Sharing Mechanisms

Community Owned and Regulated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each household owns at least 1 boat and belongs to a boating group • There are five boating groups comprising small boats, each having 30 boats.
Fair and Participatory Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 5 groups (small boats) can offer their boating services on a rotational basis, usually one group gets one day at a time. • Average Tourist footfall in the community per day is 500, though not everyone opts for a boat ride. • In case of more than usual tourist footfall on a day, the next group in line is given the opportunity to cater to tourists after the first group has fulfilled its quota for the day (roughly one ride for each of the 30 boats in a group).
Gender Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All small boats are managed exclusively by women and they charge USD 5 per ride.
Benefit Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefit (USD 5) from each boat ride is divided in a regulated way – USD 1 goes as commission to the Agent who brings in the tourist, USD 2 goes to the boat owner/household, USD1 goes to the Community funds • The entire cycle is regulated by rules agreed upon at the community level and it also ensures fair and sustainable benefit sharing with some funds allocated for maintenance expenditure that is undertaken by the community.



Savings Groups provide loan assistance to the group member (3% interest for group members & 5% for non-members) to start small businesses. They also take up community development projects and contribute funds for campaigns and protection drives for natural resources and wild life (e.g. protection of Pelican birds in the lake)



Community Fishery has a framework, catering to communities and natural habitat alike. The group has 888 members in total, roughly one from each household, with emphasis on participation by women and youth. There are structured regulations and rules (formally recognised in 2008) for fishing, conservation periods and demarcation for fishing and conservation areas (in the Tonle Sap lake) and also how the benefits are to be shared. The group organises monthly meetings in the community, and workshop in the provinces on issues like harvesting of catch, management and protection of fish habitats, flood forests, etc. they also have paroling and reforestation activities.



Community led ecotourism is also well organised with clear rules for participation by each household in the community and benefit sharing (e.g. earning from tourist boats). There are 5 boating groups, each group having 30 boats, both big and small. Each household has at least one boat and small boats are managed entirely by women. Each household gets to offer its boating services on a rotational basis. The benefit sharing from boating is divided among agents (who bring in tourists), boat owner and the community. Homestays are privately managed, but house owners pay certain charges to the community for services such as waste management.

Community Initiatives in Kampong Plouk

Gender Positive Initiatives

There is a planned emphasis to include and encourage women and youth in all efforts and initiatives. This is in harmony with the cultural ethos of South East Asia, which has generally been more inclusive of women and women have participated in all walks of life. However, the initiatives still ensure built-in components so as to particularly encourage women to come forward and get actively involved. For e.g., the small boats in the Kampong Plouk community are mandated to be exclusively managed by women. The Brahmaputra-Meghna basin in South Asia lags behind noticeably when it comes to women participation and empowerment. Specific frameworks and efforts to encourage women participation can be suitably adopted in the Brahmaputra-Mekong context. It will be pertinent to point out that the cultural realities of a geography/region are to be kept in mind while designing interventions and while it will be good for the Brahmaputra – Meghna basin to emulate initiatives from the Mekong basin, it will be important to do so by carefully balancing enablers and addressing hurdles to the process of transformation. It is therefore important to do deep diving on the enablers and address hurdles to the transformation. It is therefore important to delve deep into the enabling factors while at the same time keep a watchful eye on the factors that frustrate gender inclusion with regard to specific initiatives.

Given the similarities in climatic, geographical conditions and in certain cases, cultural nuances, many communities and places in the Brahmaputra-Meghna basin (e.g. Majuli island in Assam, India, Ratargul Swamp Forest in Sylhet, Bangladesh) can emulate the Kampong Plouk community, in regard to adaptation, conservation and tourism.

The Kampong Plouk community faces challenges in terms of solid waste management, and water monitoring and management (both waste and drinking water). Drinking water comes from bore-well. The houses in the village have their own waste pit and septic tank at the backyard for collection of solid and liquid waste. The water soaks into the soil and the pit is emptied/serviced once it is full. The septic tank is constructed at the back of the house. During flood and rainy season the water covers the bore-well site, waste pit and the tank. Some plastic waste management is done through collecting items like plastic bottles from the households for resale/recycling by outside agencies. Given this situation and arrangement there are issues pertaining to water contamination and health. There is need for focused research on monitoring water quality along with adoption of best practices on grey water and solid waste disposal. There are opportunities to learn from Meghalaya, India, about grey water disposal mechanisms that the Meghalaya River Basin Authority is working on with the communities.

Role of Civil Society and Opinion Leaders: Some Insights

Kampong Plouk, Cambodia has been a witness to close cooperation between the government and civil society (NGO forum) and the community enjoys substantial autonomy. This is in contrast to the north eastern states where most directives are given by the states to the partners. While there are strong communities in the North East as well, there is no equivalent of a civil society forum to educate them or provide leadership in ideas. One of the long term purposes of this effort is to take the best practices from the Mekong region and educate communities in the North East as well as governments to encourage participatory management of natural and cultural resources.

While there are many overarching issues, one of the main reasons behind the success of these centres in Cambodia and Thailand was the leadership provided by civil society organisations (FACT, NGO Forum) in offering pioneering ideas and articulating community concerns that were vital inputs for prudent policy making in the region. A complementary role was also played by the vision of the erstwhile king of Thailand. In the Indian context there is a disconnect between the community and the government and there is no platform that can enable the two to come together and arrive at rational policies in the interest of all concerned.

However, further research will be required on the salient features and major enablers of each success story highlighted by the case studies before the evidence at hand is ready to be taken up for adaptation by relevant stakeholders. Such studies will bring to light the specific interventions and steps that can be taken up by governments, private sector, civil society, communities. Nonetheless, the relevance of this project stems from its objective to highlight the Mekong experience, in particular the pioneering role played by the civil society organisations in making it a success story, from which areas similarly poised like the Brahmaputra basin, may have a lot to learn and emulate.

Table of Mekong and Brahmaputra basin locations indicating similarities and differences (and hence issues on which learning from Mekong may be beneficial):

Location in Mekong	Location in Brahmaputra-Meghna basin
<p>Kbal Spean, Koulen, Siem Reap, Cambodia:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has historical stone carvings of Hindu gods and symbols (11th century) on the rock bed of a mountain stream 2. Situated in the Mountains 3. Forested area 4. Is a tourism destination where international tourists are frequenting, though further promotion is possible 5. Communities are involved in tourism support services 	<p>Unakoti (Tripura, India)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has historical stone carvings of Hindu gods and symbols (7th – 9th century) on the rocks along a mountain stream 2. Situated in the Mountains 3. Forested area 4. Is a tourism destination attracting international tourists, though further promotion is possible in this regard. Preservation has not been as desired though the federal government is recognizing its importance, of late. 5. Evidence gathering needed on ways to ensure community involvement
<p>Kampong Plouk, Tonle Sap, Siem Reap, Cambodia</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Situated on the banks of the confluence of the Tonle Sap river and the Tonle Sap lake, the biggest fresh water lake in South East Asia 2. Has floods for around 6 months in a year 3. Has mangroves forest along the lake and estuary 4. Has community-led tourism activity on Tonle Sap lake, particularly around the time of floods focusing on natural resources, bird watching and cultural diversity. 5. Has well-thought out benefit sharing mechanisms for revenues from tourism 6. Encourages women in tourism activities 7. Has community fund generated through tourism to protect natural resources and bio-diversity 8. Has active Civil Society engagement and lobbying with government 	<p>Ratergul Swamp Forest, Sylhet, Bangladesh</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is a freshwater swamp forest located in Gowain River. It is the only swamp forest located in Bangladesh 2. The forest is submerged under 20–30 feet water in the rainy/monsoon season. For the rest of the year, the water level is about 10 feet deep. 3. Has community driven tourism activity around natural resources, culture and biodiversity, but is not very structured and regulated 4. Does not have active Civil Society engagement and lobbying with government <p>Dawki, Meghalaya, India</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has community-driven tourism activity on Umngot river 2. Does not have benefit sharing mechanisms for revenues from tourism 3. No particular emphasis or frameworks to encourage women participation and involvement. There are no structures per se 4. Consensus-based and structured decision making, planning are conspicuous by their absence. 5. Does not have active Civil Society engagement and lobbying with government

Majuli Island, Assam, India

1. *The biggest river island in Asia*
2. *Has floods affecting it during the monsoon season which lasts for almost 3-4 months. Flood and erosion management is a big issue*
3. *Has nature of a wetland and is home to varied flora and fauna*
4. *Has some tourism around culture, festivals, natural resources and biodiversity*
5. *Has some civil society activity, but that is not very organized or structured.*

Key ideas on exchange and collaborations that can be explored:

- *Community Conversations between Tonle Sap (Siem reap, Cambodia) and Majuli (Assam, India), Ratergul (Sylhet, Bangladesh)- Strong possibilities for the Barhmaputra-Meghna basin to learn from the Tonle Sap example; particularly about community led management of fisheries, tourism and also the use of flood waters and their conversion into an opportunity. Since climate change is expected to lead to higher inundation in the future, with much higher instances of flooding, the case of the Tonle Sap communities stands out as one that is worth learning from and emulating.*
- *Community Conversations between Tonle Sap (Siem reap, Cambodia) and Dawki (Meghalaya, India-Bangladesh Border) –There is a strong case to learn from the Kampong Plouk experience (Tonle Sap) in respect of community led management of tourism, particularly about boating services offered to tourists. There has been a recent flourish in tourism activity at Dawki, which is on the India-Bangladesh border in the Indian state of Meghalaya. The local entities who engage in tourism are not organized, regulated or well-structured. This results in less-than-optimum tourist satisfaction, revenues, and benefit sharing. The Kampong Plouk community tourism initiatives may be worth learning from.*
- *Research and Exchange on Solid and Water Waste management- Tonle Sap communities face challenges in the domains of waste disposal and water quality management given the unique natural phenomenon of flooding for 6 months in a year. There could be cross-learning in this case from community level grey water disposal models of Meghalaya. There could also be collaborative research on better management and quality monitoring of waste.*



PHOTO GALLERY



Representatives from India-Bangladesh-Bhutan delegation team and Community heads of Kampong Plouk Community, Tonle Sap, Cambodia

Tonle Sap remains fully submerged in water for 6 months in a year, with the water level at the height of a fully grown tree leaving only their top visible and above water.



Tourists enjoying boat rides in Tonle Sap. All small boats are operated by women

Tourists enjoying boat rides in Tonle Sap. All small boats are operated by women





Fishing is one of the most important sources of income in Tonle Sap. They have a diverse aquatic livestock

Houses are built on stilts in Tonle Sap and Phnom Kulen Park. This is done as a preventive measure against the floods.



Waterfall in Phnom Kulen Park

Passengers being ferried to the Kampong Plouk village on a motorised boat





Women play a crucial role in the Tonle Sap community. They engage in all the social activities and help in the economic growth of their community. They can be seen engaging in trade, ferrying tourists, fishing, etc. They are also community leaders who partake in important social gatherings and decisions that impact the welfare of the community.

The community of Tonle Sap has adapted their ways to the floods. The community receives 6 months of intense flooding and 6 months of dry spell. Each family owns a boat to make its way around during the floods.

The entire area is flooded, rendering everyday life a challenge. But this phenomenon has been converted into a unique opportunity and source of livelihood.





Asian Confluence initiates, stimulates and accelerates revival of the shared civilizational values between the peoples of India and her immediate and extended neighbourhood in order to strengthen our intellectual, economic, technological, political and security ties, and thus ensure that we become dependable and involved partners for the growth of all countries in emerging Asia.

The organisation is headquartered in Shillong, Meghalaya, India, as an initiative of Divya Jeevan Foundation which works through research, training, advocacy and exchange programs to empower the 'Third Space' towards creating better understanding of the Eastern South Asian region. It promotes an open "Third space" beyond government and industry for cultural, economic and intellectual exchanges towards creating better understanding of the North Eastern and Eastern region of India in the larger context of India as an emerging player in East Asian geopolitics and stable partner in the prosperity of the Indo Pacific Region. The organisation operates using the lens of the following two main viewpoints:

- *The region as a confluence of geographies connected by the rivers and shared waters;*
- *The region as a confluence of ideas, identities, cultures and civilisations*

Through its activities and initiatives, the organisation aims to provide an opportunity for civil society to enhance people to people contact between India and her immediate and extended neighbours in Asia and also encourage a better understanding of the cultural and socio-political issues of the region that actually are the driving force behind India's "Act East Policy". It aims to do this by promoting research and interest in the region facilitating economic and intellectual exchanges, educational tourism, cultural tourism, creation of "out of the box" livelihood generation by promoting eco-friendly products and services, impetus to green industries aimed at economic development by forging a network of civil society organizations working on similar objectives. The overall aim is to empower the 'Third Space' to convert opportunities into collaborations and conflicts into confluence.

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG INDIA The **Heinrich Böll Stiftung** is a German foundation and part of the Green political movement that has developed worldwide as a response to the traditional politics of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. We are a green think-tank and an international policy network, our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, self-determination and justice. We place particular emphasis on gender democracy, meaning social emancipation and equal rights for women and men. We are also committed to equal rights for cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we promote non-violence and proactive peace policies. To achieve our goals, we seek strategic partnerships with others who share our values.

Our namesake, Heinrich Böll, personifies the values we stand for: protection of freedom, civic courage, tolerance, open debate, and the valuation of art and culture as independent spheres of thought and action.

Our India Liaison Office was established in 2002 in New Delhi. Working with governmental and non-governmental local project partners we support India's democratic governance through informed national and international dialogue processes with a view to enhance the diversity of green thinking.

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