

India's River's are Drying, Fresh Water Biodiversity being Destroyed, and People Seriously Threatened from Dams & Mega Hydro-electric Projects: Can CBD help India's Rivers?

Twenty years after ratifying the Convention on Biological Diversity, and ten years after promulgating the Biological Diversity Act, India continues to use doublespeak in dealing with its rivers and their biodiversity.

These issues were discussed at a side event on ““Impact of Dams on Biodiversity: Socio Ecological Dimensions in Changing Climate”, organised by SANDRP and 5 partner organisations: Himdhara (Himachal Pradesh), Himal Prakriti (Uttarakhand), Samvardhan (Maharashtra), River Basin Friends (Assam and North East India) and International Rivers (South Asia) at the COP 11 of CBD now ongoing in Hyderabad.

It emerged from the side event that unknown to many India is considered to be a mega diverse country in the context of freshwater biodiversity. New freshwater species continue to be discovered at a rapid rate. Also millions of people depend on the riverine biodiversity and rivers for their needs and livelihoods (about 10.8 million people depend on riverine fisheries itself), many rivers are considered sacred, and 100s of community conserved fish reserves exist across India. Considering none of the above, even as conservation of biological diversity is being discussed in Hyderabad at CoP 11, hundreds of small and mega dams are being built or proposed to be built on nearly all rivers in India.... blocking their free flow, tunnelling their waters almost through the entire length, destroying the fresh water diversity, cultural associations and community conserved areas. The threats from hydropower projects are so serious that free flowing, biodiversity rich rivers are today India's most threatened species!!

Dams also have a negative impact on the coast and marine eco-systems. The reduction in the flow of silt to the sea affects the shoreline and can cause erosion. The reduction in nutrients from land reaching the sea through rivers also affects marine productivity and bio-diversity. According to Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), there is a 30% reduction in nutrients reaching the sea over the last 50 years on account to dams.

CBD has so far been of no help for the Indian rivers, riverine biodiversity and dependent communities. However, another UN Convention, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), certifies hydropower projects of all sizes as climate friendly projects under Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Thus while one UN convention is attempting to work for protection of biodiversity, another UN convention is incentivising destruction of biodiversity!

None of the conservation laws have been of much help for rivers and related biodiversity. There has not been any credible enviro-socio-cultural impact assessment of hydro-projects, considering riverine biodiversity. Most of those impacted upstream and downstream, particularly if not in direct submergence zone, are not even considered as “areas affected” or “project affected” for compensation or rehabilitation, leave aside participatory decision making or benefit sharing.

WAY FORWARD: We urge the Indian Government specifically:

- To amend the EIA notification to require that all large dams, all hydro projects over 1 MW capacity and also projects impacting aquatic biodiversity will need to do Impact assessment in consultation with local people.
- To urgently review plans of big dams, hydropower projects and interlinking of rivers that adversely affect aquatic biodiversity and livelihoods, conduct socio-cultural-ecological assessment as per the Akwe Kon Guidelines.
- To mandate cumulative impact assessment whenever more than three projects are proposed on any river, including impacts on biological diversity and community conservation sites upstream and downstream of such projects.
- To urgently come out with a comprehensive policy and law for protection of rivers and their biodiversity while ensuring access to and equitable benefit sharing with the local communities and total protection to any conservation efforts by the local communities in and around the rivers.
- To include Rivers in definition of wetlands in the Wetlands Rules (2010).

- Review operation of existing and under construction dam projects to ensure adequate freshwater flow all round the year in downstream river stretches.
- To stop certifying CDM hydro projects as “sustainable development projects” without impact assessment and mandatory participatory process that requires prior, informed, consent from the gram sabhas (village assemblies).

For CBD to be effective in protecting Riverine biodiversity we urge the parties to make progressive and bold decisions on the following:

- ▲ Define clear norms for participation by affected communities; and help them realise community sovereignty over their biodiversity.
- ▲ Obtain Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) from affected communities before any decisions are taken that might affect their access to inland waters and aquatic biodiversity resources.
- ▲ Improve India’s reporting to the CBD on Inland Waters, which currently excludes any mention of status of biodiversity rich rivers and their conservation. Include a dedicated Program of Work on Rivers and freshwater biodiversity.
- ▲ Strengthen the reporting and monitoring framework of Inland Waters Biodiversity Program of the CBD
- ▲ Publish best practices studies that show how protection of aquatic biodiversity is essential and possible, without sacrificing the justifiable development needs of affected people.
- ▲ Communicate with the UNFCCC to ensure that the current incentivising of destruction of aquatic biodiversity that is now going on in the name of CDM hydropower projects is stopped.

These recommendations have been endorsed by over 60 participants present at the side event on Oct 8, 2012 at CoP 11, Hyderabad. We hope this COP will make a bold Decision on Inland Waters and also stimulate governments to make the necessary changes in policy and practice before it is too late.

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 (See: [http://sandrp.in/rivers/Aquatic Biodiversity and CBD SANDRP note Oct 2012.pdf](http://sandrp.in/rivers/Aquatic_Biodiversity_and_CBD_SANDRP_note_Oct_2012.pdf) for a detailed note on this issue, summary of the same can be found at:
[http://sandrp.in/rivers/Aquatic Biodiversity and CBD SANDRP note Oct 2012 Summary.pdf](http://sandrp.in/rivers/Aquatic_Biodiversity_and_CBD_SANDRP_note_Oct_2012_Summary.pdf))