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In Assam, the Brahmaputra River Remains Uncontrollable

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Anupam Nath/Associated Press
A young girl feeds her brother at a makeshift tent built above flood waters in Burhaburhi village in Assam, June 29, 2012.

As much of India baked in blistering temperatures, anxiously awaiting the belated monsoon rains, the landlocked northeast struggled with the exact opposite problem.

An unprecedented surge of continuous rain – the worst in over a decade – led to heavy flooding in Assam, which has submerged thousands of villages, swept humans and livestock away, wrecked homes, property and villages and displaced nearly a quarter of a million people.

The flood crisis was significant enough for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to flee Delhi discussions about the country's next president and rush to the landlocked state, and has once again focused attention on the contentious issue of using, and controlling, the northeast's valuable and deadly waters.

Mr. Singh is a nominated lawmaker from the ruling Congress Party who represents Assam in the Rajya Sabha, or upper house, of India's Parliament. Mr. Singh has never lived there, but he is expected to raise issues relating to Assam as a whole and work for their resolution.



Courtesy of Press Information Bureau
Prime Minister Manmohan Singh conducts an aerial survey of flood-affected areas in Assam, July 2, 2012.

Mr. Singh swiftly announced a 5 billion rupee (\$90 million) aid package for the state, which the opposition dismissed as too meager, demanding instead that the central government declare the floods in the state a national disaster. The powerful All Assam Students Union denounced Mr. Singh as a “total failure in addressing floods and erosion.”

The criticism may not be completely warranted. As prime minister, Mr. Singh tried to start an umbrella organization that would have placed all states under a single regional water authority, which would work on controlling floods, among other issues. He dropped the idea after stiff opposition from a number of states, which felt the idea either favored upper riparians or sought an unacceptable level of central control.

The northeast, which shares 96 percent of its borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan, is one of the world's most diverse regions, inhabited by at least 220 ethnic groups speaking almost as many languages. Still, it has just three percent of India's 1.2 billion population, most of them packed into the narrow state of Assam.

For decades, the region has been better known to outsiders as a place where small insurgent groups have struggled against Indian forces in a quest for independence. With time, public fatigue and fragmentation of the rebels, as well as incorporation by the state, these movements are abating.



European Pressphoto Agency/Wild Asiatic water buffaloes in the foreground and an one-horned rhino in the background, stand in flood waters inside the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary in the flood-affected Morigaon district of Assam, June 28, 2012.

The flooding has shown once again the inadequacy of the system to handle the region's most powerful entity, which respects neither borders nor barrages. Assam has the country's greatest number of river embankments, despite its relatively small size. Yet these have failed to stem the deluge.

Experts like Professor Dulal Goswami of Gauhati University have consistently contended that the embankments are poorly designed and maintained and end up as human shelters, since they are among the few patches of dry land, instead of flood control measures.

Others, like Chandan Mahanta of the Indian Institute of Technology at Guwahati, favor an inclusive approach through a proposed Brahmaputra River Conservancy Commission, which would take a regional approach to issues, based on the river basin. Water from Tibet and downstream Arunachal Pradesh state sweeps into the Assam valley, before debouching into the flatlands of Bangladesh.

"We need to know what is happening in this little area between Tibet and Bangladesh and how we can sustainably use the waters without losing them forever," said Mr. Mahanta in an interview. "We need not just a reservoir-driven approach, but a hydraulic one, where you assess both inflows and ground water aquifers which are recharged by floods."

Such a broad-based approach could mitigate the opposition of anti-dam groups, but it wouldn't resolve their concerns. The groups have long battled projects for a network of dams, arguing that such policies are environmentally unsound and harm farmers' rights.

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