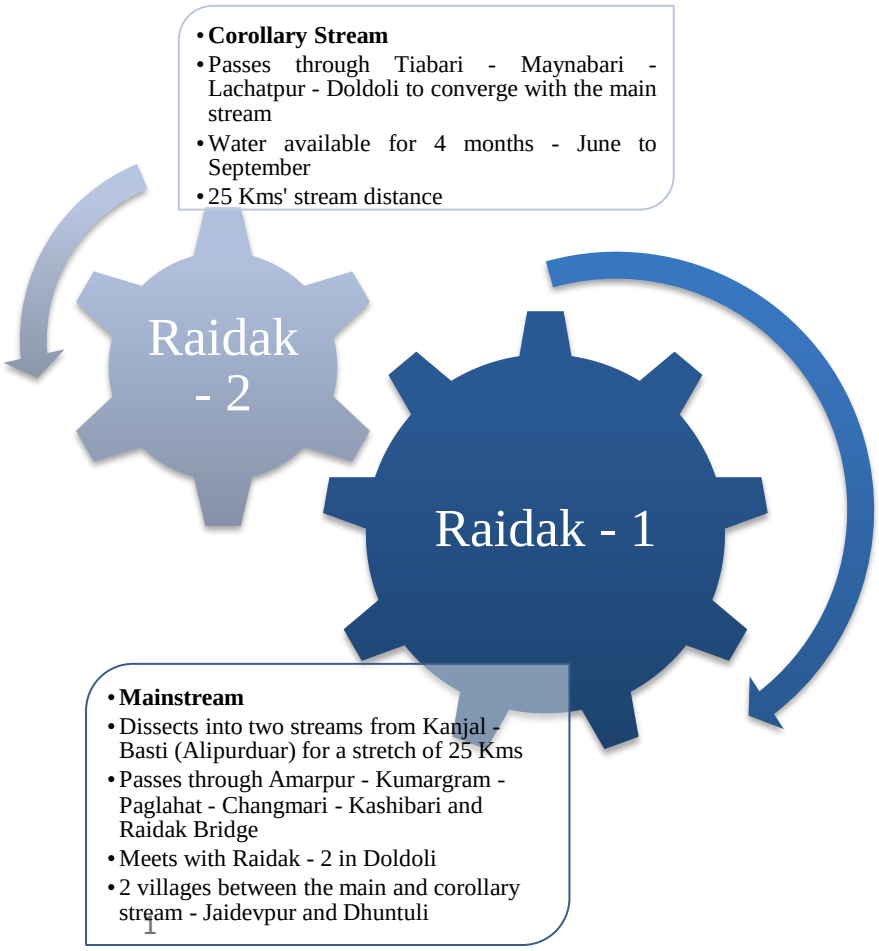
Nodi Baithak
Raidak (Dudhkumar) River, Alipurduar, West Bengal, India
19 - 23 July, 2021

River Raidak, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

River *Wong Chhu, or **Raidak***, rises in the Himalayas. In its upper reaches, it is known as the Thimphu Chhu at its origin point in Bhutan. The main river is a rapid stream, running over a bed of large boulders. Between Thimphu and the confluence with the Paro Chhu, the course of the river is not severely confine. However, after leaving the confluence, it runs through a narrow defile between steep cliffs, bringing in stones and sands along its downstream. It subsequently flows southeast through a comparatively open valley, where it is joined by several small tributaries flowing from nearby mountains. At the point of its exit in the Dooars, its elevation is only 90 metres (300 ft).

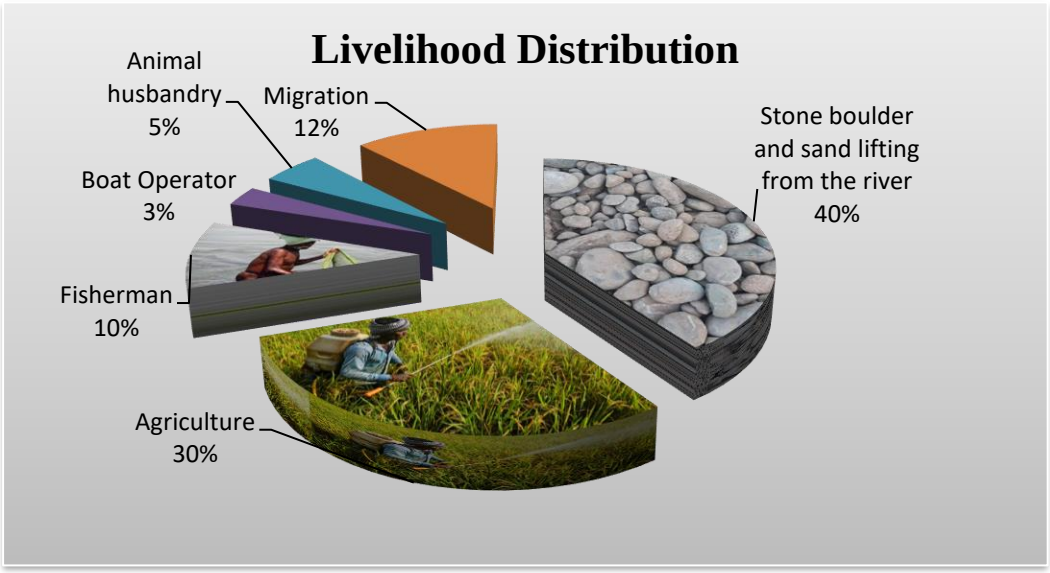
The river debouches into the plains in Jalpaiguri district and then flows through Cooch Behar and Alipurduar districts in West Bengal in order to confluence with the Brahmaputra at the Kurigram District in Bangladesh, where it is sometimes referred to as *'Dudhkumar'*.

Raidak dissects itself into a mainstream and a corollary stream near a place in Alipurduar, named Kanjal Basti. The dissection is for a river stretch of 25 Kms.



Around 100 families (6 – 8 villages) dwell on either banks of the corollary river stream (Raidak – 2), where the '*Baithak'* was conducted. Livelihood options for these villagers are not many, since these locations are far from the district headquarters with very little market access and external footfalls. Main livelihood options include lifting stones and sands from the river bed throughout the year and seasonal paddy and jute cultivation during the monsoons.

Distribution of Livelihood in the surveyed Location(s):



Key Issues and Challenges:

- ✓ **Dearth of water in Raidak:** Availability of river water throughout the year has been a preceding occurrence in these lower riparian locations, particularly after the installation of a 336 MW Chhukha Hydropower Plant in the south-western part of Bhutan. Owing to this, the overall dependence on Raidak has subsequently fallen over the past decades. Earlier, river water was profoundly used for cultivating paddy (both Kharif – monsoon and Boro – winter crops) and jute; cutting canals from the river channel for the purposes of irrigation. At present, river water can only be used during the monsoon cultivation. Other crops are grown on supplemental irrigation, procuring water from alternative means. Furthermore, all these villages use deep tube-wells for regular drinking water supplies. Fishing as a prominent livelihood option is far from reality. A decrease in the water levels coupled with irregular stone lifting from the river beds makes the occupation even more difficult.

- ✓ **Creation of alternative livelihoods, distorting ecology:** Other than people who manage to secure Government

jobs which are limited, people migrate out in search of livelihood. Given that the earlier livelihood options of year – long agriculture and fishing was profoundly dependent on river water, people have now started creating alternative opportunities in the likes of stone and sand mining from the river beds. This has negatively impacted the river health and distorted the overall ecology in the area.

- ✓ **Same Work – Varied Wages:** There are growing concerns relating to differences in the wage structure of local men and women, who are involved in stone lifting and sand mining activities. Although, works assigned to both men and women are similar, payments of women labourers (INR 250/100 CFT stone) are less as compared to men (INR 350-400/100 CFT stone). The major reason behind such differences as per discussions with local businessmen can be attributed to the fact that women takes more time (approximately 10 hours) to finish a given daily assignment as compared to men (approximately 8 hours), often *delaying* the business process.

- ✓ **A shift from manual to mechanised mode of operations:** For the last few years, local businessmen are increasingly adapting means of using mechanised excavators and fork-lanes as a possible replacement to engaging local labourers in lifting stones and sand; making greater profits. Estimation reveals that these machineries are capable of supplanting 17 – 20 labourers with increased efficiency and advanced modes of operation. Replacement of these sorts are not only creating a void in opportunities at the local level, but also rescinding the natural ecosystem by means of river erosion. Furthermore, usage of machineries in mining activities has an incremental effect on creating asymmetric depths (as deep as 15 – 20 ft.) on some parts of the river bed, which increased the frequency of floods in these areas during the monsoon. Despite some local level discontents and interventions regarding the recent shift in the mode of operations, not much resistance actually took place in order to create a community discourse in eliminating such activities, which are often termed as *'politically motivated and biased'*.

Key Entry Points towards Sustainability:

- **Leveraging palpable community level concerns regarding river health, natural resources and related ecosystem** – Growing concerns of local communities regarding construction and necessary supervision of concrete dams on either side of the river stream has been duly noted. Proper maintenance of the already existing dams could prevent the river from subsequent bank erosions. Although mining and stone-lifting is essentially unsustainable in maintaining the river ecology in the long run; given the ongoing practices, lesser usage of machine excavators in sand and stone mining would have manifold benefits in favour of the community and the larger society. Beyond ensuring jobs and sustenance of the locals, manual mining process would ensure lesser distortions in the river beds, which would be instrumental in preventing floods and bank erosion. Moreover, locals have raised serious concerns about the adverse impact of mechanised sand mining on wildlife protection in the region.

- **Strengthening age-old traditional practices and norms for protecting natural resources – use the traditional wisdom available with community elders and leaders** – Given the present situation of river Raidak, some of the elders in the village proposed straightening the river course from its Indian origin point to the Barobisha Raida Bridge in Alipurduar through proper river training mechanisms. It is ideated that with river straightening, one can ensure adequate water flow in the area and also in the irrigation canals that are already built on either side of the river banks for the purpose of agriculture.

- **Practicing Community-based ecological restoration strategies** like restoration of fish and replant eroding river banks with native trees to stabilise the soil and improve the quality of river as a whole.

- **Strengthening, hand-holding and building capacity of ground level institutions and youth groups to help in changing the discourse around rivers, water and natural resources –** Understand and sensitise local farmers in collectively practising River Lift Irrigation Schemes in a cooperative mode. These schemes are instrumental in improving the sustainability and productivity of irrigation through sharing irrigation management responsibilities with farmers through a participatory management process. Local Governments or financial institutions like NABARD could be collectively approached for better understanding.

Snapshots: