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Hydro-politics between India and Bangladesh: A study of Farakka barrage dispute

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Abstract

Given the importance of water countries having shared water resources and have often restored to different forms of arrangements, compromises, and treaties etc. to soothe the process of water sharing. India too has entered into a number of treaties with its neighbours-Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Tibet and Nepal. India is in conflict with most of its neighbours over transboundary water sharing issues due to its location, size and boundaries adjacent to other South Asian nations, and in its capacity both as the upper and lower riparian. As an upper riparian country, India has problems with Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is also remarkable to note that India, as the lower riparian, has problems with the upper riparian Nepal as well. Water sharing issues play a decisive role in determining the behaviour of the countries concerned. While they decisively influence their foreign policy formulation towards their neighbours, they also affect their respective national political scenarios. The study focuses entirely on the political aspect of water relations between India and Bangladesh. In essence, it would be discussing the water politics in India and Bangladesh in the context of international relations. The chapter will examine areas of conflict and cooperation in India's riparian relations with its neighbour Bangladesh. The chapter further seeks a detailed investigation into the Ganges water sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh. It also attempts to briefly explain the causes, issues of disagreement and obstacles to cooperation over transboundary river water between India and Bangladesh, taking into account the historical background of these issue and the mechanisms that exist to resolve them.

Keywords: water politics, India, Bangladesh, Farakka barrage dispute, the Ganges treaty 1996

Introduction

The two sovereign states in the Indian subcontinent, India and Bangladesh are intricately linked to each other in many respects. The historical, geographic and political aspects, as well as linguistic and cultural links have contributed significantly to the nature of the relations enjoyed by the two countries. Before 1947, Bangladesh, or then "East Bengal", was part of India, and with partition, it became the eastern part of the newly created state of Pakistan. "East Bengal" was later renamed as "East Pakistan" in 1955, a name that remained with it until 1971, when the latter declared independence after the Bangladeshi Liberation War. In keeping with this historical connection, neighbouring states of India and Bangladesh share the same culture and speak the same language. As a Report of 'Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses', rightly describes that India and Bangladesh share ties of blood and culture ^[1].

Despite all these links and their interdependence - a scenario in which Bangladesh's importance for India's security and India's importance for Bangladesh's well-being, bilateral relations do not always seem as good and prosperous as one would have expected. The relations have experienced ups and downs over time. Among the political disputes between India and Bangladesh, the issue of sharing the transboundary river waters, is high on the agenda and has greatly affected the two countries in shaping their relations with each other. The two countries share 54 rivers originating from the Himalayas ^[2], where the Ganges and Brahmaputra are the largest transboundary rivers. Sharing the waters of the Ganges is one of the biggest water disputes between India and Bangladesh, although a 1996 treaty sought to resolve the matter. Sharing the waters of the Teesta is another dispute that has greatly contributed to shape the relations between these two nations.

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Farakka Barrage Dispute in the Ganges Basin

The Ganges, well-known as the 'Ganga' in India and 'Padma' in Bangladesh, originates at Gangotri in the southern slope of the Himalayas. It then flows through India; and it splits into two main channels in the West Bengal State near Faraka. One channel known as Bhagirathi flows towards south via West Bengal and joins with the Jalangi. This unified river is known as the Hooghly. The other channel flows eastwards to join the Brahmaputra. Here, it should be noted that India is the upper riparian state while Bangladesh is the lower or downstream riparian.

The beginning of the dispute over sharing the waters of Ganges between India and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) started in 1951 when India decided to construct a large barrage at Farakka, in West Bengal State, just 10 miles from the Pakistani border. As per the Government of India, the barrage will divert water from the Ganges to the Hooghly River, which will improve the navigation of the port of Calcutta. In fact, the barrage construction project was named as "Project for the preservation of the port of Calcutta" by the Indian government. This was formally stated in 'Man Singh Report 1961', which indicated that this diversion of water from the Ganges to Hooghly would solve the problems of degradation and siltation of the port [3]. However, Pakistan was not consulted in the decision-making process because the then Indian Prime Minister Nehru assumed that the construction of the barrage had little ill effects on eastern Pakistan (Bangladesh) and therefore felt little need to consult Pakistan on this issue [4]. On the part of Nehru, who in the formative years of the Indian Republic pursued an altruistic foreign policy driven by political idealism, this was a clear departure from that policy. From a realistic point of view, India was acting rationally for its survival and national interest.

By the Indian decision to build a barrage in Farakka arouse agitation in Pakistan, fearing that diverting the Ganges waters into the Hooghly would deprive it of dry season flows and have an obvious impact on the irrigation needs in eastern Pakistan, with negative consequences for their economy. Pakistan strictly protested against India over the construction of this barrage doubting its technical rationale, but despite these protests, India proceeded with the construction work, which began in 1961 and ended in 1971. During this decade, the barrage was a protracted problem between the two states. Thus a geographical phenomenon became a political issue between the two countries. Despite nine technical exchanges and five ministerial-level meetings on the issue during the decade between 1961 and 1971, the two countries were yet to reach an agreement on how to share the waters of the Ganges. In spite of protests from Pakistan, the 2,240-meter-long Farakka barrage that was designed to divert up to 40,000 cubic feet of water per second (cusecs) from the Ganges to the Hooghly was commissioned on 21st April 1975, under different political circumstances [5].

Politics over the Farakka Barrage Dispute

The liberation of Bangladesh marked a significant point of departure in the resolution of the Farakka barrage dispute. Punam Pandey outlines five phases of the Politics over Farakka barrage conflict between India and Bangladesh [6], starting with the birth of Bangladesh and ending with the signing of the Ganges Treaty to resolve the Farakka dispute at least temporarily. The first phase of this process begins

when Bangladesh became an independent nation, with the full support of India on April 10, 1971. Appropriately familiar of India's role in the birth of his country, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh - Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has kept up good relations with his Indian counterpart Indira Gandhi. In May 1972, the two governments signed a 25-year "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace" and to resolve the water sharing dispute and consider matters like flood control, river basin development etc. a "Joint Rivers Commission" (JRC) was established under the Treaty [7].

The first round of political dialogue between the two nations took place in July 1973, and it was agreed to take a final decision on the sharing of the waters of Ganges in a summit between the two Prime Ministers. In early 1974, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited New Delhi, and it was revealed to him that the Farakka would be commissioned before the end of the year. It was also perceived that if the diversion of water took place at Farakka, the flow of the lean season in the Ganges would not be sufficient to meet the irrigation requirements of the two countries. As the lean season flow would not be sufficient to meet the needs of the two countries, the JRC was exploring the possibilities of increasing the lean season flow. To increase the flow of the lean season, it was necessary to harness water resources in the area available to the two countries. The Indian proposal in this regard was to increase the flow of the Ganges through Brahmaputra, which is the surplus of water through a huge link canal from Jogighopa in Assam to Farakka flowing through Bangladesh. Bangladesh proposed to increase the flow within the Ganges system by storing monsoon flows behind the seven high dams in Nepal, but not in its territory [8]. Both of them has serious reservations regarding each other's proposals and has not been acquitted. Although two ministerial meetings were held between February and April 1975, the dilemma associated with the problem of increasing inflows has not been resolved. As India was moving ahead with its plans, the barrage was finally put into operation on April 21, 1975 [9].

While commissioning the barrage, the two sides agreed that India would carry varying discharges ranging from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs, in 10-day intervals from 21 April to 31 May, while ensuring the continuation of the remaining 39,000 to 44,000 cusecs flows to Bangladesh. Although it was more than what Pakistan had claimed in 1968. Bangladesh felt betrayed by the interim agreement ascertained to withdraw water, without a headway on a mutually acceptable solution. This unhappiness has led Bangladesh to cancel the visit of its Minister of Water Resources Abdur Rab Serniabat, to the commissioning ceremony [10]. The commissioning of the barrage and withdrawal of the waters of the Ganges by India was in a way that Bangladesh thought was deceived, did not politically fit well with Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman. Indian intervention in the liberation of Bangladesh began to be critically seen by the opponents of Mujibur Rahman, and also the 'Friendship Treaty' with India was challenged. Mujib's incompetence to obtain water from India, despite his close ties with the latter, created apprehension among his opponents, which may have contributed to his assassination on August 15, 1975.

The second phase of the Farakka barrage politics begins after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman and the assumption of the military regime of General Zia ur

Rahman, with whom India had no working relationship. It should be noted that the Interim Agreement to withdraw water from the Ganges for 40 days from 21 April 1975 to 31 May 1975 has expired, India was still withdrawing water at Farakka. Although the issue of water sharing was quickly forgotten due to the unstable political situation in Bangladesh, it publicly protested to the withdrawal of water in early 1976.

Zia ur Rahman's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won in the Presidential election with the support of the Islamic elements of the Bangladeshi polity, followed policies contrary to those of Mujibur Rahman and was more pro-Pakistan and pro-US. Zia was not a friend of India or that of Mrs. Gandhi, and described the latter as a "very difficult and tough lady" during his visit to India in 1977^[11]. Zia's government has followed a twin-track strategy over the Farakka issue i.e. holding India responsible for all problems in Bangladesh and seeking support for the water-sharing dispute internationally. Bangladesh asserted that India was responsible for and threatened the survival of millions of Bangladeshis; and that Indian conduct was "a conspiracy against the independence and sovereignty of the country"^[12]. Bangladesh held that Farakka is responsible for all problems such as unemployment, floods and irrigation problems in its country. Bangladesh raised the issue at various international forums, including the 1976 Colombo Summit of Non-Aligned Movement, followed by the Islamic Foreign Ministers' Conference in Istanbul and finally at the 31st session of United Nations. The President of the General Assembly has called for the issue to be resolved bilaterally^[13]. This did not discourage Dhaka from raising the issue elsewhere. However, Bangladesh's policy of internationalising the issue got no results and the deadlock persisted. The situation changed only with a change of government in India.

The third phase of Farakka politics began in 1977, when the non-Congress government of Morarji Desai took power in India. Desai's approach to foreign policy towards Bangladesh was different from that of Ms. Gandhi, and Bangladesh, for its part, also curtailed demands for the Ganges water share at Farakka. In September 1977, the two riparian neighbours signed a five-year agreement on water at Farakka that would cover the water sharing and long-term river flows. Under the agreement, India shall withdraw water at Farakka on a 10-day schedule during the lean season, from January 1st to May 31st each year. However, the agreement would guarantee Bangladesh 80 percent of its stipulated share even if water flows fall to 80 percent of the assumed value in any 10-day schedule. Like in 1974 and 1975, again long-term augmentation plans were exchanged between the two countries in 1978. All the same, as on previous occasions, it was unacceptable to both parties. The Congress in India announced that if it came to power, it would scrap the 1977 agreement^[14]. What annoyed Congress was the guarantee of 80 percent of lean season flows to Bangladesh under the agreement.

Congress came to power in India in 1980 and with this; the fourth phase of Indo-Bangladesh water politics begins. Although Mrs. Indira Gandhi had pledged to revoke the 1977 agreement if she came to power, however she did not keep her words. At the end of the five-year period, the two countries agreed that the agreement was well implemented with regard to water sharing, but plans to increase the flow had to be reconsidered. After the Bangladeshi military coup

d'état of 1982, General Muhammad Ershad took the power there. In the same year, he visited India and signed a provisional Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the dry season of Ganges flow for 1983 and 1984. However, the 80 percent guarantee of flow to Bangladesh was absent from the MoU as probably because the Congress government did not like this guarantee provision.

Following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, her son and successor Rajiv Gandhi endeavoured to renegotiate the issue of the Farakka barrage. He met with the President of Bangladesh at the 'Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting' at Nassau in Bahamas in October 1985, and signed another MoU, similar to the 1982 MoU, for an additional three-year period on the sharing of Ganges water. Ramaswamy Iyer, a former Water Secretary of India, notes: "Rajiv has made a serious effort to solve the long-term problem of water sharing even though political negotiations have not taken off"^[15].

Bangladesh's natural feature of blaming India for all the problems at home again emerged with the 1988 floods that drowned almost two-thirds of Bangladesh. President Ershad accused the Faraka barrage responsible for it. Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) followed suit. Zia stated that the devastating floods were mainly due to construction of different barrages including the Farakka barrage in the upstream parts of various rivers for which India was responsible^[16]. In 1991, the BNP came to power and Bangladesh changed itself from a presidential system into a parliamentary form of government. During this period, Farakka barrage became a political football in Bangladesh politics. Any concession made by a party with India was considered as selling the nation^[17]. BNP also had a dual track approach towards the Farakka dispute. While engaging India bilaterally, it also tried to internationalize the issue. In the meantime, the 1985 MoU on Farakka ended, but India continued to withdraw and in fact increased the amount of water withdrawn from the Ganges to the Hooghly^[18]. This caused discomfort and disapproval in Bangladesh.

In 1996, when the fifth and final phase of the politics over Farakka dispute began, there were new governments in both countries. So a new approach to deal with the water-sharing issue was conceivable. In India, there was a non-Congress coalition government headed by Devi Gowda, with the leftist front, which was in power in West Bengal State, as a member of the coalition as well. Gowda was willing to make stronger bilateral relations with Bangladesh, and this task was much easier now, as the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina, who had a previous record of outstanding relations with India, came to power in Dhaka after twenty years. India was also ready to find a fixed solution to the Farakka issue. Indian Minister of External Affairs, Inder Kumar Gujral, approached for help to Jyoti Basu, then Chief Minister of West Bengal State, for a permanent solution to the dispute of water sharing, and the latter emphasized the best possible assistance to that end. The Central Government has taken the right step by communicating Basu for help in finding a permanent solution to this issue, as the state of West Bengal could have made a tremendous effect on the conduct of India towards Bangladesh, in the usual way the periphery influences the centre in Indian politics. For example, West Bengal could have prevented the central government from continuing negotiations or reaching to an agreement with Bangladesh. Basu kept his word, extending maximum

cooperation and assistance to the Central Government to find a permanent solution to the Ganges water sharing dispute. As the West Bengal state was likely to lose the most from negotiations, Chief Minister Basu's initiatives, implied in terms that emphasized the common history of Bangladesh and West Bengal, were noteworthy in encouraging trust^[19]. In September 1996, following several exchange visits by Foreign Ministers and the formation of a Joint Committee of Foreign Ministry officials, India and Bangladesh reaffirmed and promised to a fair and reasonable agreement on sharing the waters of the Ganges, before the following dry season. The agreement drafted on the guidelines that the Ganges Treaty was signed by the Prime Ministers of the two nations on December 12, 1996, for thirty years. Looking at various ups and downs of India-Bangladesh relations, one would have thought it impossible to arrive at an agreement for as long as thirty years. It was true that previous short time agreements and MoUs worked on the sharing of the waters of the Ganges, but they did not do so without strains. Moreover, those MoUs were far from a long-lasting resolution.

Table 1: Water Allocation in the Ganges Treaty 1996

| Availability at Farakka | Share of India | Share of Bangladesh |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 70,000 cusecs or less | 50% | 50% |
| 70,000 cusecs -75,000 cusecs | Balance of flow | 35,000 cusecs |
| 75,000 cusecs or more | 40,000 cusecs | Balance of flow |

Source: Ganges Water Sharing Treaty 1996^[23]

This is subject to the condition that India and Bangladesh each shall receive guaranteed 35,000 cusecs of water in alternate three 10-day periods during the period from March 11 to May 10. If the flow at Farakka falls lower than 50,000 cusecs in any 10-day period, both governments will immediately begin consultations to make changes urgently in accordance with the ethics of equity, fair play and without prejudice to either side^[24].

Signing of the Ganges Treaty can be seen as a prime example of the rational thinking of countries seeking to achieve the best out of existing conditions. The political will of the two governments in power in New Delhi and Dhaka has been instrumental in finding a mutually acceptable solution to an issue that has influenced the behaviour of India and Bangladesh for more than three decades. As Colombi and Bradnock note, the signing of the Ganga Treaty was an important demonstration by the willingness of both countries to find a mutually acceptable solution to the impasse in which they have become locked. It also provides a useful insight into what the parties found acceptable as a compromise^[25].

The Ganges Treaty was signed by the Awami League government. Despite its success, the Treaty was initially strongly opposed by Bangladesh's then-opposition party - BNP. The party promised that, when it came to power, it would ask for a review of the treaty. But when the BNP came to power in 2001, it neither asked for review nor terminated the treaty^[26]. Iyer attributes this to the process of realism and rational thinking of countries, in which Bangladesh believes the treaty works in favour of them. Since the Treaty works well, the two countries do not wish to disturb the status quo^[27]. With the exception of an initial interruption in April 1997 when flows in Farakka fell below 50,000 and prompt government consultations as provided for in the Treaty^[28], good flows from the Ganges and

Overview of the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty 1996

The Ganges Treaty between India and Bangladesh is an agreement to share surface waters at the Farakka Barrage near their mutual border. The Ganges Treaty is formally known as the "Treaty between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh on Sharing of the Ganga/Ganges Waters at Farakka"^[20]. It was signed on December 12, 1996 in New Delhi by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, Prime Minister of Bangladesh and HD Deve Gowda – the then Prime Minister of India. First and foremost, the Treaty sought to promote and consolidate good-neighbourly and friendly relations between India and Bangladesh, recognizing the need for arrangements to share the waters of the Ganges at Farakka in a spirit of mutual accommodation^[21].

The two countries decided that the sharing between India and Bangladesh in the waters of the Ganges at Farakka for ten days from January 1st to May 31st each year would be by reference to the following formula, which is in Annexure I of the Ganges Treaty^[22].

smooth function of the Treaty ensured India-Bangladesh relations in good condition with regard to Farakka barrage. At the broadest level, the management and utilisation of water resources in the riparian regions of South Asia is pivotal to the geopolitics of the region. On-going trans-border disagreements related to rivers and canals frame the relationship between the countries of both the Indus River Basin (India and Pakistan) and the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna River Basin (India, Bangladesh and Nepal). These resources have been regulated to some extent through bilateral treaties between the relevant nations in each basin but suspicions between the nation-states remain. South Asia is increasingly becoming a water-stressed region. With the growing population, industrial, agricultural and domestic uses, melting glaciers, and environmental degradation, resultantly, the rivers are also becoming a bone of contention between countries and communities in South Asia. The issue of utilization of water for hydropower generation and commercial irrigation is a matter of great concern and causing conflicts.

Conclusion

Conflicts over trans-boundary waters can best be described as conflicts over the allocation of property rights between states. Shared water resources could become a catalyst of cooperation provided water is treated as the common property of all the people living in the basin. To some it would seem idealistic. However, the idea lying behind this point is to advocate an equitable allocation/utilisation of shared river waters to make environment benevolent to human rights. This approach is particularly important for India and Bangladesh where water conflicts are acute while the integrated river basin development is lacking for many past decades. The perpetuation of the postcolonial mind-set of using water as a form of control must be stopped. The

ethos governing water management should now be driven by a micro-level concern for public welfare and equity, or for provision of a public service to the people. The existing structures and bodies in place should be re-evaluated and reintegrated with the current discourse to better implement water distribution and address the issue of water inequity and distribution within the subcontinent.

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