



THE TEESTA WATER CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH: A HYDRO-POLITICAL TENSION

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Abstract

India and Bangladesh are the two neighbor states and known as riverine countries in South Asia since they have many rivers and shared 54 trans-boundary rivers. However, due to the rapid population growth, industrial development and climate change they have been facing water shortage crisis. The condition of water scarcity in either states, lead them to cross-boundary water conflict and contest to meet their rising needs. This turns into hydro-politics and hydro-diplomacy over the sharing, governance and management of Teesta water resources. Being cross-boundary river the Teesta connects both the states in a complicated network of economic, ecological and security interdependencies. Thus, Teesta basin affects the economy, environment, security and politics of both states. Therefore, it becomes imperative for both India and Bangladesh to develop a collaborative strategy of water management, governance, sharing and augmentation to resolve the Teesta dispute. The purposes of the study were to resolve the long standing Teesta dispute and established a healthy bilateral relationship of India and Bangladesh. For this research, data were collected from secondary sources and descriptive and analytical methods were used. Despite of several bilateral initiatives and negotiations they have failed to settle the Teesta issue and Teesta agreement remain unsigned. At the end, this paper recommended few ways to overcome the Teesta conflict for effective bilateral relationship.

Keywords: India, Bangladesh, Teesta Conflict, Trans-boundary, Water, Hydro-politics

Introduction:

India and Bangladesh are the two riparian neighborhood countries in the South Asia. India had played a pivotal role in the emergence of the present state of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971. India had given full-fledged support to the Bangladesh's "Mukti bahini" in its fight for the liberation of Bangladesh from West-Pakistan (Ghosh, P. 2016, p.443). Friendly relations have been existed between these two nations since then. Moreover, they have a common colonial history, economy and culture. Despite of their friendly ties, with the time and space we show their changing patterns of India-Bangladesh relationship. India and Bangladesh shared 54 cross-boundary rivers between them, including the Ganges and the Brahmaputra and Teesta. The Teesta connects both the states in a complicated network of economic, ecological and security interdependencies. Thereby, both

the states sought for the rights and access over the water resources of the cross-boundary river Teesta in order to meet their rising demands which create tensions and dispute in their bilateral relations. The sharing of water of this trans-boundary river has been a major cause of dispute between India and Bangladesh (Singh, 2011. P.74). Thus, the issue of sharing of the cross-boundary Teesta water breeds hydro-politics and hydro-diplomacy in the bilateral relations of these two South Asian states. This water sharing issue may foster the possibilities of conflicts in other areas including water sharing.

Methodology:

In this research study, data were collected from secondary sources which include the published material in the form of books, articles and research journals and descriptive and analytical methods

were use to analyses the research problem.

The Teesta Hydro-Politics and Negotiations

After the emergence of independent sovereign Bangladesh, India and Bangladesh signed a 25 year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace in 1972 by which both countries committed to work together and cooperate in various field, thereby it laid the foundation of Indo-Bangladesh relationship. This treaty of 1972, which intend among other aspects join studies and an action plan for flood control, river basin development and the development of hydropower and irrigation (Pandey,2016,p.7). The treaty intends the establishment of the Joint River Commission (JRC) that was considered as an overarching body to monitoring all 54 shared rivers between these two neighbor countries (Rivers of Peace, 2013, p.51).The dispute of water sharing on cross-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh started since 1970s when India constructed a barrage across Ganga at Farakka to divert 40,000 cusecs of water towards the Kolkata port (Rudra, 2018, p. 163). The issue of diversion of water from the Ganga has been debated long, initially between India and Pakistan and subsequently between India and Bangladesh. However, in 1996 both the states signed a 30 years of long term Ganga Treaty. Subsequently, the conflict over sharing of the Teesta water emerged as a new issue of hydro-politics (Rudra, 2018, p. 163).

Teesta is the mightiest and easternmost tributary of river Brahmaputra which originated in the glaciers of North Sikkim at an altitude of 6400 m. (Mukhopadhyay and Dasgupta, 2010, p.131). the length of the river is 414 km, and it flows southwards through a deeply incised valley in Sikkim for a length of about 151 km and then delineates the border of West Bengal and Sikkim for about 19 km before it enters West Bengal and flows for 123 km in the Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar districts. It flows 121 km in Bangladesh and finally joins Jamuna or Brahmaputra near Chilmari of Bangladesh (Rudra, 2018, pp.31&168).

Motabbir Alam

The sharing of Teesta River water has added another dimension in the Indo-Bangladesh Politics. In the 1990s, both India and Bangladesh constructed barrages across Teesta at Gajaldoba (India) and Duani (Bangladesh), respectively. Both the barrages were designed with unrealistic prospects and vision, and as a result the Teesta Barrage Projects (TBPs) unavoidably faced crisis of water shortage (Rudra, 2018, p. 168). Therefore, the sharing of water of the Teesta becomes a contentious subject matter which added and breeds another dispute in the hydro-politics of these two South Asian nations of India and Bangladesh. Both the barrages are the parts of integrated Teesta multi-purpose projects which expected to meet the irrigational and electricity needs in six districts of North Bengal and seven districts of Rangpur division in India and Bangladesh respectively. The Gajaldoba barrage is the main barrage and is a part of TBP which target to irrigate 9.22 lakh hectares of land and produce 1000 MW of electricity. On the other hand, Bangladesh constructed a barrage on the Teesta at Dalia in 1990, which target to irrigate 750,000 hectares of land (River of Peace, 2013, pp.14, 16). But there remained a huge gap between targets and achievements. In fact those targets become unrealizable due to shortage of supply of Teesta water. In addition, there is lack of storages and reservoirs link with both the barrages and due to this lack of reservation of monsoon water for the use of lean season the irrigation projects in both states have been facing water scarcity problem even today.

The Teesta had been an issue of Indo-Bangladesh conflict even before the commissioning of the barrages in both states. In 1983, India and Bangladesh reached at an understanding on sharing of the Teesta water in the ratio of 39:36 between India and Bangladesh respectively (Rudra, 2018, p.169). Remaining 25% of water keep aside undistributed and would be shared later on the basis of further studies. But lastly the Teesta draft agreement remained unsigned and thereby not implemented.

However, only after the signing of the Ganga Treaty in 1996, Teesta water issue came in focus in the Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations which cause limelight of common people of both the countries. In 1997 a Joint Committee of Experts (JCE) was set up to examine the various alternative possibilities of water sharing of the Teesta River. A series of seven meetings were held in between 1997 to 2004 on the issue but no significant development was yet done. Later in 2004, a Joint Technical Group (JTG) was set up in order to develop cooperative strategy and ways on the draft conditions for a joint scientific study of the Teesta and on the draft adhoc agreement on the sharing of lean season flows of Teesta between these two neighbor states. In the year 2007, the Government of West Bengal agreed to release 25% of Teesta water from the Gajaldoba barrage but Bangladesh did not accept the offer (Rudra, 2018, p.169). Later on, during 2010 negotiations, Dhaka had initially proposed lean season equal sharing of Teesta water, keeping 20% for environmental flow; i.e. India and Bangladesh would each get 40% of Teesta's total flow. Whereas, India sought for a 15 year of agreement with 55% of share over Teesta waters (Rivers of Peace, 29). However, they were unable to reach at an agreeable and consensus solution on Teesta dispute.

The Joint River Commission(JRC) in its 37th ministerial level meeting in 2010 proposing a new formula of water sharing of Teesta on the basis of shared sacrifices of both the states to meet their dry season needs. It offers that India would get 42.5% and Bangladesh would get 37.5% of share of the Teesta water from Gajadoba barrage and remaining 20% left for river itself for her ecological flow (Mital, 2016 p.10). In this meeting both the states resolved to sign Teesta agreement in 2011. Keeping this in mind Indian Prime minister Manmohan Singh went to Bangladesh in September 2011 to sign an ad hoc agreement over Teesta water sharing. However, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banarjee opposed the draft Teesta

agreement. Her argument was that it dry out the North Bengal region and hurts the farmers of the region by hampering irrigational water supply.

In May 2012, Ms. Dipu Moni, the then foreign Minister of Bangladesh viewed that if India fails to finalized the water sharing agreement of Teesta river, bilateral relations would be unhealthy and complex. In the response to Bangladesh's worry in May 2012, S. M. Krishna, Minister of foreign affairs of India declared that the Government of India was working to develop a political consensus on Teesta issue in India and was in the process of consulting the State Government of West Bengal (Sardar, 2021, p.22).

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi went to Bangladesh in 2015 to exchange ratified Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). During this visit PM Modi unveiled a bus service to smooth bilateral connectivity and inaugurated bus route from Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka to Guwahati along with these 22 different agreements was signed (Singh,2018. p.D-33). He also expresses that India would extend her hand for Bangladesh to deals with the bilateral security, economic, boundary and connectivity issues. In addition, give assurance to Bangladesh that India would arrive at a solution of long pending Teesta water conflict. In April, 2017, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited to India to get a breakthrough on the water sharing dispute of the Teesta. During this visit both parties agreed to strengthen their bilateral cooperation in defense, connectivity and to combat terrorism, illegal cross-border trafficking. She also expressed and reminding that many Indian soldiers sacrifices their lives in 1971 war; thus both states have a historical link. Teesta issue remained unresolved as both the parties could not reach at a consensus for solution. However, Narendra Modi during this meeting in the presence of Mamata Banerjee, said "I firmly believe that it is only my government and your excellency, Sheikh Hasina, your government that can

and will find an early solution to Teesta water sharing issue (Ranjan, 2021). Banerjee suggested for others rivers as an alternatives source of water resources to meet her Bangladesh's needs. Again in 2019 Hasina went to India and signed a deal over the River Feni and India and Bangladesh tried to settle the Teesta issue but no settlement was done on the Teesta water issue between these two states.

Despite of several bilateral initiatives the agreement on Teesta remained unsigned. The geo-political realities and domestic politics of both the states interplay the resolving process of the Teesta water dispute and signing the Teesta agreement. Being downstream country, Bangladesh is almost fully dependent on water resources of rivers flowing from upper riparian India, since out of 54 cross-boundary rivers 48 rivers coming from the Indian geographical boundary.

Heavy flows from these rivers during monsoon and low flow during dry seasons bring flooding as well as drought in Bangladesh. On the other hand, India is also depended on Bangladesh in several fields. Bangladesh is the best route of connectivity of the North East to the rest of India. Its sea routes are the fastest, safest and efficient transportation routes for goods, people and services of North East to rest of India and vice versa, gone through Bangladesh. Bangladesh is the trusted partner in South Asia which helps India to protecting China's influence and strategic invasion in South Asia and in balancing power equation in the region (Oak, 2017). Being friendly neighbor it has also cooperated India for combating terrorism, illegal trafficking and migration and others fields. It is a strategic partner of India. The State of West Bengal is a significant state of India in terms of its security and geo-politics as it shares international boundary with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh and close to China (Oak, 2017). Moreover, Siliguri corridor is the only land route to North-Eastern States of India. Besides it also largely contributed in GDP of India, hence Union Government cannot disregard the West Bengal objection on Teesta's water

sharing. Thus domestic compulsions and geo-political realities interplay the Teesta water resolution process.

Recommendations

India and Bangladesh may initiates following measures to get breakthrough on the Teesta river dispute.

Integrative Approach:

India and Bangladesh needs an integrative approach to address the Teesta river dispute. In order to ensure sustainable bilateral relations and their development they require a joint effort for water resources management and development of the Teesta.

Data Exchange:

Exchange of hydrological data and information is very vital for the solution of the cross-boundary rivers conflict. Data would help to understand the ground level reality of the issue.

To Revamp and Revitalize the JRC:

If Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC) rebuild and revitalize, it would helpful to deals with the issues pertaining to the management and sharing of common trans-boundary rivers in an effective manner.

Share Sacrifices:

They can take realistic measures to solve the issue on the basis of share sacrifices for mutual benefits and South Asian peace and security.

Multi-track water diplomacy:

It refers to effective water collaboration for maximizing mutual benefits and achieving joint success for all the contending parties.

To Sign a long term agreement:

In order to settle the Teesta conflict a long term agreement become imperative for India and Bangladesh. Teesta basin conflict affects the security and geo-political realities of both the states.

Conclusion:

The Teesta basin connected with the peace and security of both states, thus may affect the political stability of either nations. The cross-boundary water is the single most burning issue which often makes Indo-Bangladesh relation contentious and tense. They could resolve this issue with their positive will and collaborative mentality and strengthen

their bilateral relations, establish peace and security in South Asian in the face China power equilibrium. If India and Bangladesh join hands implemented these above recommendations, it will be possible for both the states to overcome Teesta issue and several others issues and makes a way forward for their strong bilateral friendship and sustainable development.

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