

# Dimensions of Indo-Bangladesh Relations: Focus on Teesta River Dispute

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## Abstract

The paper might state that in today's largely interconnected global landscape, both India and Bangladesh must recognise that tight and amicable connections between them are essential for settling long-pending conflicts and making a fresh beginning. At this point, the two countries must understand that adopting a benefit-sharing strategy will necessitate talks at several levels, concentrating on specific aspects such as water, livelihood, and development expectations in such a country. Both states are unquestionably crucial in promoting regional cooperation in South Asia and in the operation of the eight-member SAARC. It is critical that both countries transcend all forms of fear psychosis, suspicion, distrust, and acrimony and begin on collaborative and cooperative projects that will eventually make South Asia one of the most flourishing areas in the world. They should understand the genuine spirit of inter-state collaboration in order to maximise resource use and promote sustainable development in the area. Such an approach, if adopted by both states, would not only inject new vigour into the spirit of South Asian regional cooperation, but would also allow for the resolution of various disputes between them, including the sharing of Teesta and Feni waters within the framework of South Asian regional cooperation.

**Keywords:** Teesta River Dispute, Indo-Bangladesh Relations, Governmental Agreements and Policies, Challenges.

## Historical Background

The developing world's position is particularly vulnerable worldwide owing to socioeconomic constraints that impede their efforts to integrate. For decades, so-called third-world countries have been put on the back burner, subject to the whims of the Western world and ruled by neocolonial politics. Only after WWII did the developed countries have to relinquish their spheres of dominance all over the world, and international politics was marked by a plethora of nationalist movements across the continents, ushering in a political and economic awakening of nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In this perspective, the late twentieth century might be described as a period of "Asian renaissance." Asia's countries, eager to seize all opportunities unleashed by the forces of liberalisation as a result of globalisation, embarked on a path of development that focused solely on economic growth, but suffered from grave environmental problems as a result of their inability to strike a balance between economic development on the one hand and protection of the environment on the other (Gill, 1997).

Since the nineteenth century, South Asia, one of the most important subsystems of the international system, has developed a distinct character. Its geostrategic location, as well as the dilemmas and dialectics between politics of change and status quo, centralization and decentralisation, secularisation and religion, and variety in political systems, make it an intriguing field of study (Jetley, 2001). South Asian nations, eager to seize the multitude of prospects, sought to begin on an economic growth-oriented development model alone, failing to see the necessity to accommodate their development aspirations in a sustainable way (Biswas, 2012). The situation is paradoxical in that, despite the adoption of open economy, the path of development has been altered. There has been no major economic progress or improvement in resource utilization. Conflicts over natural resources in this region continue to influence not just regional international relations, but resource conflicts frequently spill over into other sectors, affecting the region's politics and economics (Baxter, 1997). Because the nations share geographical similarities and a shared historical heritage, the possibilities for inter-state and regional cooperative initiatives for improved resource utilisation and development remain considerable. In reality, the foundation of SAARC in 1985 symbolises the presence of a regional cooperation framework among South Asian governments in the area (Challeney, 2011). The SAARC began its voyage with tremendous zeal, but the way looked to be littered with barriers, and the SAARC began to waver in its desired speed. In essence, the fundamental provisions in the SAARC Charter proven to be serious impediments to regional collaboration. While there is little question that India and Pakistan have the most turbulent ties, inter-state conflicts between India and her neighbours operate as a disadvantage to the completion of cooperative endeavours in the area. However, it must be recognised that significant collaboration among South Asian states is required to meet their developmental requirements in a sustainable way.

Against this backdrop, the study aimed to examine the Teesta water dispute and its implications for Indo-Bangladesh relations. After the Ganga, the Teesta River is the most significant trans-border river between India and Bangladesh. It is also the major point of dispute between the two, and it need rapid care at this time. South Asian states rely on trans-boundary waterfalls to supply their domestic water needs. In the region, water is a "emotionally" and "politically" fraught problem. Despite various bilateral treaties and agreements to govern water sharing at the regional and trans-boundary levels, countries in this region accuse one another of controlling and damming trans-boundary rivers without respecting or considering the downstream repercussions (Rudra, 2003). The current study aims to suggest that conflicts over the management of shared resources, notably water, are producing hydro-politics and are responsible for deteriorating ties among South Asian nations, with the Teesta water dispute serving as a key example.

Bangladesh [previously East Pakistan] gained independence in 1971. Since its inception, relations between the two countries have been marked by more inconsistencies than stability, which is unexpected given that India played a significant role in Bangladesh's independence. However, with the election of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League administration in 2008, it was expected that both states would go beyond the limited areas and embrace extremely wide viewpoints in order to overcome the challenges impacting bilateral relations (Times of India, 2015). The sharing of trans-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh, such as the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, and the Teesta, has impacted bilateral ties in many ways.

The Teesta Water Issue is one of the most important and critical cases concerning the sharing, regulation, and management of trans-boundary water resources between India and Bangladesh at the present time, which has taken on new perspectives and interpretation following the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June, 2015. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister was expected to give new impetus to the development of bilateral ties. Since it has been established that trans-boundary water issues are a critical environmental concern in South Asia, and the Teesta water issue requires careful consideration, this paper attempts to trace the origins and evolution of the Teesta water issue, as well as discuss the various negotiations and bilateral agreements concluded between India and Bangladesh to date (The Telegraph, 2015). The report also suggests specific strategies for optimal water usage based on the principles of equality and justice that might attempt to help stakeholders in both states to reach a meaningful resolution. As the horizon for collaboration has expanded and basin-wide river management has become increasingly important, the research has also sought to provide an alternate needs-based strategy to resolving the issue. It also suggests an equitable and fair regime as a feasible instrument for guaranteeing the effective management and exploitation of the Teesta waters (The Telegraph, 2015). The study has been broken into three components in order to make it more meaningful. The first segment attempted to trace the origins and evolution of the Teesta water crisis. In part II, an attempt was made to analyse the state of bilateral discussions between the two nations about the water-sharing formula. Section III proposes an alternate method and a mechanism in the shape of a regime that would be effective in allowing the two nations to share the Teesta water resource based on mutual benefit and necessity. This will be followed by some final remarks on the Teesta water issue.

### **The Teesta Water Dispute's Origins and Evolution:**

South Asia is the world's most densely inhabited regions, as well as one of the most water-scarce. While it houses approximately 21% of the world's population, it has access to only 8.3% of the world's water resources. Whereas the Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra rivers are the three biggest trans-boundary river systems, the bulk of South Asian nations rely on trans-boundary waterflows (Ahmed, 2012). There will always be a scarcity of water resources felt by the countries, causing water to become a cause of stress and possibly war in the region.

There are 54 trans-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh, including the three major river systems of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. The bulk of these rivers originate in the Himalayas and flow to the Bay of Bengal via India and Bangladesh. Because it is the higher riparian state, India has long held a prior claim to rivers running through its territory and has been believed to regulate the flow of water to Bangladesh, which is prone to water scarcity during the dry season (Guha, 1994). Bangladesh looks to be significantly reliant on transboundary river flows from India in this scenario. The problem of sharing trans-boundary river water resources remains a key point of concern in their ties.

Water resource conflicts have a long history between India and Bangladesh. The debate over water resource sharing was particularly visible in the sharing of Ganga river flows. The hydrology of the Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta has changed while it has been active. River flow has been migrating increasingly to eastern distributaries. Calcutta, an ocean port city 120 miles up the Hugli, was constructed by the British. In the 1950s, the Indian government decided to build the Farakka Barrage to keep the port from flooding. Over the previous few decades, as South Asian countries saw unprecedented population growth, the need for sufficient water from rivers for agriculture increased tremendously (Jaitley, 1994). The low season flow in Bangladesh allowed saltwater bores to reach significantly further upstream in numerous rivers, limiting irrigation potential and frequently affecting the water table. Bangladesh, as a downstream and smaller state in compared to India, has struggled for a fair share of the Ganga resources. In relation to the Ganga waters, it may be stated that on May 16, 1974, the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, President of Bangladesh, declared that the Farakka barrage would not be commissioned until both sides agreed on a mutually acceptable formula for allocating water available during the Ganga's minimum flow.

However, in 1978, the two nations ended discussions and reached an agreement on the effective use of water between the two countries. Subsequently, on December 12, 1996, the historic Ganga water Treaty was signed by Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sk. Hasina Wajeda, signalling a significant change in the two nations' ties. The 1996 Indo-Bangladesh Treaty emphasised the sincere goals and politico-economic foresight of both nations' heads of state and civil society. Several critical issues that require attention in the context of Indo-Bangladesh relations remain unresolved. Water resource conflicts and arguments persist over the construction of the Tipaimukh dam in the state of Manipur, upstream of the Bangladesh border, as part of India's Inter Linking of Rivers Project. However, the most visible water conflict is over the distribution of the Teesta's water resources, which is a key trans-boundary river along with others like as the Feni, Manu, Dudhkumar, Mahuri, and Dharla.

The Teesta River drains about 95% of the mountainous state of Sikkim. In Sikkim, the river is tumultuous throughout its course. The elevation of the Teesta basin ranges from 8,598 to 213 metres. It should be emphasised that the river's quick descent from high heights makes it excellent for hydropower production (Rasid, 2001). The Teesta is joined by a number of tributaries as it flows into the plains, including the Rongpo on the left bank and the Rangit on the right bank. The river is joined in the sub-Himalayan plains by tributaries such as the Leesh and the Geesh. The river exits the hills of downstream Sikkim at Melli Bazar and enters the plains of West Bengal at Sevoke near Siliguri. The Teesta flows through the West Bengal districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri before entering Bangladesh at Dimlaupazila in the Nilphamari district. The Teesta River flows through the five northern districts of Gaibandha, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, and Rangpur in Bangladesh, covering 9,667 square

kilometres, 35 Upazilas, and 5,427 villages. Almost 21 million Bangladeshis rely on the river for a living, either directly or indirectly. After travelling over 414 kilometres across India and Bangladesh, the river joins the Brahmaputra. It then travels 151 kilometres via Sikkim, 142 kilometres along the Sikkim-West Bengal border and into West Bengal, and 121 kilometres across Bangladesh. The transboundary rivers cover an area of 12,159 square kilometres, with 10,155 in India and 2004 in Bangladesh. Initially, the river was part of the Ganga river system, flowing south from Jalpaiguri in West Bengal in three distinct channels: the Karatoya, the Purnabhaba, and the Atrai (Rajagopalan, 2006). These three channels are said to have given rise to the names "Trisrota" and "Teesta." Due to a flood in 1787, the river was forced to turn southeast and join the Brahmaputra. The Teesta is a fully crimson river caused by rain and snow. As it flows into the plains, the Teesta is supplied by a variety of tributaries in addition to glacier melt water. The Teesta's tributaries are considered flashy mountain rivers that run at rapid speeds with massive amounts of debris and silt. Because of the high altitude and rugged topography, the upper catchment area in Sikkim is prone to abrupt variations in rainfall and temperature. The construction of a series of cascade dams for hydropower generation in the Indian state of Sikkim has been the most major development activity. On the river, about 30 significant hydropower projects with a total capacity of more than 5,000 MW are planned. The building of a megaproject in Sikkim and extensive areas of North East India in 2003 was a significant driving force behind the Indian government's efforts to satisfy the country's energy demands through hydropower generating (Muhammad, 1993). Some of the significant initiatives attempted to redirect river water through tunnels and a powerhouse before the river water is discharged downstream are the Teesta Stage II, Teesta Stage III, Stage IV, and Stage V. The construction of dams in the region has been a contentious subject since it has a negative ecological, environmental, and socio-cultural impact on the lives of the region's local populations. The contentious inter-linking of rivers project proposed by the Indian government includes the use of the Teesta river. Water from India's Himalayan and peninsular rivers is transferred through a network of inter-basin canals and dams to water-scarce and flood-prone districts of Southern India under the plan. Civil society in both India and Bangladesh has harshly condemned the project, which is expected to generate 20,000 Megawatts of power and irrigate 30 million hectares. It increases the country's concern of increased floods while simultaneously reducing water availability during the dry season. It is believed to violate the norms established in the 1996 Helsinki Rules on Water Resources and the later 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources for the equitable distribution of water resources among co-riparian countries. Bangladesh claims that the building of the Gazaldoba barrage upstream of Dalia has reduced water supply substantially during the dry season. During the monsoon season, the release of water produces catastrophic floods and bank erosion downstream. The availability of water for irrigation, particularly during the lean season, has long been a source of contention between the two countries. For over two decades, the Teesta flowed fast, sustaining the lives of millions of Bangladeshis. However, the river is now threatening the lives of innocent people in northern Bangladesh. Nothing of the river remains, according to Faridul Islam, President of Teesta Bachao Andolan. The river has become silted and completely dried up. According to the Joint Rivers Commission [JRC] in Bangladesh, India released barely 10% of the Teesta's dry-season flow in 2014, resulting in the river drying up. To make matters worse, the Bangladesh Water Development Board diverts whatever little water appears to be available to the Teesta barrage irrigation canal, which tends to deprive those living along its banks downstream. As a result, Bangladesh feels cheated and demands an equal portion of the Teesta River's water (Chellaney, 2011). The Teesta floodplain contains almost 14 percent of Bangladesh's total cultivated land and provides livelihood options for nearly 9.15 million people. Bangladesh needs at least 4500 cusecs of water for the 60,500 hectares of agriculture in the northern area under the Teesta Barrage Scheme. However, it is sad that Bangladesh has received barely 2,500-3,500 cusecs of water in recent years, including 2013-14. All of this adds up to Bangladesh being in a losing scenario (Ahmed, 2012).

#### **Agreements and negotiations between India and Bangladesh on the Teesta issue:**

South Asian republics are increasingly dependent on one another for livelihood and ecological sustainability in modern times. India and Bangladesh have close relationships based on a shared history, cultural affinity, geographical proximity, and environmental resource similarity. Geographic closeness is an important aspect in fostering collaboration on environmental resource exploitation, which is connected to each other's growth possibilities and, eventually, the region's overall development prospects. The commonality of environmental resources, such as transboundary rivers, provides them with a chance to strengthen their connection and encourage collaboration for the development and usage of natural resources to ensure regional growth.

In this backdrop, the focus on the Teesta water reveals that the water-sharing issue has reached such dangerous proportions that both parties must mobilise to handle the critical situation. It should be noted that bilateral negotiations on the Teesta between India and Bangladesh have so far been fruitless. Despite multiple Joint River Commission, Joint Committee of Experts, and Joint Technical Group meetings, no progress on crucial concerns such as lean season flow has been made. The countries' discussions have mostly been technical in nature, with minimal participation on social, ecological, and stakeholder issues. Spaces for civil society involvement, public participation, and the utilisation of local and traditional knowledge sources have been severely curtailed. An examination of the Teesta water treaties and agreements reveals that the Sugauli Treaty was signed on December 2, 1815 and confirmed in 1816 between the East India Company and the King of Nepal following the Anglo-Nepalese war. The monarch gave the East India Company the whole lowlands between the rivers Mechi and Teesta. Negotiations over the Teesta waters began in the 1950s and 1960s, when officials in India and East Pakistan began to debate prospective projects on the river (Guha, 1994). However, the initiative was ineffective and was limited to the exchange of technical data and information. Following the establishment of Bangladesh, the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission was formed to explore the problem of sharing Teesta waters. The Teesta River flows through Sikkim and West Bengal before entering the Brahmaputra as a tributary in Bangladesh.

In 1983, India and Bangladesh established an ad hoc water-sharing deal under which both nations were allocated 39 percent and 36 percent of the water flow, respectively, while the remaining 25 percent was planned to be allocated after further investigation. As a result, the two nations agreed to use 75 percent of Teesta waters. India, as the upper riparian country, is said to regulate the

flow of water into Bangladesh via the Teesta barrage at Gazaldoba, which was built to supply water to northern West Bengal. Bangladesh has also built a downstream barrage at Dalia in the Lalmonirhat district to provide water for agriculture and irrigation in drought-prone areas of northern Bangladesh (Guha, 1994). It is stated that the building of the Gazaldoba Barrage and the diversion of water are to blame for the reduced availability of water at Dalia Barrage, particularly during the dry season.

A Joint Committee of Experts was constituted in 1997 to investigate the subject of water sharing. Despite a series of meetings conducted between 1997 and 2004, however, no progress was accomplished. A Cooperative Technical Group was created in 2004 to develop terms of reference for a joint scientific study of the Teesta waters. The group admitted its failure to settle the matter during its fourth meeting in 2005. The Joint River Commission acknowledged at its 36th meeting that the Teesta's lean season flows could not cover the demands of both countries, and hence any water sharing formula had to rely on the idea of shared sacrifices by the two countries. The Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh released a joint statement in 2010 pushing for the Teesta problem to be addressed as soon as possible (Ahmed, 2012). The two nations drafted a Teesta agreement and a declaration of principles for sharing river flows during the lean season. These texts were supposed to establish an interim agreement between India and Bangladesh over the Teesta.

The bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh have clearly reached a favourable phase in 2010. The leaders of both nations deserved to be recognised for the paradigm change in their long-running wars. During Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011, the two nations were set to sign a new deal on the Teesta. In reality, the visit may be seen as a watershed moment in the two countries' ties. His historic visit was seen as a diplomatic gesture to improve commerce, transportation, and water-sharing issues, and it sent a strong message of collaboration and confidence across borders. An interim agreement was negotiated between India and Bangladesh for a period of fifteen years, under which India would receive 42.5 percent of the Teesta Water while Bangladesh would receive 37.5 percent during the lean season (Ahmed, 2012). The agreement also includes the establishment of a collaborative hydrological observation station to collect correct data for the future. Unfortunately, the arrangement did not materialise due to the unwillingness of West Bengal's Chief Minister to sanction it on the grounds that the loss of greater quantities of water to the lower riparian state would cause issues in the state's northern area, particularly during the drier months. Because water is a state matter in India and her party, the Trinamool Congress, was a significant participant in the national government coalition, the transaction could not be consummated without her assent. Thus, center-state relations and the compulsions of coalition politics proved to be a key impediment to resolving the issue.

The failed to resolve the vital Teesta water issue, as well as the removal of an important treaty from the Summit's agenda, was a major disappointment, and the collapse of the critical Teesta water-sharing accord at the last minute effectively sounded the death-knell for the final resolution of a major and vital conflict. Despite the fact that India and Bangladesh have signed a broad framework of bilateral cooperation agreements emphasising, among other things, the need to explore the possibility of resolving the Teesta issue, India's failure to sign the Teesta Agreement in 2011 has kept the Teesta water sharing issue a major irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations and has affected bilateral discussions on other issues as well (Ahmed, 2012). It has impacted bilateral negotiations on other problems such as transit facilities for India through Bangladesh, as well as the potential of new agreements on trans-boundary rivers like as the Feni. However, conversations are still ongoing.

Following the 2014 Indian elections, Dhaka indicated increased optimism for an accord, particularly ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in June 2015. The year 2015 marked a watershed moment in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The Indian Prime Minister's visit sparked high hopes for significant progress in resolving the ongoing Teesta Water issue between India and Bangladesh. It was supposed to result in a considerable improvement in all aspects of India-Bangladesh ties. The Indian Prime Minister, joined by West Bengal Chief Minister, appeared to illustrate both countries' determination to address the problems constructively (The Times of India, 2015). Despite the fact that the Indian Prime Minister's 2015 visit resulted in several Memorandums of Understanding being signed, including the significant Land Boundary Agreement, the Teesta water dispute remained unresolved, with both India and Bangladesh not dwelling on the lack of a final agreement on the issue.

Nevertheless, the 2015 visit may be considered a watershed moment in the history of Indo-Bangladesh ties. Both India and Bangladesh have traditionally been friends, but the commonality appears to be fading, with India flexing its muscles and Bangladesh at times siding with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and China (The Telegraph, 2015). There have been several areas in Indo-Bangladesh ties that have left much to be desired, including: 1) the sharing of the Teesta Waters, 2) the settlement of India's issue of illegal migration, 3) the continuous disruption on the Indo-Bangladesh Border, 4) the condition of minorities in Bangladesh, 5) Bangladesh's constant forays into building strong strategic and security allegiances with other countries, and 6) the renewed vigour and regrouping of insurgent.

Officials dubbed Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's April 2017 visit as "A Visit Without Water" since it was not expected that a vital water-sharing arrangement, negotiated over almost 20 years, would move during the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's brief visit (Hazarika, 2020). Nonetheless, it is indisputable that Indo-Bangladesh ties are continually evolving, and no fundamental, irresolvable disagreements can exist between India and Bangladesh. To resolve the situation, New Delhi must reconsider its political ties with powerful political parties in Bangladesh. Thus, in such circumstances, a realistic vision and concentrated effort might enable South Asian governments to work together to create a better future. For the Teesta water issue to be resolved, an effective structure of similar attitudes is required. One key hurdle to resolving the Teesta and other water crises is that water administration is predominantly driven by technical viewpoints, leaving little room for legitimate civil society voices and stakeholder interests to be expressed. It is critical to approach the problem from both a social and ecological standpoint. The negotiating process excluded a variety of social, cultural, economic, and ecological interests, which may have hampered the establishment of a basin-wide integrated strategy to planning, managing, and protecting the Teesta Basin (Hazarika, 2020). The next portion of the article makes an attempt to provide an alternate strategy for dealing with the issue. It need a more comprehensive perspective of the issue that is not just driven by the state.

## Conclusion

Protection of the environment encompasses a wide variety of concerns that raise fundamental questions about the human and environmental worlds. The rising human activities have had both beneficial and bad effects on the ecosystem. Environmentalism is stated to be a value-laden notion that finds meaning and realisation when linked to the concept of development. The environment and development are intertwined in a variety of ways as part of a multifaceted process. The earth's resources are being mined and harnessed at an increasing rate in the pursuit of economic growth, and the consequent spill-over consequences are creating new issues in terms of resource allocation efficiency and crisis management. In this context, one cannot limit one's understanding of the relationship between economics and the environment to the pursuit of development-driven by changes in technology and global competition alone, but must also consider the relationship between development and issues of justice and ethics in international relations. Unfortunately, the relationship between economic growth and the environment is not balanced under current international relations, which have a negative influence on the development prospects of every region, leading to unsustainable resource consumption.

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