

# BANGLADESH-INDIA WATER ISSUE: A Study on Teesta River

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## ABSTRACT

*Bangladesh and India have a long history of water dispute over the water sharing of Ganges and Teesta river. The Ganges from the Farakka barrage to the Bhagirati Hooghly river remained as the major area of the issue. The issue started in 1950 when government of India announced to construct a barrage at Murshidabad district of West Bengal and continued till 1996 treaty signed between Bangladesh and India. In order to resolve the issue both countries signed five years agreement in 1977 and two short term agreements in 1982 and 1985 respectively but disputation could not come to the solution till 1996. Another dispute between these two countries started in 1979 over the Teesta river water sharing when the Government of West Bengal constructed a barrage on the Teesta River in 1979 for irrigation purpose. In order to resolve this issue, an ad-hoc agreement was signed in 1983 and a Joint River Water Commission appointed to collect a hydrological data to resolve this issue. In September 2011, Prime Minister of India Dr. Man Mohan Singh visited to Bangladesh for resolving this issue. But due to the objection raised by the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, the issue could not be resolved till today. This paper will be focusing briefly on the historical background of the dispute between two countries and tries to examine the governmental policies towards the solution with special emphasis on the Teesta river.*

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Barrage, Ganges river, India, Teesta River, West Bengal

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh merged as an independent state in December 1971 in the world politics because of the hearties help and moral support of India. India helped not only in freedom struggle but also stood with the Government of Bangladesh in term of building of destroyed economy of Bangladesh along with trade and social structure by providing loans and signing various agreements. The People's Republic of Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian Territory sharing 4094 km of land border with India on three sides and the fourth side being open to Bay of Bengal. It shares 54 rivers with India, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna River systems drain through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. The 25 years Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace was signed in March 19, 1972 which was considered a unique step taken by the important Asian countries for the stabilization of peace in this sub-continent.

In the atmosphere of the relationship between Bangladesh and India, both countries have a long journey of the dispute over the water sharing particularly on Ganges and Teesta river. Before independent of Bangladesh from Pakistan, both countries had a big controversy over the Ganges river when India decided to construct a barrage in 1951 and continued till the signed of Ganges Water Treaty 1996. Another issue started in 1979 when West Bengal state of India constructed barrage at Gajaldoba, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. This issue has not been resolved till today. Millions of peoples from both countries have been shouting against the Government for resolving the issue. This issue is burning issue and has been a big concern after its independent from Pakistan. There are some implications has been undertaken by both government for resolving the issue. After the advent of new Government in India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamta Banerjee has declared in 2015 with Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina when she visited India to take a fair solution regarding the issue.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BANGLADESH-INDIA WATER DISPUTE

Historically, the water issue between Bangladesh and India can be traced in 1951 when Indian press reports that New Delhi had decided to construct a dam at Farakka, in Murshidabad district of West Bengal to divert water into the Bhagirati, Hooghly river. The idea of constructing a dam at Farak- ka had first been mooted among official circles in India in 1950.[1] India unilaterally constructed barrage in 1961 and Bangladesh (Before East Pakistan) Government raised an issue against the construction of barrage. In 1972, both countries created a Joint River Water Commission to work together towards flood and cyclone control and common interest on the water sharing during the dry season and finally project started operation on 21 April, 1975. The barrage has to divert water 1100 cubic meters per second into the Hooghly river but it was not enough for flushing out the sediment from the river.[2]

After the completion of the barrage, both countries agreed to run water flow for 41 days particularly in the dry season. But after the assassination of Sheik Mujibar Rahman on 15 August, 1975 India withdraw the water and unilaterally diverted till 1977. This led to a serious issue between the two countries. For resolving the issue, two countries signed an agreement for 5 years and renewed till 1988. Two Memorandum of Understanding were also signed in 1982 and 1984 respectively which were followed by the Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi and President of Bangladesh E.H Ershad but no agreement was signed for dry season. President of Bangladesh and Prime Minister of India discussed the issue at the Commonwealth Summit held in Nassau, Bahamas in October 1985 and agreed to signed MOU. On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1985, another MOU was signed for three years. In October 1986, both countries officially appointed experts to approach regarding the water storage in the upstream Ganges basin in Nepal but it was not succeed. Within the period from 1988 to 1996, there were no agreements signed between two countries. Bangladesh raised the issue in Commonwealth Summit held at Cyprus in October 1993 and again raised on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1995 at the 50<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly regarding [3] the tragedy of Bangladesh peoples due to the diversion of water but there were no any positives results achieved.

After the changing of government in both countries, the relationship between Bangladesh and India resulted in a positive conclusion only after the signing of the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty on 12 December 1996 which intended to bring a fair solution for a long pending discord of Bangladesh and India. Another dispute over the sharing water of Teesta river started in 1979 in the relationship between these two countries due to the construction of barrage by West Bengal for irrigation purpose to supply water in paddy fields of the northern region of West Bengal. This issue has not been resolved till today due to various reasons which will be discussed broadly in this paper.

### III. THE TEESTA RIVER ISSUE

Teesta River originates in the northern region of India, Pahunri 'Teesta Kangse' glacier above 7,068 metres (23,189 ft) and it is 309 (192 mi) long flows through the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal before entering to the Bangladesh and ends to the Bay of Bengal. It traverses through the cities of Rangpo, Jalpaiguri and Kalimpong and joins the Brahmaputra River in Bangladesh draining an area of 12,540 km (4,840 sq. mi).

Teesta River is the most important river water sharing between Bangladesh and India in term of agriculture cultivation and others purposes like hydroelectric projects. The Teesta's floodplain covers 2,750sq km in Bangladesh. Of the river's catchment, an area of land where water collects 83% is in India and 17% is in Bangladesh. The peoples of the northern region of West Bengal directly depend on this river for their livelihood. They live through the various cultivations with the help of this river water. The River is also important for the people of Bangladesh particularly in the "rice bowl" in the Rangpur region. The river is Bangladesh's fourth largest trans-boundary river for irrigation and fishing. Nearly 21 million peoples of Bangladesh directly or indirectly depend on the Teesta River. It shares water sharing comprising 9,667 sq. kms through the five northern districts of Bangladesh namely Gaibandha, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Rangpur. According to the report of Asian Foundation in 2013, its flood plain covers about 14% of the total cropped area of Bangladesh and provides direct livelihood opportunities to approximately 73% of its population.[4] During the dry season particularly December to March, Bangladesh requires 50% water sharing for the survival of the region. And India also becomes scarcity of water during the dry season because the northern region of the West Bengal directly depends on this river for their survival.

Historically, the dispute between Bangladesh and India can be traced before independent of Bangladesh from Pakistan. The main root can be located in the report of the Boundary Commission which was set up in 1947 under the leadership of Sir Cyril Radcliff to the demarcation of the boundary line between India and Pakistan and then after 1971 when Bangladesh got independent from Pakistan. At that time, the All India Muslim League, Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha were very active. However, in the report submitted to the BC, the All India Muslim League demanded Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri on the ground that they are the main catchment areas of Teesta River and it would become major areas of common interest for Muslim majority of east Bengal. The INC and Hindu Mahasabha opposed it and in the final declaration, the BC gave major catchment areas of Teesta River to India on the ground of the demography composition, administrative consideration and other factors such as railways, water and communication. [5]

In the contemporary time, immediately, after the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in December 1971, the dispute between Bangladesh and India has started due to the construction of the projects/barrages on this River. The water sharing issue between Bangladesh and India started when the West Bengal constructed a barrage in 1979 at Gajaldoba, West Bengal for irrigation purposes mainly to supply water into

the northern region of the West Bengal. Bangladesh also constructed a barrage in 1998 at Dalia in Lalmonirhat district for water supply of agriculture and irrigation to drought a prone areas of the northern region of Bangladesh. Bangladesh Government raises issue against the construction of barrage by Indian state because the construction of barrage would reduce availability of water at Dalia barrage particularly in the dry season and also lead to the scarcity of water in the region and will hurt the farmers of five districts. To pacify this issue, an ad-hoc agreement was signed and proposed formula for sharing water between Bangladesh and India. According to the agreement, both Bangladesh and India will be allocated 36% and 39% water sharing respectively and unallocated 25% will be reached to the Bay of Bengal. But Bangladesh demanded 50% water sharing of the unallocated water and West Bengal raised issue against this demanding and pointed out equal sharing of unallocated water will dry out the northern region of the state and lead to the crisis of water by 2025 in the region of India.[6] However, many people have been at stake those who were dependent on this River. In 1984, Joint River Water Commission appointed to collect hydrological data and analysed the data. After analyzing, the commission logically recommended increasing water sharing between these two countries and a new formula was proposed that 42.5% will be allocated for India and 37.5% will be allocated for Bangladesh and 20% will be reached to the Bay of Bengal. But the dispute could not be resolved because of the demanding equal sharing of water by Bangladesh.

In September 2011, the then Prime Minister, Dr. Man Mohan Singh planned to visit Bangladesh and an interim agreement was supposed to last for 15 years for the equal sharing of water but due to the objection of the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, the planning has been failed because River issue is the state subject in the Constitution of India and the Union Government cannot take any decision without any consideration of state government as per the article 253 of the Indian constitution. Banerjee argued that the treaty will dry out the northern region of the West Bengal and will hurt Indian farmers. She also pointed out that after the construction of barrage at Dalia in Lalmonirhat district, Bangladeshi farmers have already occupied three cropping seasons per year and so, Bangladesh cannot deserve more water. The West Bengal Government also declared that the Teesta Barrage Project aims at irrigating 9, 22,000 hectares of land in north Bengal and providing 67.60 megawatts of hydropower. So, any sharing of water with Bangladesh will lead to a serious impediment in the project.[2] In this regard, the issue between these two countries.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The discord between Bangladesh and India over the water sharing of Ganges and Teesta river has been the historical events in the relationship between the two neighbouring countries Bangladesh and India. Before independent of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the water sharing issue over the Ganges river was a very big issue in the relationship between India and Pakistan as well as after liberation of Bangladesh. Immediately, after the independent this dispute had been implemented for resolution between the governments of both countries and finally come to the conclusion with the help of the Ganges Water Treaty 1996. But regarding the Teesta River dispute has not been resolved till today even both countries tries to resolve it. There are many issues are involved in the dispute mainly the political problem in both countries particularly in West Bengal, the Trinamol Congress was the single largest political party during the tenure of the then Prime Minister Dr. Man Mohan Singh when he tried to resolve it. Hence, signing treaty between Bangladesh and India was failed and trip of Mohan Singh to Bangladesh was also canceled. In Bangladesh the previous Nationalist Party (BNP) govt. headed by Begum Khaleda Zia was not very receptive to India's concern. The BNP, during its tenure in power between 1991-1996 periods and again from 2001 to 2006, provided shelter to leaders and cadres from various North East based terror outfits.

Thus, the dispute between Bangladesh and India over this river can be seen a little bit possible and predictable solution only after the advent of the Modi government in India. The direction of the issue towards solution would be move expeditiously to reach conclusion when Narendra Modi said that a fair solution will be seen very soon and the CM of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee reassured that unfair deals would not be concluded. Sheikh Hasina's Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) party also followed India-friendly policies and also adopted a zero tolerance policy against anti-Indian terror outfits and eventually ULFA was banned.

In the contemporary world politics, the friendship with the neighbor countries has become a very bid political phenomenon. However, Bangladesh is very importance neighbourhood for India with a shared history, culture and religion and Bangladesh is strategically core importance for India. So, India should be responsible and needs to take a proactive step towards the early possible solutions to conclude the Teesta water issue because the notions about the development of any countries come only when the relationship is closed with their neighbouring countries.

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