

## Challenges of the Teesta Water Conservation and Management

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### Introduction

The conflict over Teesta River water sharing between India and Bangladesh is a critical juncture in South Asian hydro-politics. Beginning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both neighbours started building diversion systems across the river at Gajaldoba and Duani in India and Bangladesh, respectively. However, the lack of water during the dry season and no provision to conserve the rainwater made both projects inadequate. Extensive discussions to end the water crisis were undertaken by the countries, yet India's constant actions to divert the water flow and withdrawal of irrigation water have left Bangladesh with uncertainty. Recently, PM Modi has taken office and announced his interest in aiding Bangladesh in the conservation and management of the Teesta water.<sup>1</sup>

Though PM Hasina Sheikh seems interested, the arrangement comes at a time when Dhaka has already approached Beijing for investment in the project and the domestic stakeholders are sceptical of the proposal. Similarly, where China's involvement in the project would ensure economic benefits and infrastructure development, it comes with raising concerns about geopolitical security risks for India. As PM Hasina Sheikh is likely to accept either proposal, it becomes significant to highlight the potential challenges in the resolution of the Teesta water crisis.

### Challenges of Teesta Conservation and Management

#### Operational Loopholes

Teesta water-sharing has been a significant contention between India and Bangladesh. However, PM Modi during his third tenure offered a proposal for its resolution and it came with hope. Though no arrangement has been finalized from either side, PM Modi announced that an Indian technical team would soon visit the river to discuss its conservation and management prospects.<sup>2</sup> The only difference was that, unlike previous discussions on the issue, the joint statement does not talk about water sharing of the Teesta River. Following the history of negotiations, the problematic aspect of the Teesta crisis is India's unilateral withdrawal of water through barrages

upstream and building infrastructure obstacles to disrupt the river flow like hydroelectric power plants.

Additionally, the question remains, whether the proposed arrangement will be sufficient to resolve the water crisis for Bangladesh. In 2019, Power China, a state-owned enterprise, proposed a feasibility study for the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project in 2019. The study planned 100 km of embankments alongside the river, from the Teesta barrage to the confluence of Brahmaputra while using engineering measures like groynes, levees, and cross bars to prevent erosion.<sup>3</sup> The project involves deepening 110 km of Teesta for inland navigation and building a network of canals to store the monsoon rains. Given the condition, India's proposal will most likely align with Power China's, as the proposed joint statement has not addressed water sharing. However, the problem is that it will seriously impact the velocity of the water flow. According to a study done by Dr Md Khalequzzaman, professor of geology and environmental sciences at the Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, reducing the cross-section of the river will intensify its velocity, increasing the water flow during the rainy season and eventually exaggerating the erosion tendencies of the river banks.<sup>4</sup> This intense velocity will cut off the water from the tributaries, exposing the region to flood damage.

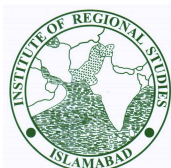
Therefore, if India remains adamant about not giving Bangladesh an equitable share of water from upstream, the issue will not be resolved. It will also remain disputed, even if Dhaka manages to achieve a water-sharing arrangement at Gajaldoba Point, without taking the upstream projects in Sikkim into consideration. The vested interest of New Delhi to keep a check on China's presence seriously questions the intentions of the proposition made by PM Modi about resolving the water crisis.

#### India's Unilateral Withdrawal of Water

The livelihood of people inhabiting the Bangladesh border region depends on rivers, and India has an upper hand in regulating the water flow in common rivers, causing problems between the two neighbours. One of the substantial issues on water sharing was India's unilateral action in the Ganges River. In 1977, after lengthy

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discussions on the management of the river, the two countries reached a 5-year deal, according to which Bangladesh agreed that India could withdraw a certain amount of water for a forty-day trial period from the Farakka barrage. However, India continued to withdraw water up to 40,000 cubic feet per square unilaterally.<sup>5</sup> In response, Dhaka tried to internationalize the issue but failed because the UN suggested a bilateral resolution to the treaty. Soon enough, in the 1980s, Bangladesh accused India of breaching the terms of the Ganges water-sharing treaty and unilaterally withdrawing a higher volume of water. After extensive discussions, the two countries managed to reach a consensus on the 30-year Ganges Water Sharing Deal in 1996, which is to end in 2026, and talks on resuming it remains a high-priority objective of Dhaka.

In 2023, Bangladesh accused West Bengal of digging canals and unilaterally withdrawing water under the Teesta Barrage, resulting in precarious conditions for Bangladeshi farmers, who heavily rely on river water for agriculture. Dhaka was concerned about New Delhi trying to divert water from Teesta using canals in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. It was also reported that India is setting up three hydropower projects in Darjeeling hills, two of which would significantly reduce the irrigation water flow in Teesta.<sup>6</sup> While on one hand, India is reassuring Bangladesh to negotiate on water management, the government is working on pursuing expensive projects to channel water on their side of the border. Moreover, India's unilateral actions without notifying Dhaka are a violation of international norms of transboundary river management. The power-oriented behaviour and lack of transparency from the Indian side remains a heightened concern for Dhaka, where 20 million Bangladeshis are dependent on the river water, especially in recent times when both neighbours are set to undertake a new Teesta proposition.

### Transboundary river politics

Recently, along with the management of Teesta, the discussion over the Farakka Treaty reorganization between the two prime ministers has upset the West Bengal CM, during PM Modi's third term. Mamata Banerjee criticised the central government for sidelining her from the proposal and undermining the effects of limited water reservoirs and erosion of river banks on farmers.<sup>7</sup> Banerjee earlier threatened to stage large-scale agitations across Bengal if the decision was not reconsidered on water sharing.

This is not the first time, in 2013, New Delhi and Dhaka were set to make a Teesta water-sharing

arrangement. This 15-year-old interim proposal was to provide India with 42.5 per-cent and 37.5 per-cent would go to Bangladesh throughout the dry season.<sup>8</sup> The agreement also established the consensus on the development of a cooperative hydrological monitoring base that would collect accurate data in the future. However, Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal led by the then Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee voiced strong opposition, calling the river the "lifeline of North Bengal." She highlighted her concern for Teesta River being dried up and not adequately facilitating the irrigation of the region itself during the lean season.

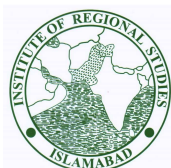
However, soon enough, then-PM Manmohan Singh claimed that West Bengal agreed to the water-sharing deal at Teesta. Mamata Banerjee was scheduled to visit Dhaka but had to cancel at the last minute, partially motivated by electoral prospects in Northern Bengal.<sup>9</sup> Considering that TMC was a key stakeholder in the federal government and water is a state issue as per the Indian constitution, the deal was not finalised between the two countries, causing great distress in Bangladesh and criticism against PM Hasina Sheikh from the opposition.

Following this incident, PM Narendra Modi during the 2014 elections brought a new hope for Teesta water-sharing in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, despite many assurances, the will to execute such an arrangement seemed negligible from New Delhi. Rather, Mamata Banerjee suggested using other rivers to share water with Bangladesh, including Torsa, Sankosh, Jaldhaka, and Raidak waterways but neither side took this idea seriously, as the rivers are the tributaries of the Brahmaputra and rerouting the flow to Teesta would be an almost impossible setup.<sup>10</sup> This gave Dhaka a sense of disjointed perspective and compelled it to seek support from China, as India did not sort the Teesta issue after almost two decades.

### China's Involvement in Teesta Management

After the constant failure of signing a water-sharing pact with India and drastically dropping Teesta water levels, Bangladesh turned to China for the development of a USD 1 billion Teesta engineering scheme in 2020. In July 2023, the Dhaka Ministry of Water Resources sought a loan from China to execute the project, where 15 per-cent of the total project cost will be covered by Bangladesh and the rest will be compensated by China.

Given that Teesta is strategically significant and located at the Siliguri Corridor, also known as Chicken's Neck (a narrow passageway connecting the Northeast



with the rest of India), this arrangement comes at a higher price for New Delhi. The Teesta basin is situated in the northern West Bengal districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar, which shares boundaries with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan and lies close to China. Moreover, it is the first time China has shown interest in a river management project with Bangladesh, a country that already shares 54 transnational rivers with India. Many in New Delhi see this planning as an opportunity for China to gain an advantage over its biggest regional rival. However, the Bangladesh government at the time claimed its right to defend its transboundary river, especially when it had no alternative considering India's insensitive attitude towards a legitimate pact.

India and China have a long history of military stand-offs in these contentious border zones. Beijing claims about 90,000 sq km of the territory, which includes almost all Arunachal Pradesh states.<sup>11</sup> The two most prominent flashpoints between the two states are Nathu La, a high mountainous region passing through Sikkim, sandwiched between Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, and Doklam plateau, claimed by China and Bhutan, which gives access to India's Siliguri corridor. From an economic perspective, the corridor has expansive railway links and gives India trade access to its northeastern regions as well as ASEAN countries. Given the complicated strategic nexus, New Delhi is concerned about China building infrastructure and gaining access to the border regions, followed by events of 2017 and 2018 military stand-offs.<sup>12</sup> Henceforth, the Teesta water arrangement between India and Bangladesh remains the only probable solution to avoid security threats.

## Conclusion

The equal distribution of the Teesta River is critical for Bangladesh, as its water-sharing structure is insufficient and dependency on the country's basin is greater than India's. Secondly, Bangladesh is concerned about the Gajoldoba barrage in West Bengal channelling massive amounts of water unilaterally, which has reduced the country's traditional water flow to 10 per-cent.<sup>13</sup> India has also built over thirty dams in the upper Teesta region

and despite them being regarded as run-of-the-river projects, the lean season usually results in high storage, eventually influencing the amount of water going downriver in Bangladesh. Given the circumstances, it would be premature to conclude that Bangladesh would favour India despite compromises, though PM Hasina has signalled it in a few official statements. Experts in Bangladesh believe Dhaka may negotiate with New Delhi to involve Beijing, though it is not an option for Indians.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, Dhaka cannot afford to upset Beijing, as both neighbours enjoy an annual trade turnover of over \$23 billion and Bangladesh is suffering inflation sparked by the Ukraine-Russia conflict. As PM Hasina made an official visit to China, following her India visit, things have been stressful. The top line expectation of the visit was a \$5 billion Chinese yuan low-cost budget support, however, China seemed more interested in providing the sum as a high-interest trade facility, though both countries have signed several MOUs.<sup>15</sup> Hasina's excessive devotion to India may be the reason for China's unwillingness to cooperate monetarily, which may harm Bangladesh's already strained economic state.

Recently, in a shocking turn of events, Sheikh Hasina resigned as the PM of Bangladesh faced with nationwide anti-government protests. Following her ouster on July 30, 2024, the country's parliament was dissolved and the Bangladesh president appointed Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, to lead an interim government. The leader of the main opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party BNP, Khaleda Zia has also been released from house arrest.<sup>16</sup> This political uncertainty is a serious challenge for India, given that New Delhi enjoyed a close relationship with the Awami League government during the 15-year tenure. Following the political vacuum in the coming months and BNP's close affiliation with China, New Delhi is concerned about its potential bilateral projects, the Teesta water arrangement being significant.<sup>17</sup> The disruption in Indo-Bangladesh ties can restrict India's access to the Northeast, allowing China to pursue its strategic aspirations. The situation calls for India to recalculate its old policy and build ties with opposition parties, which will not be easy for a country closely affiliated with PM Hasina.

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