



Indo-Bangladesh Relations in Contemporary Times: In the Context of Teesta River Disputes

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ABSTRACT

The Teesta river controversy is one of the most important outstanding issues in India-Bangladesh water relations that depicts the intricate interplay of hydrology, domestic politics, diplomacy, and national security. This paper will discuss the strategic importance of the Teesta River and how the river is extremely important in supporting agricultural livelihoods and food security in these two nations. Even though bilateral relations have been good, lack of a formal water sharing agreement has created a never-ending diplomatic tension, mainly due to the federal political nature of India, where the resistance of the states- especially West Bengal- has constituted central decision making. The paper also studies the diplomatic consequences of the dispute, indicating that it harms mutual trust and hinders regional cooperation. Moreover, it delves deeper into the national security aspects of the issue, such as the dangers of water-related migration, difficulties for the local population, and unrest in vulnerable border areas. The research through the lens of non-traditional security has raised awareness that the Teesta dispute is a matter of national security and it is also a resource sharing issue. The analysis ends with the recommendation that collaborative processes like hydro-diplomacy, data sharing, and joint river basin management can deliver a way out that is sustainable. The Teesta dispute is not only needed to be addressed in the context of reinforcement of the India-



Bangladesh relations but also to provide the region with long-term stability and water security.

Introduction

The dispute over the Teesta River is probably the most complicated and politically delicate matter concerning water between India and Bangladesh. Despite the fact that the two nations have maintained friendly relations and have cooperated effectively on a number of issues, the bilateral diplomacy between the two countries has been continuously strained by their failure to resolve the issue of sharing the Teesta water.

Unlike the Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 which culminated in a water sharing protocol, the Teesta dispute is a problem of water sharing mechanisms without an enforceable agreement, thus domestic politics, diplomatic negotiations, and national security considerations interweave in this matter. This river dispute especially spotlights how internal political upheavals at the level of a federated state can act as foreign policy decision-making bottlenecks. Moreover, it flags how a water disagreement, if left unresolved, can stir up a wide range of security concerns e.g. livelihoods' insecurity, migration, and vulnerability of a border area to strategic considerations. This paper focuses on the critical hydrological importance of the Teesta River, India's domestic political constraints that shape its stance, the diplomatic front of the issue, its national and regional security ramifications among other things.

Hydrological and Socioeconomic Importance of the Teesta River

Originating from the Eastern Himalayas, the Teesta River passes through Sikkim and the northern districts of West Bengal before finally entering Bangladesh and merging with the Brahmaputra system. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that practically all of the agriculture, the fisheries, and rural incomes in both countries revolve around the river.

The Teesta basin in Bangladesh is home to the main source of livelihood of millions of people. Among these, the inhabitants of the Rangpur district are the most dependent on irrigation to raise rice and carry out other crop cultivation. Water in the Teesta on a seasonal basis is ultimately necessary for food security in the area that is already disadvantaged, prone to poverty and other natural constraints.

In India too, the Teesta supports crop irrigation in North Bengal and Sikkim State gets its hydropower generated by this river. On the other hand, one of the characteristics of the river is that it experiences very different seasons quantitatively; the monsoon period sees a huge surge in the flow of water whereas the



dry period has acute water scarcity. Such a condition causes the competition for water to become tougher which makes the redistribution of water a politically sensitive subject. The increasing need for water from both sides together with climate change induced uncertainties in river flows which have inclined the Teesta river to hold strategic significance in bilateral water talks.

The role of domestic politics, especially in the federal governance structure, is one of the salient features of the Teesta River dispute in India. In India, water is officially the concern of the state only and therefore the state has the main say on the use of river water. In the Teesta case, the West Bengal state government has been, from the start, against any proposed water sharing agreements and it justifies its position by its claim of the state's farmers' threatening a decrease in irrigation and water security. Such a refusal has considerably restricted the Central government's power in making a treaty with Bangladesh.

At the national level, it may happen that the country's political leaders may be strongly for solving the dispute but the state government's opposition may disallow the signing of a formal agreement. Thus, the Teesta case brought out the restrictions that the central foreign policy machinery of India has on it when it encounters sub-national political demands altogether. The situation is, however, further exacerbated by the fact that politicians also need to be re-elected to the legislature.

Water scarcity is a highly divisive topic in West Bengal, where the majority of the population relies on agriculture and their livelihood may be disturbed by even a slight change in river flow. Therefore, any move perceived as a concession of water to Bangladesh is viewed as a risk of a loss in popularity at the state level. Hence, domestic political computations generally weigh more heavily than international diplomatic ones and are therefore the main cause of the deadlock at the negotiating table.

From a diplomatic point of view, the persistence of the Teesta problem has caused far-reaching consequences for India–Bangladesh ties. What the Teesta means to Bangladesh is way beyond a water-sharing issue only; it is a matter of getting fair and equal treatment and the two countries treating each other as partners in a bilateral relationship. Politicians and the public in Bangladesh, frustrated over this issue, regularly point it out as one that spotlights their government's ineffectiveness to negotiate effectively with India. None the less, they have seen cooperation at other fronts such as trade, connectivity, and security, which makes this one lapse towards a friendly relationship situation.

India has a diplomatic dilemma that is balancing at the same time the domestic political limitations with the foreign policy strategy requirement of good relations with a regional partner. India counts on its neighborhood particularly its security aspect when it comes to Bangladesh in the matter of



counterterrorism, connectivity to Northeast, and also stability of the Bay of Bengal, hence the desire to dampen the duration of the diplomatic conflict. Moreover, the Teesta disagreement may act as a lever for outside powers to increase their engagement with Bangladesh and consequently alter the balance of power in the region. Whilst water collaboration has not been completely forfeited, the absence of a Teesta agreement constitutes a gap that is quite apparent in the otherwise increasingly friendly bilateral relations.

National Security Implications

Teesta River dispute is not an issue about conventional security per se, but the impact of its implications on national and human security can hardly be underrated. For instance, during the dry season in Bangladesh, when the water in the river is insufficient to maintain agriculture, the worst impacts of this will be suffered by the impoverished ones who then face food insecurity and are forced to migrate internally. Hence, such vulnerable conditions lead to the increase of the risk of migration and displacement mainly in northern Bangladesh, the borders of which belong to India. Therefore, population pressure created due to migration in India's bordering districts tends to increase the already existing socio-political sensitivities in the fragile areas.

In India on the other hand, the situation is that water stress bordering instability is a challenge for internal security and borders management. The fact that the Indus river serves as a frontier between India and Bangladesh and border is dynamic makes the space vulnerable to erosion, displacement and informal movement. As in the case of a shortage of water or by neglect of water, security will become indirectly more vulnerable, which may include aspects such as illegal migration and local conflicts over resources. At a broad strategic level, if the water dispute rages on, the image of India as a responsible power in the region will be greatly devastated. Leaders who manage difficult non-traditional security issues by water diplomacy increasingly become a yardstick of regional powers. Therefore the failure to address downstream concerns could greatly weaken India's normative influence in South Asia along with its broader regional security strategy

Teesta disputes and the Question of Trust

Trust is a fundamental prerequisite for both transboundary water governance and inland asymmetric river systems. Long-standing impasse of the Teesta rift has shaken the confidence level between India and Bangladesh making the latter all the more suspicious of the fact that the former is a more powerful



player. Bangladesh feels that the absence of a finalized agreement is a cause to question the reliability of the long-term water supply.

From the standpoint of India's domestic politics, obtaining foreign policy consistency and reliability are nearly impossible tasks. Such a lack of trust subsequently affects sectors other than water like energy and trade besides regional connectivity. The Teesta case thereby exhibits how resource issues, when unresolved, tend to impose a "shadow effect" over the entire gamut of bilateral relations.

Prospects for resolution and cooperative frameworks

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the Teesta dispute does provide a scope for novel hydro-diplomatic initiatives. An early step towards reconciliation would be mutual trust-building through, for instance, a broad sharing of data, jointly conducted hydrological studies, and an agreement for the interregnum period on the volumes of flows. Another avenue of redressing will be to hold state governments responsible and deeply engage them in diplomatic processes. Through this approach, domestic and foreign policy goals can be brought closer to each other.

Integrated basin management strategies would, in addition, be constructed around ecological sustainability, and co-benefits. Rather than dividing water volumes being the main focus, parties to the conflict can combine their thoughts and exchange solutions more efficiently if they also consider flood control, irrigation improvement, and climate adaptation in their working plan. As a consequence, water would be managed in congruence with the broader developmental and security advancements.

Conclusion

The Teesta River dispute represents the multi-dimensionality of water security issues between India and Bangladesh. It illustrates a case where the disciplines of hydrology, politics, diplomacy, and security all coincide to examine the water question. The deadlock that has been going on for quite some time and eventually leads to the high diplomatic/strategic costs is due to the federal system in India, as well as the fact that Bangladesh is a downstream, powerless party. Although the disputed has not almost destabilized the bilateral relations altogether, by far it remains an important challenge for India as a non-traditional security issue and cooperative diplomacy. To resolve the Teesta dispute will be to raise water security for the people will be a trust-enhancing factor besides peace in the region and India's stature of a leader in South Asia. Especially in this time of great climatic changes, indeterminacy, it is critically important for the future of the world and humanity that such disputes will be solved through dialogue and shared responsibility.

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