

Water Crisis or What are Crises? A Case Study of India-Bangladesh Relations

Written by Roshani Jain

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ROSHANI JAIN, JUN 11 2020

The official Indo-Bangladesh relationship is one that spans almost half a century, beginning with India being one of the first countries to formally recognize Bangladesh. However, putting aside technical scrutiny, these two nations share a much deeper bond, rooted in shared history, language and sentimentality, that to this day seeps in between the porous border of the two neighbors. Such close relations— both geographically and culturally— hold important consequences for economic interactions and strategic interests of the two nations (Datta 2002), as well as in maintaining stability in the Indian Subcontinent. However, the current situation points towards trouble. There are various factors which stymie positive bilateral relations between these two neighbors; ranging from migration issues, insurgent activities, border and trade disputes, and the battle over the most fundamental resource, water. This paper focuses on the last, and arguably the most important factor, water insecurity. It seeks to investigate how this shapes Indo-Bangladesh relations. This is carried out by a case study on the Farakka Barrage, which is often termed as the key cause of the Bangladeshi water crisis (Farhin 2018). Ultimately, this paper seeks to show the detrimental effect of undertheorizing and undervaluing water' on the relations between the two neighbors.

In order to analyze this claim, it is crucial to contextualize the study and understand the nature of tension between the two countries. Here, the geopolitical characteristics of the conflict must be highlighted, as it creates a push-and-pull effect. The physical proximity of the two states necessitates cooperation, however, the changes in the political regime and ruling party has often times exacerbated the issue or limited the level of cooperation. This is a trend that underlies most domains of conflict, as explained further.

Border Permeability

India and Bangladesh share over 4000 kms of border, with the International Boundary being the largest land border that India shares (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). The permeability of this border and the lack of clear demarcation of land used to be a major cause of contention, as it produced adverse consequences of its own. This is because natural land contours do not bend to the will of artificially constructed borders. Hence, the enclaves of India and Bangladesh that existed in each other's territories provided a hotbed for illegal migration. This issue further propagated negative consequences, such as drastic changes in demographics of the bordering Indian states of West Bengal and Assam (Dutta 2002), as well as sparking a discourse on citizenship which has now become the pulpit of the Indian political propaganda.

This politicization of immigration is rooted in the fear of the spread of radical Islamism and other attempts at insurgency. The cross border ethnic linkages and favorable terrain makes for easy passage for the militants, thereby destabilizing the area. Furthermore, New Delhi has often berated Dhaka over directly supporting various insurgent groups in the North-East, by providing them military training and a safe haven on Bangladeshi soil (ibid). In an attempt to curb such activities, the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi executed the India-Bangladesh Land Border Agreement (2015), to secure the border by untangling it. Under this agreement the enclaves of both countries were exchanged, and the residents of such lands were given the option to retain their citizenship or legally migrate (Ministry of External Affairs 2017).

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Trade Obligations

Another issue constraining positive relations between the two neighbors is trade. Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia, with India's exports to Bangladesh amounting to US \$9.21 bn and imports standing at US \$1.04 bn for the financial year 2018-2019 (Ministry of External Affairs 2020). However, such relations have an adverse effect on Bangladesh's economy. She finds herself facing a trade deficit that is intrinsically linked to the imbalance that India poses (Dutta 2002). Despite this, the geostrategic interests and competitive economic compulsions have ensured that both states are cooperative when it comes to trade and commerce. This can be seen reflected in the move towards the establishment of an Indian Economic Zone, and cooperation in the power sector; which is often cited as the hallmark in Indo-Bangladeshi relations (Ministry of External Affairs 2020). These issues typically dominate the security concerns between the two neighbors. However, a core issue which is yet to receive satisfactory attention is that of water sharing between the two states and the insecurity this causes. The following section will investigate the nature of water sharing that has existed between the two states, hitherto, with special focus on the Farakka Barrage (and consequently on the Ganga Water Sharing Agreement), as it is the primary cause of contention in this domain[1].

The Politics of Farakka Barrage

The Ganga is a major river system, whose tributaries and drainage area spans over 420,000 sq mi, flowing through the states of India and Bangladesh. This lifeline of the Indian subcontinent sustains life for over 4 hundred million people, across Northern India, Bangladesh and Nepal (Subedi 1999). Specifically, India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers, many of which originate in the former and flow into the latter (Kawser & Samad 2016). Needless to say, water is the most fundamental resource for all forms of life, and hence its equitable and effective management should be the norm. Sadly, this is not what is observed. There is a sense of mistrust that characterizes Indo-Bangladeshi negotiations over this issue, with Bangladesh viewing India as a hegemon, only interested in securing self-interest, often at the cost of the other. India, on the other hand, has accused Bangladeshi nationalist sentiments of obfuscating rational agreements over the same (Subedi 1999).

This tension can be traced back to the politics of the British colonial period, where modernization and development projects would take precedence over conserving the ecological balance of river basins. This culminated in the construction of the Calcutta Port, an important center for trade and navigation of the Bhagirathi-Hoogly River System (Mukherjee 2011). However, the construction of the Port was short sighted and did not take environmental factors into consideration- such as changes in the course of rivers and sedimentation. This necessitated a long-term solution, which was envisaged in the form of a barrage (ibid). Further exacerbating the situation was the Partition of 1947, colored by tremendous loss of human life, territorial and water-related disputes and long suffering. The Partition also demonstrated that the sharing of the Ganga waters was driven more by political objectives rather than ecological considerations. This can be seen in the case of Murshidabad, a Muslim majority region, which was awarded to India (rather than East Pakistan) as it contained the take-off point of the Bhagirathi-Hoogly River (Kawser & Samad 2016). Herein lies the genesis to the water conflict that we see today, as political interests took precedence not only over ecologically sound decisions but also over equitable arrangements.

Post-independence, the preservation and maintenance of the Calcutta Port gained prominence, and hence, the Farakka Barrage was constructed. The project began in 1962 with the aim of diverting water supply towards the head of Bhagirathi-Hoogly River, thereby ensuring that the Calcutta Port constantly received an adequate amount of water[2] (Subedi 1999). In studying the period before the independence of Bangladesh, it becomes evident that India had the upper hand, as she had successfully convinced the colonial rulers to grant her this ecologically strategic point. This meant that the Indian agriculture and economic needs dictated the course of events, while Pakistani resistance to the same fell on deaf ears (Kawser & Samad 2016).

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 sparked hope for a more equitable arrangement, as this event fundamentally altered the geopolitics of the subcontinent, creating an ally out of a former enemy for India. In 1972, Bangladesh and India established the Joint River Commission which legislated over the Farakka project (Mukherjee 2011). What followed was a series of temporary, trial-based agreements, in 1975 and 1977, over the quantum of water which

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would be released by India. The tension during this period arose out of Bangladesh, who found the terms of the agreements unfavorably skewed. Matters escalated into a national protest in 1976, followed by Bangladesh internationalizing the matter by taking it to the United Nations, in the same year (ibid). Sadly, no favorable conclusions would be reached for the next nineteen years, as the issue hung in a deadlock of Memorandums of Understanding and other such transient measures (Subedi 1999).

Due to the change in Bangladeshi leadership in 1996, with Sheik Hasina once again at the helm of power, India and Bangladesh could finally reach an agreement. The principal of "optimal utilization" of the water flow was institutionalized in the "landmark" Treaty on Sharing of the Ganga Waters, in December 1996 (Mukherjee 2011). This treaty guaranteed that for a total incoming flow of 75,000 cusec, India could divert 40,000 cusecs from the Barrage, leaving 35,000 cusecs for Bangladesh (Kawser & Samad 2016). It was lauded as a triumph for bilateral diplomacy as it signaled an opportunity for regional cooperation.

Signs of Danger

Upon studying the terms of, and events leading up to the Treaty, two trends become apparent. Firstly, there is a recognizable pattern of domestic party politics shaping the course of cooperation or stagnation over this dispute. This can be understood by studying the terms of the 1996 Agreement, which shares a striking resemblance to the 1977 Agreement; with the only difference between the two time periods being the party in power at New Delhi and Dhaka. This shows that friendly relations between governments are crucial to achieving a long-lasting solution, and also reinforces the point made earlier, on political interests holding greater weightage over other matters (ibid). The second (and more concerning) trend has to do with how the two states conceptualize water relations. The states, especially India, have approached the dispute from individual sense of ownership rather than from the framework of collective responsibility. The reason this is problematic is because water is a resource that neither of the states can survive without, but by trying to exercise soft power in such matters, it transforms the issue into a zero-sum game. This, naturally, has devastating consequences for the "loser" or the lower riparian state, i.e. Bangladesh. Thus, such an approach creates an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity between the two neighbors, which could potentially lead to instability for the subcontinent on the whole. The following section will study the scale of devastation that Bangladesh suffers as a consequence of both states pursuing rational calculations of power and a competitive mindset.

Competitive Mindsets: A Zero-Sum Game

In the twenty-four years since the Ganga Water Treaty the world has been fundamentally transformed. The rise of globalization and the global capitalist system has altered how individuals and states interact with one-another. Amidst this transformation, climate change has emerged as an important variable in global security discourse, almost performing the role of a non-state actor. It is in this context that one can begin to understand the plight of Bangladesh, which faces an undue brunt of the global environment crisis. Bangladesh has been flagged as one of the most vulnerable nations to climate change, which has fueled an internal migration and chaotic urbanization (McDonnell 2019). Worsening this predicament is the presence of the Farakka Barrage and the reduced water flow that Bangladesh receives. The Barrage also increases the salinity levels thereby drying up the Sundarbans Delta. This has immensely huge costs for the productivity of the effected land, and on the economy, which is heavily reliant on agriculture. Such projects spell catastrophe as the lowered productivity of these natural resources, i.e. water and land, impacts not only the agricultural industry but also fisheries, navigation, sanitization etc. To put this issue into perspective, around one third of the total area of Bangladesh depends on the Ganga Basin for their livelihood. These lives now face grave uncertainty (Kawser & Samad 2016). When understood from the lens of ecological political economy, one can see the implication that this water crisis has on other (related) issues- of food security, human security, unemployment. If such tensions are left unchecked, they could potentially spiral into protests and violence, both within the country and across the border. Though unlikely that this would escalate into a traditional war, such brewing tensions further creates a level of insecurity, which could poison the relations between the two neighbors (Lovelley 2016).

Furthermore, even India suffers from the current arrangement of the 1996 Agreement, as it is unable to sufficiently

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meet India's water needs. In specific, the Farakka Project has meant devastation for regions in East India, particularly Bihar and West Bengal (Ahmed, Dixit, Nandy 1997). This points towards a major flaw of the Treaty, i.e., the assumption of future availability of water given the past average flow. This critique is not grounded in hindsight, rather it is a condemnation the underestimation of climate variability and population explosion, along with a disregard for the ecological cycles and balance, which was disturbed due to the Farakka Project (Rahman, Islam, Navera, & Ludwig 2019).

Water Crisis or What are Crises?

Here, it is imperative to make a distinction on what exactly is being critiqued. This paper is not as much of a criticism of the Barrage itself, as much as it is a critique of how India and Bangladesh have approached this issue. The dominant narrative presented by both governments, as well as academicians in the field of security study, severely underplays the importance of stressed water relations and how this is a deterrent in positive bilateral relations. The Ministry of External Affairs report on India-Bangladesh Relations in 2017 reviewed the Ganga Water Treaty in a positive light, as it was said to be working "satisfactorily" (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). What is more worrying is that in the same Report for 2020, there was no mention of the water scarcity issues at all. Similarly, in the Joint Statement released during Prime Minister Hasina's official visit to India, in October 2019, long winded claims were made on the "trust and understanding (shared by the two states) that transcends a strategic partnership", yet the issue over unequitable water flow was not even discussed (Press Information Bureau India 2019). Adding to this, most strategic analysts when commenting on the nature of relations between these two nations, point towards how the relationship has considerably improved. The evidence for this lies in decisive action taken by Prime Minister Hasina in curbing extremism and the Land Border Agreement (2015) which tackled the border issue head on (Bhargava 2019). While these are commendable moves which surely guarantee security and stability in the region, they are not an accurate reflexion of the ground reality. In the fight over water allocation rights, it is the socio-economic and the environmental costs on human life and suffering that is understudied (Mukherjee 2011), and when the dominant narrative does not capture this raw aspect of reality, it becomes easy to underplay the larger dispute of water sharing on the whole. The fact remains that water is an essential resource and two states cannot possibly cooperate over other matters if one state is choking its neighbour's lifeline. This prompts one to question why water is undervalued and why water security issues do not dominate traditional security studies. A possible hypothesis points to the fact that water is a free, public good. This means that we not know how to value this commodity unless a monetary value can be attached. Exacerbating this is the problem of free riding where the upper riparian state (India) is not inclined to cooperate, or give up any tactical benefit, resulting in the lower riparian state (Bangladesh) to bear the brunt of the adversity.

Hence, it can be argued that there are two simultaneous and interlinked processes which shape the (skewed) discourse on water security. Firstly, there is gap that exists between viewing the issue of water insecurity from an ecological lens and from a security perspective. There is a large body of work emerging out of the former, which critiques the existing policy for not delivering enough. However, this is not reflected in actual policy deliberations and hence these critiques simply remain as remarks on paper. The second and more dangerous trend is to do with one's understanding of a crisis. Since most officials in power keep reaffirming the "good relations" shared by the two countries, and do not direct their energy towards resolving the dispute[3], the crisis like understanding of the water dispute is lost. Hence, one can argue that in the larger policy/ security discourse, not all costs have been calculated accurately. Along with this, one can observe the trend of nationalising water amongst the South Asian states. By commodifying a natural resource as "state property" not only do these states create a further potential for conflict they also trivialise the water needs of their own citizens (Ahmed, Dixit, Nandy 1997). Such trends work in conjunction to keep water disputes a marginalised issue and point towards the need of the hour, which is to reconceptualise how we view security in general.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that water is an important variable in calculating inter-state relations even though that is not the practice that is carried out. There is an eminent need to revisit Indo-Bangladesh relations with a renewed emphasis and commitment towards effective and equitable management of the Ganga Basin, as it will

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result in a positive sum game. India has always prided itself in following a dynamic foreign policy tradition, with no strict adherence to any one school of thought, and if she is serious in her commitment towards positive bilateral relations with her neighbour then she will have to temper the Realist paradigm that she has practiced until now with values of cooperative responsibility and solidarity.

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Notes

[1] However, it would be remiss to ignore the Teesta River Water Agreement which lies in a state of political limbo. The reason for focusing on the Farakka Barrage is to limit to scope of inquiry.

[2] Which would then flush out the sediment

[3] By way of amending the agreement, making it more amenable to both parties

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