



Teesta water sharing conundrum: A litmus test of bilateral trajectory and beyond

Arpon Sarki

Department of Political Science Harishchandrapur College, University of Gour Banga, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The Teesta River contention between India and Bangladesh epitomizes the intricate nature of transboundary water-sharing arrangements within South Asia, influenced by geopolitical considerations, regional diplomatic efforts, and domestic political factors. Originating from the eastern Himalayas, the Teesta traverses Sikkim and West Bengal prior to entering Bangladesh, and it possesses crucial importance for irrigation, agricultural practices, and energy generation in both nations. Despite the persistence of negotiations aimed at achieving equitable water allocation since the 1950s, a sustainable agreement continues to remain unattainable—largely attributable to resistance from the West Bengal state government in India. The contention has intensified in light of increasing Chinese interest in the Teesta basin and evolving political circumstances in Bangladesh. This research paper investigates the historical context of the dispute, the strategic ramifications of unresolved water-sharing, and the influence of India's federal structure on diplomatic negotiations. It further analyzes the wider regional repercussions stemming from an extended stalemate. The research posits that addressing the Teesta conundrum is essential for socio-economic advancement in both countries and for maintaining India's influence in Bangladesh in the face of external challenges. The paper promotes a pragmatic and collaborative strategy that reconciles domestic priorities with the imperative for regional stability and equitable water management.

Keywords: Teesta, diplomacy, geopolitics, hydropolitics, bilateralism

Introduction

The Teesta River dispute between India and Bangladesh exemplifies the complexities and sensitivities surrounding transboundary water governance in South Asia, a region particularly beset by domestic political turmoil, economic crises, etc., in the past decade. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan poses a direct threat to regional stability and India's security interests. The Taliban's return signifies a reemergence of radical ideologies and militant activities that could potentially spill over into neighbouring regions, including India, and with Myanmar entrenched in civil conflict since the 2021 military coup, New Delhi has needed to navigate its own economic and security interests along their shared border. On India's western front, Pakistan remains in a state of polycrisis, characterised by political turmoil, economic challenges and growing violence. Looming over all this is the considerable influence of China — with whom India has an active border dispute and its growing engagement in the region, including its alignment with Pakistan. Sri Lanka's economic crisis, the Maldives' growing anti-India rhetoric, Nepal's political volatility, and Bhutan's strategic realignments with China further complicate India's foreign policy landscape. (United States Institute of Peace, 2023) ^[21] And this in August 2024, following the regime change in Bangladesh, the Teesta River dispute makes headlines like every time. However, this time, it is not the Awami League or any other political party at the helm but the new interim government led by Chief Advisor Dr Muhammad Yunus, who has expressed interest in restarting talks with India over sharing the waters of the Teesta River to “find an amicable solution”. While replying to a query on whether the interim government would push for resolving the issues over the Teesta water-sharing treaty at the earliest, he said the new regime will pursue it. (The Hindu, 2024) It cannot be denied that the Teesta water-sharing agreement has become a lingering

issue, the history of which dates back as early as 1951, before Bangladesh merged as a sovereign country. How has this unresolved dispute continued to strain bilateral ties despite decades of negotiations? This article, foregrounding this episode, examines the Teesta water-sharing agreement and attempts to delineate the discourse and complexities involved in the intricate hydro-diplomatic (Modak, 2020) ^[8] relations between the two neighbours that share 54 rivers between them.

Contexte historique: The Teesta River has been a source of contention (Banerji 2021) ^[1] between India and Bangladesh since the 1950s and 1960s, when both nations-initiated discussions on potential projects on the river. Following the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 (Siddiqui, 2020), the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission was formed in 1972 to facilitate discussions over the allocation of river flows. This was an episodic arrangement. Efforts to address the issue persisted over the years, encompassing the establishment of the Joint Committee of Experts and the Joint Technical Group from 1997 to 2005. Nevertheless, their endeavours were predominantly ineffective. A primary difficulty was the Teesta's insufficient lean season flows to satisfy the requirements of both India and Bangladesh. The Committee recognised that any distribution formula for the lean season must be predicated on collective sacrifices. (Tewari, 2017) ^[19] A series of discussions and provisional agreements ensued. In 1983, a temporary settlement designated 39% of the Teesta's waters to India, 36% to Bangladesh, and left 25% unallocated. (Joint River Commission 1983) ^[7] Notwithstanding these provisional steps, a definitive treaty continued to be unattainable. In 2011, a proposal for a provisional agreement was presented, allocating 42.5% of the seas to India and 37.5% to Bangladesh. This project was abandoned due to significant opposition from the West Bengal government, underscoring

the influence of federal dynamics on the matter. Consequently, despite multiple efforts for resolution, a definitive agreement on the allocation of Teesta's waters remained unattained. (Singh 2024)^[15]

Underlining the significance

While the Teesta is only one of several water disputes with Bangladesh that need urgent resolution, it is the most significant one, primarily because it has, over the period of time, become a bone of contention between India and Bangladesh. Post-1996 negotiations between India and Bangladesh on the sharing of the river waters started a couple of times but have made limited progress. (Banerji, 2021)^[11] The Teesta River issue assumed significance after the conclusion of the Ganga Water Treaty in 1996, which aimed to ensure a fair distribution of the Ganga River's (known as the Padma River in Bangladesh) water during the dry season, fostering cooperation and mutual benefit for both India and Bangladesh. (Jahid-Al-Mamun, 2024)^[6]

The Teesta is the fourth largest river in Bangladesh, entering through the northern Rangpur division. Its floodplain spans 2,750 square kilometres, supporting diverse ecosystems and providing livelihoods for millions of people. The river is essential for agriculture, food production, fishing, and domestic needs. It is vital for cultivating Boro rice, Bangladesh's largest crop, and irrigates about 14 per cent of the total cropped area. The northern region, known as the country's granary, depends heavily on the river for irrigation. The Teesta Barrage Project, the largest irrigation project in Bangladesh, irrigates 540,000 hectares and serves a command area of 750,000 hectares across seven districts: Nilphamari, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogura, Gaibandha, and Joypurhat. (Rasul, 2024)^[13] According to the 2013 report by the Asian Foundation, the river's waters play a crucial role in agriculture, especially in the Rangpur region, which is known as the country's rice bowl, providing livelihoods for nearly 73% of the population. (The Asia Foundation, 2013)^[20] However, during the dry season, Bangladesh experiences a significant drop in water flow, rendering over 100,000 hectares of arable land uncultivable and exacerbating rural poverty.

However, during the dry season, Bangladesh experiences a precipitous drop in water flow, rendering over 1 lakh hectares of arable land uncultivable and exacerbating rural poverty. The Teesta water-sharing agreement is central to addressing the pressing needs of all stakeholders—India, Bangladesh, and their internal constituents. For Bangladesh, equitable access to the river is vital for sustaining its northern agriculture, securing livelihoods, and mitigating socio-economic vulnerabilities stemming from water scarcity. The dwindling flow, exacerbated by upstream barrages, has severely impacted Boro rice production and groundwater levels, threatening the nation's food security. (Press Xpress, 2024)

India, on the other hand, faces its challenges. West Bengal and Sikkim depend heavily on the Teesta River for irrigation and hydropower, with local politics and voter sensitivities complicating a unified national stance. Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, demands interlinking rivers, which underscores the complex interplay of domestic priorities in water diplomacy. For India, particularly West Bengal, the Teesta River is the lifeline of North Bengal. It irrigates approximately 9.22 lakh hectares of agricultural land and supports hydropower projects with a

combined capacity of 67.60 MW. (The Telegraph, 2024) The river's waters are integral to the economic and social well-being of nearly half a dozen districts in the state. Consequently, any diminution in water availability poses a direct threat to agricultural productivity, energy security, and local livelihoods. (Noolkar, 2017)^[11]

Political angle and chronological of logic: The Teesta water-sharing disputes demonstrate the blurred interplay of diplomatic sluggishness, domestic political compulsion, and India's federal limitations, which hinder a durable resolution. The ongoing stalemate, (probably) plagued by electoral variables and regional assertiveness, exacerbates tensions and perpetuates hydro-political imbalances and realpolitik dynamics, leading to the reemergence of historical grievances and obstructing any potential resolution. While Bangladesh has long sought a resolution, India's cautious approach stems from its own internal complexities, particularly the opposition from West Bengal's political leadership. (Singh, 2024)^[15] This deadlock has further deepened following the August 2024 ousting of the Sheikh Hasina government, as opposition forces in Bangladesh leveraged the unresolved issue to stoke anti-India sentiments.

A crucial determinant contributing to the phenomenon of policy paralysis can be attributed to the intricate federal dynamics inherent in India, wherein regional interests frequently contest the supremacy of the Union government regarding international treaties. Although the Union maintains exclusive jurisdiction over such accords, pragmatic necessities often compel de facto consultations with state governments, engendering a continual discord between constitutional mandates and political exigencies. This circumstance has afforded considerable leverage to the leadership of West Bengal, particularly Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, in the context of the Teesta negotiations. Her dissent, motivated by apprehensions concerning water scarcity (Islam, 2021)^[5] and the agricultural reliance of North Bengal on the river, has recurrently impeded diplomatic initiatives. The Teesta contention serves as a microcosm of a more extensive challenge within Indian politics, wherein regional considerations may supersede coherent national policy objectives, thereby constraining the foreign policy prerogatives of the central government. It would not be out of places to argue that Narendra Modi, given his history of discord with Banerjee, could have easily made a grand declaration about water-sharing, especially to prove a point to the Bengal CM. However, he did nothing like that and made it absolutely clear that the water-sharing issue will not be resolved without the state government's inputs. (Islam, 2016)^[4]

Modi's approach demonstrates a commitment to cooperative federalism; however, one cannot overlook conceivable implications that the BJP is also considering its political calculations in West Bengal. The party's enduring efforts to gain a foothold in West Bengal suggest that its reservations to conclude the Teesta pact could be influenced not only by governance concerns but also by strategic electoral considerations. In fact, the reluctance of the Bharatiya Janata Party' (BJP) to finalise the Teesta pact is inextricably tied to its electoral ambitions in West Bengal. Historically, the party has struggled to establish a stronghold in the state, long dominated by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Left. However, its breakthrough in the 2019 Lok Sabha

elections, where it won 18 of Bengal's 42 seats compared to the TMC's 22, signalled a shift in the state's political landscape. This trajectory was, however, partially reversed in the 2024 elections, where the TMC secured 29 seats while the BJP was reduced to 12. (Times of India, 2020) Given this electoral vulnerability, the BJP cannot afford to make any move that might alienate the rural electorate of North Bengal, which remains highly dependent on Teesta's water for agriculture. Mamata Banerjee, for her part, has reinforced her pro-Bengal stance by framing the water-sharing issue as an existential concern for the state, further complicating the BJP's position. Any concession on Teesta would provide her with an electoral weapon against the BJP, allowing her to galvanise regional sentiments against what she would frame as an unjust compromise at Bengal's expense. The impasse surrounding the Teesta River transcends mere policy inertia; it appears to be a calculated political strategy worked on by both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC), each seeking to leverage the situation for electoral gain in the lead-up to the 2026 state assembly elections.

Strategic Implications for India and Bangladesh: Chief adviser Dr. Muhammad Yunus have said the interim government would pursue with India ways to resolve the differences over the long-pending Teesta water sharing treaty, Indian media outlet The Economic Times reported Friday quoting an interview of the chief adviser with Press Trust of India (PTI), an Indian news agency. In an interview at his official residence in Dhaka, Dr. Yunus stated that the water-sharing issue between the two countries must be resolved according to international norms. "If I know how much water I will get, even if I am not happy and sign it, it would be better. This issue has to be resolved," he said. According to the Economic Times (ET), in reply to a query on whether the interim government would push for resolving the issues, he told PTI, "Push is a big word; I am not saying it. We will pursue it. But we have to sit together and resolve it." Bangladesh and India were set to sign a deal on Teesta water sharing in 2011 but West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee declined to endorse it, citing a scarcity of water in her state. (*Prothom Alo English Desk*²⁰²⁴) Resolving the Teesta dispute holds profound strategic implications for India. Bangladesh is India's most significant trading partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade surpassing \$18 billion annually. Additionally, Bangladesh's geographic location is critical for India's connectivity with its northeastern states, a region fraught with developmental and security challenges. Maintaining strong ties with Bangladesh is indispensable for countering external influences, particularly from China, which has been expanding its economic and strategic footprint in the Bay of Bengal region.

India should prioritize initiating a new set of bilateral engagements aimed at addressing this persistent problem. To rebuild trust and dispel skepticism in Bangladesh regarding New Delhi's intentions, India must demonstrate greater transparency and proactive efforts to resolve this issue. Unlike external actors such as China, which has historically engaged with all Bangladeshi stakeholders irrespective of their political affiliations—whether the Awami League or the BNP—India has largely focused on Hasina's Awami League government. This approach has often been criticized as lackadaisical and short-sighted,

failing to engage meaningfully with other key stakeholders and missing opportunities for more inclusive and pragmatic diplomacy. Such critiques have been echoed by both Indian and Bangladeshi commentators who highlight the shortcomings in India's policy formulation and decision-making, emphasizing the need for a more foresighted and pragmatic approach.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Neighbourhood First" policy underscores the importance of fostering cooperative relationships with neighboring countries. Successfully resolving the Teesta dispute would enhance India's credibility as a responsible regional leader and reinforce its commitment to equitable resource sharing. Moreover, it would demonstrate India's ability to balance domestic and international interests, setting a positive precedent for future transboundary water negotiations.

For Bangladesh, securing a fair share of the Teesta's waters is critical for achieving agricultural sustainability and rural development. Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, with his global reputation for ethical leadership, is uniquely positioned to navigate the political and diplomatic challenges associated with this issue. His focus on restoring hope and trust among Bangladesh's farming communities aligns with broader efforts to strengthen the country's agricultural economy and socio-political stability. Tensions between Bangladesh and India may appear to be sparked by conflict over water, but as one participant noted, it is not always a case of conflicts over water resources leading to a worsening of political relations, though that does happen on occasion; it is more often a case of a difficult political relationship rendering the water issue more intractable. (Smith & Gross, 1999)^[18]

Bangladesh evolving Political aura and China Angle:

Bangladesh's dynamic political tableau, ignited by the student-led protest and the emergence of the National Citizen Party (NCP), is set to dramatically reshape its rapport with India, particularly in relation to the protracted Teesta water-sharing conundrum. Historically, India has nurtured a close relationship with the Awami League (AL), while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and various Islamist groups have often adopted a more skeptical viewpoint. With Sheikh Hasina's departure and the ascent of the NCP, India finds itself cautious of potential transformations in Bangladesh's foreign policy, regional equilibrium, and strategic affiliations. The Teesta River water-sharing pact, long stalled amid political headwinds in West Bengal now teeters on the brink of additional uncertainty. Both the ruling party in state and centre, Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) respectively are apprehensive of backlash from farmers dependent on the river, rendering any resolution improbable before the 2026 West Bengal Assembly polls. Should the new Bangladeshi leadership embrace a nationalistic or anti-India posture, tensions may heighten, prompting Bangladesh to explore alternative alliances with China, which has increasingly exhibited interest in the Teesta water dilemma.

China's engagement in the Teesta River water management initiative in Bangladesh has morphed into a significant geopolitical apprehension for India, as it could threaten India's diplomatic and strategic stakes in the area. (Singh, 2024)^[15] The Teesta River, which springs from India and meanders into Bangladesh, is vital for agriculture and the

livelihoods of both nations. Yet, the lack of a resolved water-sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh has created a void that China is keen to exploit. (Singh, 2024)^[15] The Chinese-supported Teesta Barrage scheme, encompassing dredging, the development of satellite cities, and the regulation of river flow, has sent shockwaves through New Delhi, which perceives Beijing's expanding footprint in Bangladesh as a strategic hurdle. (Sinha, 2025)^[17] One of India's foremost worries is that the Teesta initiative falls under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to bolster Beijing's connectivity and sway throughout South Asia. By funding and erecting the Teesta Barrage, China could fortify its economic and strategic bonds with Bangladesh, diminishing Dhaka's reliance on India. This shift could tilt the regional balance of power in favor of Beijing, potentially eroding India's clout over its eastern neighbor. Furthermore, the project's closeness to India's strategically critical "Chicken Neck" or Siliguri Corridor—a slender link connecting mainland India with its northeastern states—raises profound security apprehensions. A robust Chinese presence in such proximity to this crucial corridor could entail surveillance and military risks for India.

Furthermore, reports indicate that Bangladesh has sought a two-year time frame for the master plan, ensuring that it incorporates feedback from local communities along the riverbanks. Moreover, the project, valued at \$1 billion, must be completed by December 2025, including reservoir construction, drainage systems, and satellite townships. India also fears that if Bangladesh completes the Teesta project with Chinese assistance, it might set a precedent for further Chinese involvement in other transboundary river projects in South Asia. (Naym Pieal & Billah, 2025)^[10] This could weaken India's leverage in water-sharing negotiations and lead to similar interventions in Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Additionally, once the project is completed, the region could see a shift in public perception, with a rise in anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh due to China's visible role in improving water management and economic development. At the same time the interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, is struggling with economic instability and rising discontent, which may push it to take assertive stances on issues like water-sharing to rally domestic support. India, on the other hand, must navigate carefully to maintain regional stability while preventing China from capitalizing on Bangladesh's political realignment. If the NCP manages to break the BNP-AL duopoly, it could introduce a more unpredictable element into bilateral relations, potentially leading to renegotiations on strategic agreements, including river-sharing pacts. Furthermore, if Bangladesh experiences prolonged instability, it could impact trade, security cooperation, and migration patterns, all of which are crucial to India.

Conclusion: A test for regional diplomacy: The Teesta River issue goes beyond bilateral negotiations, serving as a litmus test for the effectiveness of South Asia's regional hydro diplomacy. The stakes are multifarious, including agricultural sustainability, domestic political dynamics, and India and Bangladesh's larger geopolitical imperatives. An equitable conclusion would strengthen India's commitment to its "Neighbourhood First" policy while also reaffirming its credibility as a responsible regional power. For Bangladesh, preserving an equal share of Teesta waters is

critical for agricultural resilience and economic stability, especially as climate change worsens hydrological unpredictability. The Teesta impasse highlights the intersection of India's federal limits and foreign policy prerogatives. West Bengal's political leadership holds disproportionate power in water-sharing agreements, frequently sacrificing diplomatic considerations for domestic electoral imperatives. With the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections nearing, both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) are hesitant to take views that could alienate significant voter segments. This internal standoff, however, has far-reaching consequences, since continued inaction risks pushing Bangladesh closer to China, which has been actively increasing its economic and strategic influence in South Asia.

The comeback of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the rise of the National Citizen Party (NCP) add to the difficulties, since these political forces may shift Bangladesh's foreign policy posture, potentially taking a more assertive or antagonistic approach towards India. Given the geopolitical ramifications of the Teesta issue, both nations must urgently prioritize a resolution to prevent the erosion of trust and cooperation in their bilateral relationship. Bangladesh's internal political struggles have always had ripple effects on its foreign relations, especially with neighboring countries like India and China, which hold significant strategic interests in the region. Thus, New Delhi must move beyond its traditional reliance on the Awami League and engage in extensive dialogue with all political parties in Dhaka to preserve policy continuity and strategic stability in the face of regime transitions.

To break the impasse, India must establish a transparent transboundary water-sharing system that includes hydrological data sharing, equitable allocation methods, and collaborative water management projects. This approach would reduce diplomatic friction and promote long-term cooperation. Concurrently, New Delhi must adjust its regional strategy to offset Beijing's expanding influence, relying on historical linkages, economic interdependence, and diplomatic engagements to strengthen its strategic presence in Bangladesh. The Teesta issue demonstrates the limitations of subnational diplomacy, requiring a rethinking of the balance between state-level prerogatives and national strategic goals. West Bengal's leadership, particularly Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, must recognise the importance of connecting state-level concerns with larger national imperatives in order to achieve an equitable and mutually beneficial outcome. Finally, resolving the Teesta conflict is more than a bilateral necessity; it is a strategic imperative for regional stability, displaying South Asia's ability to overcome political obstacles in pursuit of common prosperity.

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