**Why India and Bangladesh should Sign the Teesta Treaty?**

[John Rozario](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/john-rozario/)

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One of the long-standing unresolved issues between Bangladesh and India is the Teesta water-sharing agreement. The agreement between Bangladesh and India on Teesta water-sharing has been under discussion for the last few years. But the Teesta issue has stopped with assurance. After the Ganges Treaty in 1996, the issue of distribution of water of the river Teesta became the most important topic of discussion. The issue of Teesta water-sharing between Bangladesh and India started at the Ministerial level meeting of the two countries in August 1983.

In September 2011, the then Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh visited Dhaka. At that time, Teesta water-sharing agreement was to be signed. The term of the interim agreement was 15 years. According to the agreement, India’s right to 42.5 per cent of the Teesta’s water and Bangladesh’s 37.5 per cent will be established. But the deal was not finalised due to opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Later in 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India. This visit to India sparked hopes of signing the Teesta Treaty. During the visit, the PM had a meeting with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. But even then, the Chief Minister of West Bengal did not agree. She said that the main reason for her disagreement was that she was not willing to give water to Bangladesh by depriving the people of North Bengal. Even in 2015, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee visited Dhaka with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Although positive statements were made about the Teesta treaty at that time, no results were obtained. There are 54 inter-border rivers or common rivers flowing through Bangladesh and India. Of these, India holds most of the waters of 43 common rivers, which is virtually unfair to neighbouring countries.

Due to the growing domestic demand, Sheikh Hasina is keen to solve the problem of Teesta River distribution.

The technical committee of 54 India-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission has been meeting for two days from January 5, 2021. The meeting was virtually completed due to the coronavirus situation. The meeting discussed a framework agreement for the distribution of water in the common river. Earlier, the Bangladesh government agreed to draw 1.82 cusecs of water from the Feni River for humanitarian reasons to address the water crisis in the town of Sabroom in Tripura. However, the issue of distribution of Teesta water has remained unresolved day after day. The agreement was important in sharing water across a transboundary river, as it ensured a country’s water share and availability.

If the agreement is not completed, it will not be possible to meet the water shortage in the city of Sabroom and even in Bangladesh, it will not be possible to implement it by constructing an irrigation project with a pump house. The agreement would benefit both countries.

Ghazaldoba Dam was established in 1998 in the Malbazar subdivision of Jalpaiguri district in India upstream of Teesta river in Nilphamari. Through the construction of this dam, the control of the river Teesta passed into the hands of India. The dam has 54 gates that are closed to divert water from the mainstream of Teesta to various sectors. The dam was built mainly to divert the Teesta water into the Teesta-Mahananda canal.

Before the Ghazaldoba Dam, 2500 cusecs of water were available in the Teesta Basin, and now the water flow is less than 400 cusecs. During the dry season in Bangladesh in 1997, the flow of water in the Teesta was about 6,500 cusecs, which dropped to 1,348 cusecs in 2006, and in 2014 it stood at only 800 cusecs.

Many lands have become uncultivable due to a lack of water. As a result, ordinary farmers are facing losses, which is affecting their livelihood. Due to insufficient water flow, the river is filling up with chars.

Even in summer, there is no water in the river at all. People cross the river on foot. Teesta has turned into a dead river. If this continues, not only public life but also biodiversity will be threatened. The Teesta water-sharing agreement is now the demand of the time. But India’s procrastination over the Teesta water-sharing deal suggests it is reluctant to abide by it.

The Teesta project will excavate 115 km of the river Teesta flowing through the border of Bangladesh. The depth of the river will be significantly reduced through excavation. Many rivers will be rescued through river management. Land along the river will be made suitable for cultivation. It will even be possible to build industrial cities on both the banks of the River Teesta, which will create employment opportunities for many people. This will enrich the entire economy of the country.

Basically, not signing the Teesta River agreement is belittling the neighbourly spirit between India and Bangladesh. India should remember that Bangladesh is a well-trusted ally in the region. If India doesn’t sign the agreement with Bangladesh, Bangladesh will definitely try to find out an alternative. It is often said that Bangladesh and India are currently witnessing a golden age in their bilateral relations. India should take immediate steps to resolve the dispute before accepting China’s cooperation on the Bangladesh issue. Bangladesh has already agreed to be a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But despite this, Bangladesh has indicated that it still considers India as its most important neighbour and ally. Due to the growing domestic demand, Sheikh Hasina is keen to solve the problem of Teesta River distribution. But if it is too late on the part of India, Bangladesh may think of an alternative path.

A fruitful solution to the Teesta problem will not only benefit Bangladesh economically but also help strengthen bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. The Teesta Treaty will also greatly benefit India. If this bilateral agreement goes ahead, it will be able to satisfy all the stakeholders of Bangladesh. India will definitely be able to strengthen its position as a strong ally of Bangladesh and build a strong economic and diplomatic partnership.

The river Teesta has immense potential. If the proper implementation of the Teesta water-sharing agreement or Teesta project is possible then not only the people of the Teesta coast or North Bengal but the whole of Bangladesh will enjoy its benefits. The change will come in the public life of the people of North Bengal. Bangladesh’s economy will be prosperous. Overall, it is important to take effective steps to implement the Teesta Agreement or the Teesta Project.

*The writer is a student based in Karnataka.*