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India-Bangladesh Relationship: Water Disputes

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the nations is characterized by both friendship and enmity. The relationship in case of neighbor's also follows the same realistic law. The neighbouring countries share geographical, cultural, economic, political, and other ties and these connections can either led to friendship or conflicting interests. The case of India and Bangladesh relationship cannot be an exception and the same is true with these two countries as well. Both share relationship of multiple layers, guided particularly by cultural, linguistic, historical and geographical connectivities. There are many conflicts between the two nations but conflicts are always transitional and can be solved through dialogue process. After Bangladesh independence, two countries started relationship on a good note but immediately after 1975 the conflicting attitudes and interests equally came to the fore which led the two nations towards conflicting claims on different issues and ultimately proved very harmful to bilateral ties. The paper seeks to highlight the issues in their proper perspectives and also tries to highlight their historical backgrounds as well.

1. Introduction

Historical links, economic interactions and geostrategic interests make India and Bangladesh vital to each other. As one of the main immediate neighbors surrounding Bangladesh, India naturally occupies a pivotal position in its foreign policy (Sreeradha Datta, 2). The geostrategic conditions, economic interactions, energy supplies, trade links, ethno-cultural proximity and historical linkages provide a plethora of opportunities for close cordial and cooperative relations between the two countries (Sreeradha Datta, Ibid: 3). India's contribution towards Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971 was critical to the latter's birth. However, events that followed the liberation of Bangladesh did not result in the continuance of cordial relations between these two countries as expected. There are few fundamental issues between India and Bangladesh such as land and maritime boundary demarcation, the sharing of water from 54 common rivers, informal trade, transnational crime and interference in internal affairs that have adversely affected their relationship. While it may be easy to simply list these issues, overcoming them would be difficult mainly due to the overall geopolitical compulsions, the historical legacy and the mutual mistrust in the region (S. K. Chaturvedi 2008: 24).

India is a big neighbor and is capable of assuming the central position in the region. Rajen Harshe's evaluation may be pertinent here, ―It is, thus, as a result of India's (whether perceived or not) economic and military might, that India's smaller neighboring countries regard the South Asian region as an Indo-centric region, with India being the core and other South Asian states as the peripheryǁ (S. K. Chaturvedi 2008: 25). Again, borrowing the idea from Zbigniew Brzezinski, former United States National Security Advisor, and ―India may be called a geostrategic player while Bangladesh may be called a geostrategic pivot. A geostrategic player has the capacity and national will to exercise influence beyond its borders in order to alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs, while the significance of a geopolitical pivot is derived from how strategically it is located and the potential consequences it may bring about as a result of the behavior of the geostrategic playersǁ (Mohd Aminul Karim 2009: 2). Nonetheless, it is necessary for India, as a formidable power in the region, to take along its neighbors, especially the smaller nations, in settling any outstanding issues amicably. A relatively smaller country such as Bangladesh has to depend on and share resources like water, energy, maritime, trade and technology with its neighbors (Moonis Ahmar 2003: 187).

The hydrology of South Asia will play a critical part in the conflict-cooperation dynamics in the region. In many ways water management will be crucial to conflict management in the region. Water being indispensible is an emotional issue that can become a corner stone for confidence building and a potential entry point for peace. However an appropriate discourse that shifts away from ‗water war to ‗water peace needs to be developed (Smruti S Pattanaik 2011: 88). The India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers and the major dispute originated first on Gang river water sharing. Being a lower riparian, Bangladesh is keen on signing agreements on water sharing on all the common rivers. So far there is only one such agreement the Ganges Water Treaty signed in 1996. It is the sharing of Teesta water which tops the list of water disputes between the two countries and Bangladesh has been insisting on reaching an agreement. The reading of the negotiation process since beginning to the present time suggests that though the technical nature of the problem remains the same, a change in domestic politics facilitates or obstructs the negotiation process.

2. Ganges Water Dispute At Farraka

Few controversial matters of the subcontinent have attracted the attention and concern of the world community as intensely as the long standing disputes over the sharing of the Ganges water between India and Bangladesh. The construction and operation by India the upper riparian of a barrage across the Ganges at a place named Farakka about

17 kilometers upstream from the western borders of Bangladesh with India. River Ganges flows through China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh (Rafiqul Islam 1987: 1). It receives 80 percent of its rainfall during the June-September monsoon period till the volume of water at Farakka becomes 2.5 million cubic feet. In 1951 India first thought of building a dam at Farakka-18 miles upstream from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) designed to divert the Ganges flow during the dry season into Baghirathi-Hoogli River to flush out the silt at the port of Calcutta. Concern for the future of East Pakistan's agriculture was aroused by this planned barrage. As time passed the Farakka Dam became a dispute between India and Pakistan- second in bitterness only to the Kashmir dispute (Rafiqul Islam, Ibid: 2). The Dam was commissioned after the independence of Bangladesh. It was expected that, given the cordial relations between India and the newly created state, the Farakka Dam issue would be dealt with amicably, but it was not. India did not consult Dhaka before operationalzing the barrage. In the years that have followed, Bangladesh has been suffering adverse effects on its agriculture, fishery, navigation and forestry due to the reduced flow in the dry season when it most needs the Ganges water (Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers sustain 86 per cent of the total land area in Bangladesh). Anti-India sentiment was fuelled by the dispute over the Farakka Dam. In contrast, when India, as the upper riparian state, interfered with rivers flowing into Pakistan the dispute was resolved through the Indus Water Treaty in 1960 (H R Kulz 1969: 4). India and Bangladesh have failed since 1974 to agree on a strategy of water flows during the dry season. When Bangladesh proposed several storage dams on the tributaries of the Ganges River in the Nepal, India objected to it. Instead it proposed a diversion from Brahmaputra through a large canal to augment the Ganges waters. This was not acceptable to Bangladesh, which feared ecological damage from the canal. After independence of Bangladesh many short-term agreements and Memorandum of Understandings were signed from time to time between the two countries. In 1972 Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission was established to study the river flow and develop the river water on a cooperative basis. A short-term agreement was signed between the two countries to conduct the 40 days trial test of the barrage during the dry season. Un-fortunately the president of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib was assassinated by elements of the military that found him too cooperative with India. The next dry season India began to divert water at Farakka unilaterally and continued to do so until 1977[i] when a treaty of the Ganges water at Farakka and on augmenting its flows was signed by the two countries and guaranteed a minimum flow level for Bangladesh for a five year period. After the expiration of this treaty in 1982 two more short term agreements were concluded on water sharing until 1988. Thereafter India again began unilateral diversion at will. Moreover domestic political upheavals and the growing polarization caused by rising national religious factions (Hindu India vs. Islamic Bangladesh) contributed to a rising level of animosity between the two countries. The political climate began to change when in 1992 the prime ministers of the two countries met and agreed to renew efforts for a solution. In addition Bangladesh revived its attempts to internationalize the affairs by bringing forth the dispute before the UN General Assembly and the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting in 1993. In addition the issue was also raised in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) although no definite action was taken.

In 1996 a new atmosphere of regional cooperation was created with a change of government in India and in December of 1996 a Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was signed that is supposed to last for thirty years. In Bangladesh, the Awami League headed by Sheikh Hasina while in India a non-Congress coalition government led by Deve Gowda came to power. One of its important constituent was the Left Front, which was in power in West Bengal at that time. The Awami League had returned to power after a 20-year long gap and New Delhi was keen to strengthen this regime in Dhaka (Ramaswamy Iyer 2003: 230-254). Both realized the need to overcome the impasse over the Ganges water issue and the urgency to arrive at an agreement before the onset of the next dry season. Farooq Sobhan the then Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh in 1996 shared this assessment and noted that, Awami League had stronger commitment towards having a treaty. India also reciprocated in the same manner. Traditionally BNP has been less receptive to Indiall (Punam Pandey 2012: 275-76). The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary visited India during August 6-10, 1996 to prepare the ground-work. During this visit the Foreign Secretary also held a meeting at the suggestion of the Indian External Affairs Minister I K Gujral with the West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu to seek his help and support in finding a permanent solution to the problem (Tariq Ahmad Karim: 227).

During September 1996 the Indian External Affairs Minister visited Bangladesh and the two sides agreed to convene a Joint Committee involving members of their respective foreign ministries which were tasked to bring water experts from both sides to work towards the finalization of an agreement on water sharing. The formation of such a committee was another major departure from the past where such committees had always been under the jurisdiction of the Water Resources Ministry. By bringing the technical experts under the supervision of the political leadership, the discussions were moderated in a manner so as to lend flexibility and give pre-eminence to the political agenda over the obfuscation of engineering technicalities (Tariq Ahmad Karim: 228).

During November 9-13, 1996 both sides reaffirmed their commitment of arriving at an agreement on a fair and equitable sharing of the Ganga waters before the onset of the next dry season. The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary also visited Calcutta to get Jyoti Basu actively involved in the negotiation process. In fact Jyoti Basu‘s visit to Bangladesh from November 27 to December 2, 1996 proved to be very crucial because it helped in significantly narrowing the differences between the two sides. He had wide ranging discussions with both the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and Foreign Minister. While the negotiations were underway at the political level the Joint Committee met several times to reexamine the technicalities involved and worked hard towards arriving at an agreed draft agreement to be placed before the two governments (Ramaswamy Iyer: 235-36). This culminated in the last marathon session of the Committee from December 5-10 in New Delhi at the Foreign Secretaries level. It was during this final round of negotiations that the nature of the instrument to be drawn up- Treaty instead of Agreement- and the duration

of 30 years was agreed upon. The final product the treaty on the sharing of the Ganges waters entered into by India and Bangladesh on December 12, 1996 was ‗a more significant document than most had considered possible'. The treaty was signed in Indian capital New Delhi between Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda and Bangladesh Prime Minster Sheikh Hasina (Ramaswamy Iyer: 236)

Table 1.Formula for Sharing the Waters of the Ganges under the 1996 Treaty

Availability at Farakka	Share of India	Share of Bangladesh
70,000 cusecs or less	50 percent	50 percent
70,000-75,000 cusecs2	Balance of flow	35,000 cusecs
75,000 cusecs or more	40,000 cusecs	Balance of flow

Note: - Subject to condition that India and Bangladesh each shall receive guaranteed 35,000cusecs of water in alternate three, 10 day periods during the period March 11 to May 10. Source Annexure 1 of the Treaty

3. Critical Analysis of the Treaty

The 1996 Treaty has three parts: the preamble, the operative part containing 12 Articles and the Annexures. Article I to XI set forth the provisions for sharing of the Ganga flow and related matters. Though the 1977 agreement contained a ‗guarantee clause' and the 1985 deal had a ‗burden sharing' formula, the 1996 Treaty did not include any compulsory in-built safeguards for Bangladesh (Ahamed Abukhater 2013: 55). There are however various provisions which provided a modicum of security, for instance, there is a provision of 35,000 cusecs to either side in the alternate 10 day segments in the period from March 11, to May 10. Another important aspect of the treaty is that when the flow goes below 50,000 cusecs, the treaty recognizes an emergency situation and provides for immediate consultations by the two governments. The treaty also provides for a conflict resolution mechanism by prescribing a joint monitoring of flows which should eliminate or minimize the possibility of disagreements over the data (Ahamed Abukhater: 56).

The Indo-Bangladesh JRC meeting was held in Dhaka on April 10, 1997 to discuss the reasons behind the low water level flow. The Indian side reiterated that 1997 could be considered as an abnormal year. Even the historical data showed that before the Farakka barrage was built flows had fallen as low as 40,000 and 39,000 cusecs in 1952 and 1953 respectively. Usually the low point in the flow occurs between the second 10 days of March to the first 10 days of April (Salman M. A. Salman, Kishor Uprety : 177).

There was another issue pertaining to the discrepancy between the quantum of water released at Farakka barrage in India and that arriving at the Hardinge Bridge 170 kilometers downstream in Bangladesh which became a major bone of contention between the two countries in 1977. Several explanations have been offered to explain such a discrepancy. At Hardinge Bridge the Ganga channels are very large and have a carrying capacity of 1.5 million cusecs but bad load movement, sediment distribution and sand bar formation can be peculiar rendering it difficult to measure the flow correctly. B G Varghese explains that since it is not the system where you can switch on or off according to a 10 day period but does not stop on the 10th day. He underlines the importance of dispelling mistaken notions among some Bangladeshi segments which assumes ‗somebody is sitting there whose job is to switch off or switch on the key of water flows' and that this needs to be understood by the people across the borders (Punam Pandey: 277).

The switching of 10 day flows to guarantee one side or the other 35,000 causes during six alternating 10 days flow periods, Varghese explains, is ‗technically unsafe as the walls of the Farakka feeder canal could collapse with such abrupt changes in levels (Assit K Biswas and Juha I Uitto (edt) 2001: 173). Both had realized this due to their experience from the previous negotiations and that is why a stepped pattern was written into the treaty instead of the smoother gradient spread over a few days, whereby the quantum of water delivered would have remained the same though with a different 10 day flow pattern. The Indian side had no option but to stagger the reduction and augmentation of releases over some days, which altered the pattern of scheduled deliveries in a few 10 day periods, with Bangladesh being compensated for any scheduled deficit in supplies in the ensuing period. This was cited as a treaty violation, though in a point of fact the total quantum of water released to Bangladesh over the lean season as a whole was a little more than stipulated in Annexure II (Assit K Biswas and Juha I Uitto: 173).

There is yet another and more complex problem of the Gorai hump. Bangladesh's grievance about diversions by India from the Ganges at Farakka has revolved around the acute distress said to have been caused in the South-West Khulna region on account of salinity ingress and a shortage of water for agriculture, fisheries, navigation and sustenance of the Sundari mangrove species. This area, because of the Gorai spill which delivers upland fresh water supplies to the region, is left high and dry as the Ganga recedes. While this is so, it would be erroneous to attribute the problem exclusively or mainly to diversion at Farakka. The entire Ganga system has been shifting east and north as a secular trend over the past century and more. The Bhagirathi, the western-most spill, was the first casualty. Other streams, moving further east have progressively deteriorated as the Ganges has shifted course (K Biswas and Juha Uitto: 175).

In any case the Treaty is unlikely to solve this problem because even 35,000 cusecs are not enough for this purpose, only a water flow to the order of 70,000 cusecs would help the waters of the Ganga in the Gorai River. The answer to this problem is perhaps partly dredging and partly arrangements to help up the Ganga waters and enable them to enter the Gorai (Ramaswamy Iyer: 242).

In mid-June 1997 an expert level meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh JRC held in Dhaka which recommended the formation of a scientific committee to study the causes of the unusual flow of Ganga during the critical period of the dry

season. By early August 1997 the flood information centre in Bangladesh had started warning that the Ganga water flow was above the danger mark and that certain areas could soon be flooded. The 1998 dry season flows helped to ameliorate the concerns raised in the preceding year as the Ganga flow in Bangladesh that year had fulfilled its expectations. The 1999 dry season flow was less voluminous than that of 1998, but was still far more than that was prescribed under the Treaty. Only on one occasion Bangladesh objected that it was not receiving water according to the schedule of the treaty. The JRS stated in a press release issued in Dhaka on April 6, 1999 that in one of the six schedules Bangladesh received more than its share of the Ganga water during the lean period, the latest quantum being 33, 892 cusecs at Hardinge Bridge during 21-31 March against 29,688 cusecs as stipulated in the treaty. the flow of the Ganga during the dry season of the year 2000 was similar to that of the previous year though in an important departure, the last 10 day period of April witnessed an increased flow as compared to that specified in the treaty. at the 36th Indo-Bangladesh JRC meeting held in September 2005 at Dhaka both countries agreed to review the operational implementation of the 1996 treaty as per the provisions of the Article X. Bangladesh also proposed to hold tripartite talks involving Nepal to discuss the construction of water reservoirs in Nepal to augment the dry season Ganga flow and sought water sharing agreements for 53 other common rivers shared with India (Poonam Pandey: 278).

After a gap of five years the JRC met in March 2010. A senior officer in the Ministry of Water Resources described the situation of the last five years as, —there was a demand by Bangladesh for JRC meeting but Indian water Resources Ministry kept telling Bangladeshis that we are preparing for a meeting, the moment it is ready we will meetǁ. He further added, —For instance, at the technical level meeting in 2003, anti-erosion activity was discussed but no decision was taken because of differences about how to do this. Good political atmosphere really plays an important role. If the brief comes from the political level, the mechanism is found for solution. Again, in August 2007, secretary level meeting took place for taking action against anti-erosion activity but nothing concrete came out because of the difference in the approach of going about it, after three years gap, in February 2010, secretary level meeting took place and 50 points have been identified for anti-erosion activities because of good understanding. Since January 2009 to February 2010, almost every month, technical level meetings have been taking place. You can understand that the political atmosphere plays an important roleǁ (Poonam Pandey: 278).

The very deficient point of the treaty is that in case of the decrease in the water flow there is no guarantee clause or the burden sharing arrangement. The only option for Bangladesh at that time is to enter into immediate consultations. But it is also true that India cannot guarantee flow of the Ganges would always remain as specified in the Schedule to the treaty because natural causes can any time affect the flow. Although the Preamble to the treaty mentions flood management as one of the areas for cooperation, no provision for flood control are included in main body of the Treaty itself. Another important issue that the treaty did not address is the environmental situation of the Ganges. More than 400 million people live around and depend on the waters of Ganges Basin for irrigation, domestic and municipal uses. This heavy population concentration, the absence of strict environmental rules for the use of the river and the failure to enforce whatever rules that exist have resulted in the Ganges being one of the most polluted rivers in the world today (Salman M. A. Salman, Kishor Uprety (Opcit): 178-179).

It is important to note that the 1996 treaty does not offer an ideal solution. It has been criticized on both technical and political grounds, but the very fact that it became possible to negotiate and sign a long-term treaty in the first place and then to make it work well for more than a decade is a huge breakthrough which in turn materialized precisely because the governments in New Delhi and Dhaka have shown the requisite political resolve to achieve this objective.

4. Teesta Water Issue

The contemporary scenario represents somewhat the same picture. Present era is marked with various kinds of conflicts where resource sharing between the nations is a big issue of contemplation, which further leads to disagreement. According to Thomas Homer-Dixon, water will be the major source of conflict in the upcoming time. The conflict often arises due to unequal distribution of resources or from a dependency-led need for more resources often at the expense of neighboring states (Mallika Sinha 2012).

The Teesta river issue currently tops the list of water disputes between the two countries and Bangladesh has been insisting on reaching an agreement. Teesta is the most important river in northeast of Bangladesh. It originates in the Sikkim Valley of the Himalayan Range within India. The entire rainfall runoff of this valley accumulates near Kalimpong of Darjeeling district in Pachimbanga (West Bengal). The river enters Bangladesh near Tin Bigha of Lalmonirhat3 district and, according to one river expert, the total length is about 315 km (some say 400 km), out of which 129 km (some say 172 km) is in Bangladesh. Its summer flow, according to one estimate, is reportedly about 280,000 cusecs and minimum flow is about 10,000 cusecs. At Kaunia Road Bridge in Rangpur district in Bangladesh, there is a water level and discharge measuring station for the Teesta River. About 21 million Bangladeshi people live in the basin of river Teesta while only 8 million live in West Bengal and half a million live in Sikkim state (Haroon Ur Rashid 2012). The population ration is 70 for Bangladesh and 30 for India. India has built a barrage at Gozaldoba from which 85% of water flow is diverted from Teesta River without Bangladesh's consent. When Bangladesh needs water in dry season it does not get it, but when it does not need water during summer and monsoon it gets enough of it to the point of flooding, destroying houses, roads and riverbanks and embankments. Accordingly, sharing of water of the rivers is necessary in the dry season. Bangladesh has to irrigate 632, 000 hectares of farming land with water from the Teesta and during the dry season. Since Sikkim and West Bengal withdraw water from the Teesta, the flow has been drastically reduced to the detriment of the Bangladeshi farmers. Initially, Dhaka proposed equal sharing of Teesta water, keeping 20% for river flow. This means the sharing would be out of 80% and Bangladesh would get 40% and India 40%. But India wanted 55%. Furthermore, India wanted a 15-year agreement on water-sharing of the Teesta River.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 talks on the Teesta water sharing continued in the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission. Bangladesh objected to India's plan to divert the water of Teesta to the Mahanadi basin area. The talks continued without any result until 1983 when the two parties reached an adhoc allocation agreement, according to which India was to get 39 percent Bangladesh 36 percent and the 25 percent was reserved for reallocation later, after further study. However even this agreement has not been executed and the amount of dry season water on the Bangladesh side has gradually decreased. The high level committee of JRC in both India and Bangladesh sat for meetings about 33 times for the Teesta water problem but no fruitful decisions could materialize (R Keerthana 2013).

Bangladesh wants to split the water at 50:50 ratios at the Indian barrage to have an ensured supply of half of the water during the dry season. The proposal also considers keeping 20% of the water for environmental flow. In other words the draft proposed by Bangladesh and India each would get 40% water of the Teesta and 20% water would go to Bay of Bengal (via Brahmaputra) for maintaining the channel of the river. On the other side India prefers to keep only 10% for the river. India wants other factors to be taken into account before distributing water of these rivers. In the case of Teesta, 85 percent of agricultural land served by the river was in India and the remaining 15 percent in Bangladesh. So, India wants water to split in that ratio. The ratio of catchment area also another point mentioned in the argument (The New Horizon 2011).

Ever since 1983 there have been several high-level political meetings and discussions, the most being in 2010 during the 37th meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission the ministerial level. In this meeting the two countries decided to sign an agreement on Teesta water sharing by 2011 and for that purpose, a draft agreement was exchanged between the parties. The draft stipulates that India and Bangladesh would each get 40 percent of the actual flow available at Gozaldoba Barrage in West Bengal while twenty percent of the actual flow available at Gozaldoba would be reserved as environmental flow. According to the draft agreement, the Indian share of the Teesta water would be made available at Gozaldoba, while the Bangladesh share will be at Teesta Barrage (Doani in Bangladesh) (Sundeep Waslekar, Ilmas Futehally 2013: 3). A formula sharing the water is given in the agreement in Annexure-I of the Draft Teesta Agreement. The draft agreement deals with the period of flow between October 1 to April 30 which is commonly referred to as the lean period or the dry season. The sharing arrangement can be reviewed at an interval of five years as required. A party can seek the first review after 2 years, once the interim agreement comes into force. This provision will help towards ensuring that sharing of the water is not at a constant. The agreement also provides for the establishment of a Joint Committee which will help in implementing the provisions of the agreement, as well as act as a forum for dispute resolution. The two countries have an option to ensure that when there are changes in the flow of river due to natural reasons or exigencies such as drought, the governments may work out a mutually beneficial sharing arrangement (Sundeep Waslekar, Ilmas Futehally: 4).

The signing of the agreement on Teesta waters was one of the objectives during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in September 2011. However, the chief minister of West Bengal opposed the agreement and unexpectedly dropped out of the Prime Minister's entourage to Bangladesh by stating that water was a State subject under the Indian Constitution, and the state needed to give its consent to the central government prior to any agreement with Bangladesh. Thus the negotiations on the draft Teesta agreement failed to fructify and the treaty has remained unsigned by the parties ever since (Sundeep Waslekar, Ilmas Futehally: 3-4). In recent years there has been increasing pressure on both sides of the border regarding Teesta and its distribution. The importance of this river is felt most on Northern West Bengal and Northwest Bangladesh, especially to a rural population of about 30 million who are highly dependent on its use for domestic and agricultural consumption (Sundeep Waslekar, Ilmas Futehally: 4).

5. Tipaimukh Dam Issue

Another contentious issue which brought the bitter ties between India and Bangladesh to hinge along with Teesta imbroglio is the Tipaimukh Dam. Tipaimukh is a proposed embankment dam- a 390 meter long, 162.5- meter high earthen core rock filled dam on the river Barak in the Manipuri state of India. The proposal of Tipaimukh dam was unveiled by India in the first joint river commission meeting in 1972, when the primary purpose envisaged as flood mitigation. The dam is proposed to be located 500 meters downstream from the juncture of the Barak and Tuivai rivers, first proposed by the Assam government (Tridib Chakraborty, Mohor Chakraborty 2002: 7). The government of India handed the project to North-Eastern Electronic Power Co-operation and the Indian President apparently approved it in 2001. Following this action preparatory work on the ground was initiated in 2003, but subsequently obstructed on account of resentment from local population as well as neighbouring country Bangladesh. As a result the proposed initiative came to a standstill. Since the Barak is a part of the Brahmaputra-Barak-Meghna river basin situated in the upper rung of the valley, in case the dam is constructed it would certainly reduce the flow of water in the north eastern region Bangladesh, because the Barak breaks up into the Surmaand Kushiyara Rivers that flow through the Sylhet region. Further more if this dam is built it will affect the ecology, climate and environment of the north eastern regions of Bangladesh and may even lead to its desertification. Therefore in this entire issue there are three major contending parties: first, the central government of India expressed its willingness towards the proposed dam since energy generation remains the principal motto. Secondly, the population of the Indian state of Manipur and Dhaka are concerned about the negative effects of dam construction from different angles. This ultimately has led to become an issue of internal politics both within India and Bangladesh.

In order to explore the possibilities of reducing tension and thereby determining the way to continue with this project, the Government of India invited a parliamentary delegation from Bangladesh in July 2009 to discuss the project and visit the site. The former Indian Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde during this visit assured the Bangladesh delegation that —no water flow will be diverted and no irrigation project will be constructed upstream or downstream of the projectǁ. After the meeting the Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni indicated that —if the Tipaimukh dam goes against the interests of

Bangladesh, we will do whatever is necessary to protect national interestǁ (The Daily Star 2009). Thus this issue became very sensitive and came into prominence after Manmohan Singh paid his official visit to Dhaka in 2011. At the end of this visit in the Joint Statement issued by the leaders of the two countries it was stated that, —India would not take steps on the Tipaimukh project that would adversely impact Bangladeshǁ. Moreover the statement expressed the need for enhanced cooperation —in sharing of the waters of common rivers and both parties would explore the possibilities of common basin management of common rivers for mutual benefitǁ.4

Interestingly when Sheikh Hasina visited India in 2010, the Tipaimukh dam was not an issue between the two countries. However this issue has been ignited with fire when the Manipur government on October 22, 2011 signed a contract with two Indian companies- NHPC Ltd. and Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd. For the construction of the 1500 MW Tipaimukh Hydroelectric Project on the Barak. This caused serious hue and cry Bangladesh and in spite of political differences between the AL and BNP their leaders expressed a common voice with reference to this issue. In fact Sheikh Hasina while speaking in unison with opposition leader Khaleda Zia asserted, —A unilateral decision by India to build Tipaimukh will not be acceptedǁ. Hasina also informed that she would send a special envoy to look into the details from the Indian government about the latest status of the project. While understanding the concern of the Bangladesh government with reference to this problem, the Minister of External Affairs in a statement issued by its official spokesperson Vishnu Prakash in December 2011 reiterated, —India will not take steps on Tipaimukh Project, which may adversely affect Bangladesh. Following this statement as well as the commitment made by Dhaka Advisors to the Bangladesh Prime Minister Mashiur Rehman and Gowher Rizvi made courtesy calls to New Delhi in December 2011. During this visit to India, the Mea once again confirmed that the Government of India —has already conveyed to Dhaka its readiness to hold discussions with the Government of Bangladesh on the Tipaimukh Hydroelectric Project (The Hindu 2011). Thus it is evident that the sensitivity of this issue has been amplified on account of the inner power struggle which has emerged at the domestic level in Bangladesh politics. If Bangladesh and India can enter into cooperative arrangements on the Teesta and the Tipaimukh based on resource development and basin management, mutual benefit, invisible security and equitable responsibility, this may lead to greater confidence building on water issue and the acceptance of water as a common security concern in south Asia.

6. Conclusion

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has seen many ups and less downs. There are many pending issues between the two states, but water dispute has been the dominant bilateral issue. Since India is a biggest democracy and big brother in south Asia, therefore reciprocity must not be the strategy. Bangladesh being a lower riparian country, is hugely dependent on water resources for agriculture and other purposes.

Notes

[i] 1) Sharing period would be from 01 January to 31 May divided into 15 slots each having 10 days. 2) Sharing was on the basis of 75% dependable flow at Farakka between 1948 to 1973. 3) Sharing proportion of Bangladesh and India was 60:40 respectively with a minimum flow of 34,500 for Bangladesh and 20,500 cusec for India. In case of decrease in flow at Farakka under extreme situation Bangladesh was guaranteed with 80% of its share during each of the slots. 4) Regional co-operation for augmenting the flow at Farakka was agreed upon and the augmented flow would be shared proportionately

