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THE GANGES WATER SHARING ISSUE : DIPLOMACY AND DOMESTIC POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

The link between issues of diplomacy and domestic politics is integral, each affecting the other. To be sure, while domestic issues may not always have diplomatic implication, every foreign policy issue is essentially a matter of domestic concern either as cause or effect or as both. National interest is as much central to diplomacy as power to politics. Domestic imperatives and implications of foreign policy are also multi-dimensional in nature - encompassing a country's political, economic, socio-cultural, historical, ethno-religious and environmental constraints and potentials. Such constraints and potentials most often interact with the geo-political conditions of a particular country, and the nature and complexities of such interaction also considerably affect priorities in diplomacy. From this perspective, any discussion on challenges to Bangladesh's diplomacy must refer sooner or later to the India factor. Dictates of geo-politics have rendered Bangladesh literally India-locked. There are a number of outstanding problems between the two countries. The irritants are well-known, and except for a brief period immediately after Bangladesh's independence, relations between the two have remained far from cordial.

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The objective of the present paper is to analyze the domestic political implications of a foreign policy issue in the context of Bangladesh. The country's most important outstanding problem with India, e.g., sharing of Ganges water is the case in consideration. The main burden here is to examine how the Ganges water issue as the prime concern of the country's diplomacy affects domestic politics. To put the discussion in perspective, the pervasive socio-economic and ecological consequences of the dispute will also be dealt with. The paper proceeds with a brief outline of the Ganges water sharing problem itself, followed by a discussion on the problem in the context of Bangladesh-India relations.

THE GANGES WATER PROBLEM

The Ganges water problem is not only the longest-standing source of dispute between Bangladesh and India but also by now one of the most elaborately studied subjects in inter-state relations in South Asia. A large number of studies is available on various aspects of the problem, and no attempt is made here, nor is it necessary, to dwell at length the various dimensions of the problem *per se*. Suffice it to mention here that the Ganges, an international river, originating on the southern slope of the Himalayas spreads over China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. The flow of the Ganges water starts 7000 meters above the sea level at its point of origin and traverses for about 2550 kilometers before falling into the Bay of Bengal.¹ The main tributaries of the Ganges - the Karnali, Sapt Kosi and

1. Unless otherwise mentioned, the data quoted in this part are taken from: Amjad Hossain Khan, "Development and Management of International River Basins: The Ganges Issue", in Bangladesh National Committee of the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID), *Management of International River Basins and Environmental Challenges*, Academic Publishers, Dhaka 1994; B. M. Abbas, *The Ganges Water Dispute*, University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1984; Q. K. Ahmad, *et. al* (eds), *Converting Water into Wealth*, Academic Publishers, Dhaka, 1994; B. G. Verghese, *Waters of Hope, Himalaya Ganga Development and Cooperation for a Billion People*, Oxford, New Delhi, 1990; Nahid Islam, "Environmental Challenges to Bangladesh", *Biiss Papers* no. 13, 1991; Nurul Islam Nazem and Mohammad Humayun Kabir, "Indo-Bangladesh Common Rivers and Water Diplomacy", *Biiss Papers* no. 5, 1986; Khurshida Begum, *Tension over the Farakka Barrage: A Techno-political Tangle in South Asia*, UPL, Dhaka, 1987; and Ashok Swain, "Conflict over Water, A Case Study of the Ganges Water", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1993.

Sapt Gandaki - originate in Nepal, while the mainstream of the river splits into two channels before entering into Bangladesh, one flowing as Bhagirathi-Hoogli into West Bengal and the other as Padma into Bangladesh. The Padma indeed marks the border between Bangladesh and India for about 112 kilometers and in the lower reaches, flows southeast through Rajshahi to join the other major international river of the region, Brahmaputra at Goalondo near Faridpur.

One striking feature of the Ganges as a river is that its flows are highly seasonal, with heavy floods, often devastating, during the monsoon and acute scarcity during the dry season. As about 80 percent of the annual rainfall of the Ganges plain occurs during the monsoon (June to September), the flow of water is also highest at this time of the year reaching about 2.5 million cusecs at Farakka while during the dry season the flow comes down to 55-65 thousand cusecs. This erratic feature of the flow of the Ganges, if not simply because of its being an international river, warrants that equitable sharing arrangement must be reached between the concerned basin states.

Bangladesh is criss-crossed by rivers and its dependence on river water is enormous with 86 percent of the total land area falling into the three major river basin systems - Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. The Ganges basin accounts for nearly 32 percent of the land and beside the country's historical, civilizational and cultural attachment to the river, Bangladesh is crucially dependent on it as the source of sustenance of its economy, agro-ecological system, production structure, fisheries, forestry, industry, navigation and environmental balance. The life and living of over 40 million people (36 percent of the population) are dependent directly on this river.

The Ganges water dispute centers around the Barrage and the Feeder Canal constructed by India at Farakka, 18 kilometers upstream from Bangladesh designed to divert part of the Ganges dry season flow through the Bhagirathi-Hoogli river for flushing the silt in the Calcutta port. Officially designed for the "preservation and maintenance of Calcutta port by improving the regime and navigability of the Bhagirathi-Hoogli river

system"² the barrage is about 2.25 kilometers long with a total discharge capacity of 2.7 million cusecs. The feeder canal is 38 kilometers long and has a design discharge of 40,000 cfs. Ever since October 1951, when the information on the barrage first appeared in newspaper reports, concern was deep in Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, on the adverse affect of the barrage on the downstream flow and thereby on the economy and ecology of Bangladesh. Despite formal protests from the lower riparian, India, unmindful of the consequences for the former, went ahead with the construction. The long and arduous process of negotiation between the two failed to produce any breakthrough towards a mutually acceptable solution while construction went on until after the independence of Bangladesh when expectations rose that the issue would be resolved.

THE GANGES ISSUE IN BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS

Formal relation of independent Bangladesh with India was established on 6 December 1971 when the latter accorded recognition to the new republic three days after the outbreak of Indo-Pakistan war. In reality the relationship, however, started earlier in March the same year when the military junta of then Pakistan unleashed a reign of terror and repression against the civilian population of Bangladesh. Indian support and assistance to the millions of evacuees who flooded into India, to the provisional government of Bangladesh and the organizational, logistic and diplomatic support to the liberation struggle of the country are well known. What is often less emphasized is the significant coincidence of the cause of Bangladesh's independence with India's long-standing strategic objectives *vis-a-vis* the region. As early as in the closing phase of the liberation struggle, opinion of Bangladeshi exiled leaders on Indian motives was dichotomized. To be sure, the exiled leaders were all profoundly grateful to the Indian authorities for according them refuge, letting them organize the

2. Ministry of Information and Publications, Government of India, *India 90*, New Delhi 1990, quoted in, Askok Swain, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

government-in-exile.³ But a dispassionate and cool assessment of the then Bangladeshi officials revealed that Indian support came from New Delhi's own self-interest rather than any nobler motives.⁴ In retrospect, India was already impatient that the two wars that it fought with Pakistan in 1947 and 1965 could neither unlock the conflictual relationship persisting between the two since Partition, nor change the power balance in New Delhi's favour. Hence, the political turmoil in the then East Pakistan and subsequently, the struggle for independence of Bangladesh proffered India a unique occasion to cut to size an unfriendly neighbour, Pakistan, and at the same time emerge as the unchallenged regional power in South Asia. Thus, when the Indian international *locus standi* of having to sustain millions of refugees on its soil was reinforced by the Pakistani blunder of open attack, India could retaliate in full strength to make the best use of the 'historic opportunity'. The sense of Bangladesh's gratitude to India for the latter's role in 1971 was, therefore, soon tempered by the realization that India had certain well-conceived and cogent calculations of its own in extending assistance to Bangladesh. In addition, while the military intervention by India expedited Bangladesh's independence, some of the actions of the Indian army prior to its withdrawal amounting to "wholesale plunder of Bangladesh's material resources"⁵ sowed the seeds of discontent and distrust in Bangladesh

3. See for details, Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, "Bangladesh's External Relations: The Strategy of a Small Power in a Subsystem", unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Australian National University, May 1980, pp. 55-112.

4. Iftekhar Chowdhury quotes a position paper prepared by the Bangladesh Foreign Office set up in Calcutta during the struggle to reveal the dichotomy: "India's support for Bangladesh basically comes out of her negative approach towards Pakistan. For political, historical and economic reasons, India desires to weaken Pakistan, both West and East. It is not for her love of democracy or sense of brotherhood of the people of Bangladesh that India wants to uphold the cause of the liberation struggle of our people. The whole thing has a deep political move ...", *ibid.*, p. 71.

5. See for details, Kamal Siddiqui, *The Political Economy of Rural Poverty in Bangladesh*, NILG, Dhaka, 1987, pp. 426-30. There have been widespread allegations, and eventually well-documented evidences that the Indian army carried along with it all the armaments surrendered by the Pakistan army to which Bangladesh felt that it had a right to share. There were also reports of looting of huge quantities of equipments from mills, factories, offices and hospitals. See for example, *The Guardian*, 21 January 1972, quoted in Siddiqui, p. 427. For more details based on interview of senior Indian military officials, Shaukat Hassan, *India-Bangladesh Political Relations During the Awami League Government, 1972-75*, UMI Dissertation Service, Michigan, 1988, pp. 93-94; and Partha S. Ghosh, *Conflict and Cooperation in South Asia*, UPL, Dhaka, 1989, p. 66.

which eventually accentuated as evidences emerged that despite extremely cordial relations at the beginning, India's long term objectives were often detrimental to the interest of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh-India relations, nevertheless, developed spontaneously into a level of cordiality in the immediate post-liberation period. The euphoric heights were symbolized by pronouncement that the friendship between Bangladesh and India was "everlasting" and that "no power on earth will be able to make any crack in this friendship".⁶ Notwithstanding, or rather for the sake of, such level of cordiality, the Farakka issue, a legacy of the Pakistan era assumed a low profile during the first summit meeting between independent Bangladesh and India held in New Delhi in February 1972. The only reference made to the issue in the document that emerged from the meeting (which was occupied with two main issues, e.g., withdrawal of Indian troops and trade relations), was that "Farakka and other problems relating to development of water and power resources were discussed."⁷

But then, the issue figured in almost every high level contact between the two. During one such visit of Indira Gandhi to Dhaka the 25-year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace was signed. Hearkening the Indo-Soviet Treaty, the controversial document alluded to common ideals and struggles and sacrifices that both countries had gone through, and declared that "there shall be lasting peace and friendship" between the two peoples and countries. Although in very general terms, the treaty contained a reference to the problems associated with the issues of common water resources between the two countries. Article 6 stipulates that the two parties agreed to "make joint studies, and to take joint action in the fields of flood control, river basin development and development of hydro-electric power and irrigation".

Thus, although the problem apparently lost the urgency in the post-independence euphoria, it soon gained prominence in the concern of the new government which already had the taste of frustration.⁸ Mujib raised the

6. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, quoted in, Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

7. *Times of India*, 2 March 1972, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 75.

8. Partha S. Ghosh, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-7.

issue during his talk with Mrs. Gandhi in May 1974. The communique signed at the end of the meeting stated that problems should be resolved "with understanding so that the interests of both countries are recognized and the difficulties removed in a spirit of friendship and cooperation." It was a clear indication by both at the highest political level that *difficulties* existed which needed to be *removed* and that there existed genuine conflict of interest between the two governments on the issue.⁹ Earlier, during Indian Foreign Minister's visit in February 1974 the two sides agreed that a mutually acceptable solution will be arrived before the Farakka Barrage was commissioned. But no headway was made until April next year when India convinced Bangladesh that while discussions on allocation of the Ganges waters were continuing, it was essential to run the feeder canal of the Farakka Barrage during the dry season of that year.¹⁰ Under the agreement that was reached between the concerned Ministers of the two countries on 18 April 1975, India took the right to withdraw 11,000 to 16,000 cusec during the dry season of April 21-May 31, leaving 39,000 to 44,000 cusec for Bangladesh at the same period. As the normal flow of the Ganges during the dry season would increase from 55,000 to 65,000 cusec, the amount of water allocated to Bangladesh could rise upto 49,500. The amount negotiated for Bangladesh was reportedly more than what Pakistan asked for in 1968.¹¹ But Bangladesh already felt deceived by the way the interim agreement was worked out to withdraw the water at Farakka, and the barrage was commissioned pending any headway on a mutually acceptable solution. The cancellation of the visit of Abdur Rob Serniabat, Bangladesh's Water Resources Minister who was invited to attend the commissioning ceremony

9. Shaukat Hassan, *India-Bangladesh Relations ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-4. It was agreed under the Joint Declaration issued at the end of the visit that a there might not be enough water to meet the needs of the Calcutta port and full requirements of Bangladesh during the minimum flow period of the Ganges, b) the fair weather flow in the lean months would have to be augmented and c) the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) should study and make recommendations about the best means of augmentation.

10. *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, vol. xxi, 1975, Longman, London 1975, p. 27251.

11. *Ibid.*

was indicative of Bangladesh's dissatisfaction.¹² Moreover, it agitated Bangladesh that violating the agreement, India continued to run the Feeder after May 31 which added to the acrimony.¹³ This 'short term agreement' has been viewed as one of the reasons for the Mujib Government's falling out with the Army which assassinated the leader on 15 August, the same year.¹⁴ Despite its widespread image of being pro-India, the Mujib government was successful in upholding Bangladesh's sovereign prerogatives,¹⁵ but Mujib did face criticism for his acquiescence in India's test run of the feeder canal disregarding Indira's earlier agreement with him. And this, coupled with the controversial Friendship Treaty, the alleged misuse of power by the India-trained paramilitary *Rakhi Bahini* and Mujib's failure to match his people's expectation to offer them a democratic government grossly discredited him before the people. The linkage between the killing of Mujib and the Farakka issue demands close investigation. But there is no doubt that apart from personal grievances of the army officers who were involved in the 1975 coup, the already growing tide of anti-Indianism in Bangladesh, symbolized by the disapproval of the commissioning of Farakka Barrage turned out to be one of the justifications for the brutal action.¹⁶ The point in any event, is that the Ganges water issue contributed to a considerable extent not only to the erosion of the great friendship between Bangladesh and India but also to the laying of the foundation of anti-Indianism in Bangladesh which was eventually to persist long into the future.¹⁷

The political trauma that Bangladesh suffered in 1975 was used by India as a justification for further intransigence. With the approach of 1976 dry season Bangladesh suggested that the 1975 formula be continued and a joint

12. *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 19 and 20 May 1975, quoted in. Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

13. B. G. Verghese, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

14. Anthony Mascarenhaas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, quoted in Ashok Swain, "Conflicts over Water: A Case Study of the Ganges Water Dispute", *Security Dialogue*, 1993, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 8.

15. See for a well-researched study on the early years of Bangladesh's relations with India, Shaukat Hassan, *India-Bangladesh Political Relations During the Awami League Government, 1972-93, op. cit.*

16. *Keesings Contemporary Archives, op. cit.*, p. 27381.

17. Indian scholars also hold the view that Farakka withdrawals were to predominately account for Bangladesh-India relations to erode in the initial years. See for example, Ashok Swain, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

study on the effects of withdrawal, as stipulated under the April 1975 agreement, be carried out. India not only remained unresponsive but also continued to withdraw the dry season flow unilaterally causing serious damages to Bangladesh. In its first attempt to draw global attention to the problem Bangladesh was forced to take the issue to the Colombo Summit of the Non-aligned Movement, followed by the Islamic Foreign Minister's Conference in Istanbul and finally, to the UN. As a result of several rounds of negotiations that followed between the two pursuant to a consensus statement of the Special Committee of 31st UNGA, an agreement was reached in September 1977 for sharing the dry season flow at Farakka for the five year period of 1978-82.¹⁸ Bangladesh paid considerable price for the agreement as it had to agree to almost doubling of India's withdrawal authority from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs range to 20,500 to 26,500 cusecs. Under the 1977 agreement, however, it was agreed that in the case of exceptionally low level of flows in the dry season, Bangladesh would be guaranteed a minimum of 80% of the volume earmarked for it in the schedule of allocation. By the close of the period of the agreement, Indian attitude to Bangladesh stiffened further. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was signed in October 1982 for two years (1983-84) dropped the 80% guarantee clause leaving Bangladesh at the whim of India. There was no agreement of sharing in 1985 while the MOU was extended for three years from 1986-88. In the absence of any further sharing instrument India has been continuing its unilateral withdrawal causing unprecedented reductions in the flow left for Bangladesh in the dry season.

18. Whether the 1977 agreement was the result of Bangladesh's move at the UN or that of the change of regime in India earlier that year remains to be examined. As a result of Bangladesh's move at the Special Political Committee of the UNGA, a consensus was worked out by group of the non-aligned countries who urged Bangladesh and India to 'meet urgently in Dhaka at the Ministerial level for negotiation with a view to arriving at a fair and expeditious settlement'. Before these talks could produce any result, the Congress Government of Indira Gandhi was replaced by Janata Government headed by Morarji Desai. It was during the tenure of the latter, which is considered to be the warmest interlude in post-1975 Bangladesh-India relations that the agreement was signed.

The latest high level political move between the two was initiated by Prime Minister of Bangladesh Mrs Zia during her visit to New Delhi of 26-28 May 1992 when her Indian counterpart assured that "every possible efforts would made to avoid undue hardships to Bangladesh by sharing the flows in the Ganges at Farakka on an equitable basis".¹⁹ To follow up, a Ministerial meeting was held in Dhaka on 26-27 August 1992 and followed by two Secretary level Joint Committee of Experts (JCE) meetings in New Delhi and Dhaka successively, none achieving any progress. The sentiment of Bangladesh was captured by the leader of the Bangladesh delegation in the Dhaka meeting of 30-31 March 1993, when he said at the end of the meeting that he felt particularly shocked because he had not noticed anything from the Indian delegation to appreciate the extraordinary hardship of the vast population of Bangladesh caused by what they were doing upstream.²⁰ The two Prime Ministers talked about the problem during their brief meeting in April 1993 when Narasimha Rao came to Dhaka for the SAARC summit, but the Indian Prime Minister's commitment remained unfulfilled.

Apart from the problem of sharing the existing flow at Farakka, from the long term perspective the crux of the problem is the failure of Bangladesh and India to agree on a strategy for augmentation of water. The augmentation problem dates back to August 1974 when in its 10th meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission the two parties examined each other's proposal to augment the dry season flows of the Ganges. Bangladesh proposed that seven storage dams should be built on the Nepalese tributaries of the Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas to store the unused monsoon flow which could be released in the lean season as and when necessary to augment the Ganges flow. India for its part proposed that the flow could be augmented by diverting water from the Brahmaputra by connecting Brahmaputra with the Ganges with the help of a 320 kilometer

19. Quoted from the Joint Communiqué released simultaneously from New Delhi and Dhaka at the end of the visit of the Bangladesh Prime Minister to New Delhi on 26-28 May 1992, *Bangladesh Observer*, May 30, 1992.

20. M. Asafuddowlah, Irrigation Secretary of Bangladesh, quoted in, *Bangladesh Observer*, 1 April 1993.

long link-canal, 120 kilometers of which would run through Bangladesh. Both parties rejected each other's proposal, and two decades have passed without any progress.

Bangladesh's proposal is built on the basis of its concern for the control of water both in the dry and monsoon season, and it is argued that the schemes will help not only augment the flow but also control the downstream flooding in the monsoon. In addition, the projects will generate huge hydro-electricity for the use of the whole region. India contends that the water to be stored would not be sufficient to meet the needs of the two countries, and rejects the idea basically on the ground that the problem is 'bilateral' in which a 'third party' (Nepal) had no role.²¹

The Indian proposal, on the other hand is based on the idea that the three river basins - Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna - constitute one single system and while the flows of the Ganges are inadequate, and as Brahmaputra has untapped extra capability during the dry season, the resources of the two could be combined. Bangladesh is not convinced, which argues that according to relevant international authorities like the ECAFE and World Meteorological Organization and even the Indian Irrigation Commission of 1927, the three rivers are classified as three distinct and separate international basins. Therefore, the Indian proposal is one for not augmentation but inter-basin transfer which violates the principles governing inter-basin transfer of water.²² Moreover, the dry season flow of Brahmaputra is also not adequate to meet the full requirements of the basin itself. In any event, it is clear to Bangladesh that the Indian proposal is basically aimed more at responding to some other Indian concerns than the problem of augmentation to help resolve its problem with Bangladesh. Thus India looks at the canal as the source of water to satisfy its industrial and irrigation needs in the northern Gangetic plains. It could also help

21. See for details on the two proposals and each other's arguments, B. M. Abbas A. T., *The Ganges Water Dispute*, UPL, Dhaka, 1984, pp. 124-9. See also, *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, September 1981; and Ashok Swain, *op. cit.*

22. B. M. Abbas A. T., *op. cit.*

cheaper and more efficient transportation route between the states of West Bengal and Assam at the same time facilitating faster and effective movement of men and material to the remote north-eastern and eastern states bordering China and Burma, an important and longstanding security concern.

The reasons for Bangladesh's rejection of the Indian proposal are obvious. As the Brahmaputra is already flowing through the country the canal promises to bring it no extra water, rather the country is apprehensive that the project could divert water from its principal source which would mean that the central and northern Bangladesh would soon face the same fate as the south-west areas affected by the Farakka. This has created an impression in Bangladesh that by the proposal India is asking Bangladesh to forget not only about the water of the Ganges but also that of Brahmaputra. Besides, it would displace millions of people from their land, homes and livelihood. For a country already overpopulated and short of cultivable land, the fear of losing another 0.5 million hectares of fertile land is a dreadful nightmare. Besides, the canal would add to the country's communications problems by creating another large river bisecting its northwestern region.²³ The security implication of the link-canal with its both ends in the Indian territory also makes Bangladesh apprehensive, particularly in respect of the possibility of troop movement through the canal, seven times the size of the Suez. Bangladesh therefore, rejects the proposal which has also been rejected by internationally reputed experts.²⁴

As the stalemate continued, and frustrated by the limits of bilateral negotiation, for the second time Bangladesh wanted to draw international attention to the problem when its Prime Minister referred to her country's helplessness in her speech at the 48th Session of the UNGA on October 1993. She said that unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges water was in complete disregard of the interests of the people of Bangladesh. It had pushed

23. Shaukat Hassan, *Environmental Issues and Security in South Asia*, Adelphi Papers 262, (IISS London) 1991, p. 52.

24. Dr. Peter Rogers, Professor of Environmental Engineering of Harvard University rejects the idea by saying that it will cause disasters both from technical and socio-economic point of view. Quoted in, *Bangladesh Observer*, June 23, 1994.

over 40 million people to face with catastrophic disaster. She said that it was a gross violation of human rights and justice that a big part of Bangladesh's population was being pushed to the threshold of poverty and destruction.²⁵ India reacted sharply and advised Bangladesh to "overcome temptation to play politics with the important river water issue".²⁶ Bangladesh could not help but continue its effort to mobilize international attention to the urgency of the problem side by side with its negotiation with India. The Prime Minister referred to the problem in her speech to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Limasol in October 1993. She discussed the problem with Nepal during her visit to Kathmandu on 24 November the same year. During the Chinese Foreign Minister's official visit to Dhaka in February 1994, Bangladesh discussed the problem with the visiting delegation while during the Prime Minister's visit to Japan in April 1994 she briefed her Japanese hosts about her country's predicaments. The main objective of this approach adopted by Bangladesh has been not so much to bring in any third party to mediate as to create international public awareness on the challenges faced by the country as a result of unilateral withdrawal of water from an international river by an upper riparian in absolute disregard to the adverse effects caused to the lower riparian.

DOMESTIC IMPACT OF THE ISSUE

Socio-economic and Ecological Implications

The impact of the Ganges water issue on the society, polity and economy of Bangladesh is enormous and multi-dimensional. Several studies have already focused on the socio-economic and agro-ecological aspects of the devastating implications of India's "turning the tap on and off" at its own whim at Farakka.²⁷ The socio-economic and ecological impact of the unilateral withdrawal by India can be summarized as follows:

25. Quoted in *Bangladesh Observer*, 3 October 1993.

26. *Ibid*, 18 October 1993.

27. Farooq Sobhan, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, quoted by Sanjay Hajarika, *Stranger of the Mist*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 8. For details on the socio-economic and ecological impacts of the Farakka on Bangladesh, see, B. M. Abbas, *The Ganges Water Dispute*, University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1984; Nahid Islam, "Environmental Challenges to Bangladesh", *Biiss Papers* no. 13, 1991; and Ashok Swain, "Conflict Over Water, A Case Study of the Ganges Water", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1993.

The flow of Ganges water at Hardinge Bridge has fallen alarmingly - to a record low level of 9,218 cusecs in March 1993 compared to a historical average of nearly 65,000 cusecs at this time of the year, causing havoc to the eco-system of Bangladesh. The damage to the hydrological system includes siltation and rise of river-beds leading to flood, reduction in the conveyance capacity of the river channels, demolition of embankments, change in the river course, and decrease in the soil moisture leading to desertification of wide areas of the Ganges basin.

Due to drastic fall in the water level as a result of the upstream withdrawal, the country's agriculture, fishery, forestry, navigation, industry, and every possible productive sector has been exposed to disastrous consequences. To name only one example of the impact on agriculture, the Ganges-Kobodak project, the largest irrigation scheme of the area with nearly 142,000 hectares of command area is about to be closed because of the shortage of the Ganges water. Crop production is affected not merely by the reduction in the irrigation capacity but also by the sharp drying out of the soil moisture. Planting of crops are delayed and the growing season is shortened causing loss of productivity. The withdrawal of Ganges water has also caused depletion of groundwater tables rendering shallow, even some deep tubewells inoperative. The Ganges water system has historically been the main source of lives of the huge variety of fish and prawn which have been the main staple food and source of nutrition of the people of the country. As a result of the reduced flow, the decomposed weeds, insecticides and industrial debris emptied into the river remain stagnated which have been damaging the aquatic organisms. Coupled with the rising water temperatures and shortage of oxygen because of low level flow these are leading the riverine fishery of Bangladesh to the verge of extinction. The drastic fall in the Hilsa catch rendering hundreds of fishermen out of job is associated with the upstream withdrawal of Ganges water. The navigability of over 200 miles of large and medium waterways in the region have become a thing of the past.

Excessive upstream withdrawal at Farakka drastically weakens the upland flow within Bangladesh, particularly at the Gorai-Modhumati sub-system. As a result, there has been unprecedented intrusion of salinity in the coastal areas. High level of salinity has been making sharp inroads to both surface and ground waters affecting large areas of the south-western region further deteriorating the conditions in agricultural production, domestic and municipal water supply and public health. Inland saltwater intrusion has increased from 300 kilometers to 460 kilometers. In parts of the country where the impact of the salinity is most severe, like the Khulna region, local industries using river water for production are facing closure, supply of water for domestic use are growing increasingly scarce, and shortage of soil and plant nutrients is causing large scale death of trees. The impact of salinity on the Sunderbans, the world's largest single tract of mangrove, which is also severely affected by desertification is most devastating with the whole range of wild life and forests facing extinction.

The financial damages inflicted to Bangladesh can hardly be quantified with certain degree of accuracy. Global loss in the sectors directly affected is, nevertheless, estimated to have already crossed 3 billion dollars with loss in crop yield alone accounting for over half a billion dollars annually.²⁸

The social impact has been pervasive with its worst manifestation in terms of unemployment in the affected sectors, particularly agriculture, navigation and fisheries. Growing crop losses and shrinking employment opportunities in the directly affected regions are causing widespread economic migration to the other regions of the country, particularly to the capital city adding to the factors of socio-political instability.

Political Implications

The domestic political implications of the issue have also been significant. As already indicated, the issue has been clearly catalytic in the origin and growth of anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladesh. In Bangladeshi

28. For details on negative impact of Farakka, see, Nahid Islam. *op. cit.*

eyes India's good-neighbourliness has not stood the test of time and therefore, Bangladesh cannot be sure of India's intentions and motives.²⁹ The people of Bangladesh realized since the early days of independence that New Delhi was determined to capitalize on Bangladesh's geo-politically "India-locked" situation to do everything to compound the vulnerability of their country.³⁰ And there is no doubt that unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water at Farakka since the days of "everlasting friendship" of the immediate post-independence period contributed greatly to such realization. Since the issue originated during the time when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan, India's regional rival, many people considered the dispute as an example of differences between Islamabad and New Delhi. The irony for the people of Bangladesh is that while a similar dispute between India and Pakistan was settled by the Indus Water Treaty of 1960 which withstood the strains of two full-scale armed conflicts, the Ganges dispute has persisted despite the fact that Bangladesh emerged independent through a liberation struggle in which India played a significant role.³¹

The disappointment in Bangladesh continues to mount as there is a growing realization that the failure to make any progress benefits India at the expense of Bangladesh as India being located in the upstream can, and does, withdraw and release the water whenever necessary while Bangladesh as the lower riparian cannot do so, however acute might be its needs. The Ganges issue is one of the most frequently appearing themes in public debate in the country. Various professional groups are active in raising their voices on the issue to sensitize domestic as well as international public opinion. It is also the subject of most frequently printed editorial comments in leading dailies and weeklies. The government is continually under pressure to tell the people what has been done on the issue. Some political

29. Shaukat Hassan and A. Rob Khan, "Bangladesh Floods : The Political Debate", in Shaukat Hassan and M. G. Kabir (eds), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, Dhaka, 1989, p. 89.

30. See for details, Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine: Implications for Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan, (eds.), *op. cit.* pp. 18-43.

31. Nikhil Chakravarty, in *Bangladesh Observer*, 26 May 1992.

parties put constant pressures on the government to seek international mediation. A view shared by a considerable part of the public opinion, this is drawn from a perception - right or not - that the 1977 agreement was the result of Bangladesh's taking the issue to the UNGA. Any governmental effort towards progress - bilaterally or otherwise - is used as an instrument of political gain by the ruling party while the opposition projects the same as yet another setback. The immediate domestic impact of the raising of the issue by Prime Minister Zia at the UNGA Session of 1993 was a perceived political gain for the ruling party, although nothing substantive emerged. A tumultuous welcome was staged for her by the party, and the cheerful supporters were told that the "UN member states supported Bangladesh's stand on the issue."³² Her political opponents are, however, on record to have been on the counter-offensive as they viewed it merely as a "political stunt".³³

The Ganges water issue indeed constitutes one of the recurrent themes in domestic politics of Bangladesh. Political parties, either in opposition or in government, condemn the Indian intransigence. While this is a regular event, the stress is more, everytime a water talk is held either in Dhaka or in New Delhi. This is one of the issues that are most intensely debated within and outside the parliament. The opposition political parties, beside condemning India, also criticize the government of Bangladesh for pursuing weak foreign policy and failing to force India to give Bangladesh its due shares. The leader of the opposition in the present parliament, and chairperson of the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina Wajed is on record blasting the government for its failure to reach any agreement with India for the country's legitimate share in the waters of the Ganges in three years of its tenure despite making big noise about it before coming to power.³⁴ The Awami League (AL) always defends its position by reiterating that during its regime, under the 1975 agreement it managed to realize the maximum of

32. *Bangladesh Observer*, October 8, 1983.

33. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1993.

34. *The Daily Star*, January 8, 1994. and *The Ittefaq* (in Bangla), July 30, 1994.

44,000 cusec as against 34,000 cusecs in the successive periods. On the other hand, its opponents keep on blaming the Awami League for consenting to the Farakka withdrawal in the first place. Khaleda Zia, the present Prime Minister led the Farakka March³⁵ on several occasions as the leader of the seven party alliance against the Ershad government as an instrument of mobilizing public opinion in favour of her party. She used to describe Farakka as an Indian conspiracy which the people of Bangladesh would not accept. Bangladesh-India relations, particularly Ganges water dispute, is indeed one of the issues in electoral politics of Bangladesh. During the 1991 elections, Mrs Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was active in trying to project the Awami League as a pro-Indian party. With no progress at that stage on any of the issues in bilateral dispute, particularly sharing of the Ganges water, this proved to be an effective electoral campaign resulting in negative vote for AL and accounted in a considerable manner for the victory of BNP.³⁶ Overall, to the extent that India's unilateral withdrawal of water without concern for Bangladesh's interest strengthens anti-Indianism in Bangladesh, it also may have correspondingly contributed to the weakening of the salience of secular politics in the country, thereby feeding the political dissensus in the country.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

For Bangladesh the Ganges water issue is a "litmus test" in relations between Bangladesh and India.³⁷ Progress in resolving the issue is indeed

35. A symbolic tradition created on 16 May 1976 when late Mawlana Bhashani led a huge procession of over 200,000 people which reached upto Kachar-Nawabganj area. Since then, 16 May has been designated a Farakka Day in Bangladesh.

36. Craig Baxter and Sayedur Rahman, "Bangladesh Votes 1991: Building Democratic Institutions", *Asian Survey*, vol. xxxi, no. 8, August 1991, pp. 686-91. During 1991 elections Khaleda Zia and her party leaders during their election campaigns were reported to have committed to bring more Ganges water if elected to power. See, *Ajker Kagoj* (in Bangla), June 6 and 8, 1992.

37. Farooq Sobhan, quoted in *Bangladesh Observer*, March 11, 1994.

key to the establishment of cordial and good-neighbourly relations between the two. As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh said, "a solution to the Ganges water sharing problem would make it easier to solve rest of the problems while delays in the solution of this problem would only complicate the entire process."³⁸ The problem, aside from its being the leading concern of Bangladesh at the diplomatic level, also compounds its challenges for economic survival, social harmony, environmental sustainability and political stability. And there are reasons to believe that any change in Indian attitude towards resolving the problem in a mutually acceptable fashion will open the gates for comprehensive range of cooperation between the two neighbours.

The people of Bangladesh, despite some differences in nuances related with politicization, is united on the issue. The adverse impacts on the country is as much to account for this as the firm conviction developed over the years that India is not only intransigent and unconcerned about the fate of Bangladesh but also unreliable as the vitally important neighbour. On several occasions Indian actions and postures have not been in conformity with New Delhi's earlier commitments. India, as mentioned above, committed that it would ensure a mutually acceptable solution to the water issue before the Farakka barrage was commissioned. The barrage was very well commissioned while a solution remained as elusive as ever. Although a limited agreement was signed, India had no hesitation to break the spirit of that. India's continued reluctance to undertake a joint study on the effects of water withdrawal at Farakka as stipulated under the 1975 agreement is also an evidence of circumlocutory tactics.³⁹

Bangladesh's problem with India is of course much greater in scope than the sharing of Ganges water.⁴⁰ Even on the question of water, the two countries share between them 54 rivers all of them belonging to the single

38. Prime Minister Mrs Khaleida Zia, quoted in *Bangladesh Observer*, April 20, 1994.

39. For other examples of such Indian policy see, Iftekharuzzaman, "India Doctrine: Implications for Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir & Shaukat Hassan, (eds), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, Dhaka 1989, pp. 36-38.

40. For a survey of issues in Bangladesh India Relations, see, Shaukat Hassan, *op. cit.*, also by the same author, "India Factor in the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir & Shaukat Hassan, (eds), *op. cit.*; Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine: Implications for Bangladesh", in *ibid*; M. Shamsul Huq, *Bangladesh in International Politics*, UPL, Dhaka 1993; and Partha S. Ghosh, *op. cit.*

motherhood of the Himalayan basin. India has already started unilaterally to construct barrages and other works on the major ones out of these international rivers to divert or impede their natural flow.⁴¹ There may be, therefore, many more Farakkas soon. Moreover, the issues are also linked with the issue of flood control in the whole of the Himalayan basin. India's principled position of bilateralism in dealing with such issues as water sharing, particularly the augmentation question, which are fundamentally regional problems is also a source of major concern for Bangladesh. India's resistance to a regional approach to the problem despite all technical justifications is viewed mainly as a strategy to ensure that Bangladesh is endemically vulnerable—politically, economically, socially, and environmentally.

Despite the mounting frustrations in the country, and notwithstanding an apparent India phobia in a section of the polity, there is no doubt that in articulation of its India policy, Bangladesh does not need to be either passive or emotional or confrontational. From the perspective of Bangladesh, development of friendship and good-neighbourliness with India is critical to Bangladesh's success in resolving its water problem and for that matter, in promoting its national interest. Bangladesh is not insensitive to the fact that sharing of the waters of the Ganges and other regional basins are also a major concern for India, despite its advantages as the upper riparian and much wider options. Water sharing is a problem that has for long been prominent behind troubles in the central government's relations with the states like Punjab, West Bengal and Assam.

One notable gap in the whole question of water sharing between Bangladesh and India from both the sides has been that the dynamics of the problem within India - between the Union government on the one hand and West Bengal and Assam on the other - have been understressed. Although the original stated objective of the Farakka project was to fulfill the need of the Calcutta port, in reality, the withdrawal of water upstream has reduced the ability of the river to flush down the Hoogly river causing aspersion in

41. Shaikat Hassan, *Environmental Issues and Security in South Asia*, Adelphi Papers 262, (IISS London) 1991, p. 35.

West Bengal. On the other hand, the Indian proposition to divert the waters of Brahmaputra that flow through Assam into Bangladesh is viewed by the Assamese as a potential threat to their interests, both political and economic.⁴² There is no doubt that Ganges water sharing problem can be resolved only through a joint political decision by Bangladesh and India. And in their search for the mutually acceptable political decision, it may be useful for the two countries to take the interests and perspectives of West Bengal and Assam into closer consideration than before.

42. Shaukat Hassan, *op. cit.* p. 34.