

Preface

Conjoined by history, economy, culture, geography and environmental concerns, the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been defined mostly by domestic politics. Politics on the Ganges seems to have contributed to a political discourse in Bangladesh where the river became a yardstick to judge the performance of a government for quarter of a century. This hydrological issue began when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan and continued even after its birth as an independent country in 1971.

After two decades of deliberations with Pakistan and a quarter of a century of negotiations with Bangladesh, the treaty on the Ganges was signed in 1996. Though lauded for a successful conclusion of one of the contentious river disputes all over the world; it is important to analyse the variables which kept the issue alive for such a long time, and address new challenges which would be determining the life of the treaty after 2026 when the term of the treaty ends. Examining the operation of the treaty is equally important. These questions spurred me to go for detailed examination of the subject.

There are some iconic works on the subject like Ben Crow's *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development*; B.G. Verghese's *Waters of Hope: Integrated Water Resource Development and Regional Cooperation within the Himalayan-Ganges-Brahmaputra-Barak Basin*, and Ramaswamy Iyer's *Water: Perspectives, Issues, Concerns*. These are detailed books on the Ganges, giving a historical treatment to the subject; describing evolution of the issue in bilateral relationship; and also suggesting how the river can contribute to regional cooperation. The present work studies the Ganges from domestic political lens and understands how this river occupied the focus of discussion for major part of the bilateral relationship of India and Bangladesh. This book has emerged out of a prolonged research on the issue.

For deeper analysis of the subject, I have gone through coverage of the issue in mass media of India and Bangladesh for almost four decades.¹ To understand the

¹Though Calcutta has become Kolkata, the old names have been used keeping the context in focus.

Indian political discourse on the Ganges, I have also consulted Parliament's proceedings. Reading through the Indian parliamentary discussions, I found that they underline that conventional understanding has developed over the period among the political parties that water issue with neighbours should be dealt bilaterally. Another noticeable feature is the gradual rise of sharp disjuncture in federal relationship where states cannot be assumed to be on board when the central government is negotiating with neighbour on any issue especially related to water. The central argument of the book is *how domestic politics facilitate or complicate external negotiation process in the context of the Ganges river issue*. The book approaches the Ganges river water sharing issue with fresh research insights learnt by fieldwork both in India and Bangladesh.

Though the Ganges region is home to one of the densest concentrations of some of the poorest people in South Asia, flexibility and sensibility required to resolve this issue was not sufficiently demonstrated by both countries. Achieving immediate political interests has always preceded over long-term perspectives. The reading of important events highlight that there were occasions when matter would have been resolved for the larger good of the people but political considerations overwhelm the governments of the day. Both sides stuck to their respective positions. Bargaining and compromise were made possible only when linkage among various issues were aligned; sometimes it was just for fulfilment of domestic political configurations. The 1977 Agreement and 1996 Treaty underline that the only missing link between negotiation and successful outcome on previous occasions has been lack of convergence of political interests. It highlights that political dimension works as a master key which could open all the hitherto closed doors. This has been illustrated in the book with several examples. Another important aspect which emerges is that technical differences are circumvented easily if overlaid by interpretations according to alignment of interests of the political parties in power which, in turn, work as a multiplying factor for them in the domestic politics.

Though the Ganges Treaty has covered close to two decades of its 30 years period, importance of the subject has not diminished for these two South Asian neighbours; rather it has increased because of climate change and other emerging factors. Reading of the Ganges dispute suggests that river water in general and Ganges in particular has political currency in the domestic politics of both India and Bangladesh. This aspect has been gleaned from an examination of various phases of negotiations. The discussions on domestic aspects are critical because they are undercurrents which guide the respective governments and its negotiating team. Choice of negotiating strategy has always been contentious between India and Bangladesh; while the former prefers bilateralism and the latter intends to follow multilateralism. On its trajectory to formalisation of the treaty, civil societies played very important roles. Their important contributions in the Ganges water negotiation have not been sufficiently highlighted in the literature. This book examines the constraints and limitations faced by civil society groups which are engaged between two neighbours and discusses the future potential of civil society in the river water dispute. It is important to examine operation of the Ganges Treaty for last two

decades which would help facing new challenges of climate change and other evolving political situation of India and Bangladesh.

The study of this subject becomes critical because this is the younger region in terms of modern nation-state demands where nation-building projects are still in the fledging stage, basic needs of people are yet to be realised; many more negotiations would be carried out as India and Bangladesh share another 53 rivers where same considerations would play many times over. Most importantly, climate change phenomenon has come out of the realm of possibility to reality as different parts of world in general and India in particular are suffering from successive droughts. But for many Indian provinces, it seems that confrontation and combativeness have taken over debates and deliberations over issues of common concerns particularly for those that share water resources. Recently, there have been some fresh initiatives to cleanse the Ganges and activate pause button on the construction of large dams on the upper reaches of the river. The result would be known in future whether all these measures add to the free flow of the river, and hopefully, this would translate into better riparian relationship between India and Bangladesh.

In the end, it is important to add one caveat for researchers who are interested in studying Indo-Bangladesh river water relationship that approaching government authorities for access to data and getting updates about status of bilateral relationship is next to impossible. One has to be extra-vigilant and use informal sources to get important information. This book will be of interest to students studying international conflict over rivers, student and scholars of South Asia and international relations, scholars and practitioners of Indian foreign policy, journalists, water experts and civil society groups.

Bloemfontein, South Africa

Punam Pandey

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Pandey, P.

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