

INDIA BANGLADESH BILATERAL RELATIONS: A STUDY OF KUSHIYARA RIVER AGREEMENT

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Abstract

India is the most important and closest neighbour for Bangladesh. Bangladesh-India bilateral relations are known to be a role-model for neighbourhood diplomacy. The first such deal since the 1996 signing of the Ganga water treaty, India and Bangladesh reached an interim agreement on water sharing for the Kushiyara river on September 8, 2022. PM Modi and PM Sheikh Hasina signed a memorandum of understanding on sharing of waters of the Kushiyara river, a contract that will benefit residents of southern Assam and the Sylhet division of Bangladesh, in an effort to divide up the resources of the river that flows through both nations. The two Prime Ministers also discussed nuclear energy collaborations, terrorism, and flood mitigation. India and Bangladesh had a warm and cordial beginning, with India being one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Over the years that followed, India and Bangladesh made significant progress in furthering bilateral ties. It has not been a straight and upward trajectory all throughout, however. For a long time, the relationship was mired in mistrust and suspicion, but the political will displayed by the top leadership of both countries helped in resolving some long-standing issues; other important issues remain unaddressed. In this paper, we will discuss the reasons behind the Kushiyara River Agreement and its impact on India Bangladesh relations.

Keywords: Agriculture, Border Security, Boro, Drainage System, Ethnic Violence, Migration, Infiltration, Public Diplomacy, Rahim Canal, River Commission, River Disputes, Sylhet.

INTRODUCTION

River water management has always been a problem. But, when the river is trans-border, that is, it flows between two countries, then this problem becomes even bigger. Since rivers are the geographical resource of a country and are associated with traditions and folk culture. In such a situation, any kind of dispute regarding rivers affects the foreign policy of the nations as well as the common people. Recently, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India in the first week of September 2022. During this, India-Bangladesh signed various agreement. In which the one was Kushiyara river agreement.

There were some concerns related to India's border security regarding the Kushiara river, due to which India was not agreeing to this agreement. The draft of this agreement, after several rounds of meetings, was finalized in August last month by the "Joint River Commission" of the two countries. And finally, it was formalized after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. In fact, for the past few years, the southern region of Assam and the Sylhet region of Bangladesh were facing the problem of floods. The other were also facing drought in the winter and summer season. Due to which the crop production was affected and irregularities in crop cycling were being created. In such a situation, keeping in view the interests of the regional farmers there, such an agreement became necessary. Almost 26 years after the "Ganga River Water Agreement" of 1996, no such river water agreement is being signed between India and Bangladesh. That is why its importance also increases. As we know the role of 'Joint Rivers Commission' has been important in giving shape to this agreement. So before proceeding, let us know about 'India-Bangladesh Joint River Commission'.

In fact, India and Bangladesh share 54 trans-border rivers. In such a situation, it is natural that the interests of both the countries will also be intertwined, as well as there will be some disputes. Therefore, in order to take joint advantage of the mutual interests related to rivers and to resolve the issues related to river water, the 'India-Bangladesh Joint River Commission' was established in 1972 under the 'India-Bangladesh Peace Treaty'. This commission organizes meetings from time to time to discuss issues related to river water. A delegation from both the countries is involved in the meetings of this commission to discuss the relevant subjects. These delegations are headed by the Ministers of Water Resources of the respective countries.

Since we are discussing a topic related to river water. In such a situation, it becomes necessary to know about the rivers, drainage system and other geographical formations of the area concerned- The Kushiara River is a distributary of the Barak River. It is worth noting that when a river stream takes a different route and a new name after leaving the main river, it is called a distributary of the main river. The Barak River originates in the Manipur Hills of Senapati District in the Indian state of Manipur, which is part of the Surma-Meghna river system. In fact, when the Barak River reaches the Bangladesh border, it forms two distributaries named Surma and Kushiara. The Surma river flows from there to the districts of the northern part of Bangladesh. While the Kushiara flows through the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and the region of Assam, determining the boundary line between the Indian state of Assam and Bangladesh.

This Barak River is later known as Meghna, which further flows along with the Ganges and the Brahmaputra River in other areas of Bangladesh. There are mainly two major river systems in the Indo-Bangladesh region- the Ganges and the Brahmaputra River systems. When the Ganges originating from 'Gangotri' enters Bangladesh, it is known as Padma. Similarly, the source of the Brahmaputra River is 'Man Sarovar' lake in Tibet, from where this river flows through Tibet, India and Bangladesh and empties in the Bay of Bengal. In Bangladesh it is known as 'Jamuna'. Despite the abundance of rivers, this area is affected by flood as well as drought conditions due to lack of favorable infrastructure. There is ample potential for agricultural work in this area, but the changing nature of rivers has caused great damage to agricultural activities.

The issue which was coming in the realisation of this agreement was the 'Rahim Canal Project' of Bangladesh. India has some concerns regarding this. Let us understand what were the objections of India related to this-

In order to solve the drought problem of the farmers, Bangladesh had constructed the Rahim Canal in Zakiganj Upazila of Sylhet. But this project was incomplete due to non-availability of water from Kushiara river. In fact, the Kushiara river determines the boundary line between India and Bangladesh for some distance, due to which India had objections like border security. The cleaning and dredging of the Rahim Canal was affecting the border security. Second, the Kushiara river flows through both India and Bangladesh, but there was no concrete provision regarding water sharing. Because of this, the agreement was hanging in the balance.

In such a situation, the agreement was finalized after resolving all the related objections in the Joint River Commission meeting of both the countries on 25 August 2022 itself. Since all these objections were from India's side, all the objections automatically ended after this agreement. Bangladesh has also constructed water pumps at various places on the 8 km Rahim Canal, so that all the farmers of Sylhet and surrounding areas will be able to take advantage of the availability of water.

Under this agreement, Sylhet district of Bangladesh and southern region of Assam will be mainly benefited. as well as certain other types of benefits contained under this Agreement. So let the understand how the Kushiara River Agreement will benefit both the countries-

- Basically, through this agreement, river water can be used equally throughout the year. This will directly benefit about ten thousand hectares of land and lakhs of farmers. Bangladesh will get 153 cusecs of water annually through this agreement. Due to the availability of water

throughout the year, other tasks like animal husbandry, pastures etc. associated with agriculture will also become easier.

- If seen through this agreement, Sylhet region will be particularly benefited in the production of Boro paddy. Because the farmers here produce Boro paddy from December to February and early summer and this is the time when there is a shortage of water in the Kushiyara river. In such a situation, the water received by Bangladesh through this agreement will help the farmers of this region in crop production and the income of the farmers will also increase.
- Due to lack of proper drainage management during the monsoon season, this area used to suffer from the problem of floods. On the other hand, drought conditions were also faced in summer. Now both the problems will be solved through this agreement. In this regard, along with the drainage of water through Rahim Canal, availability of water for summer irrigation will also be made available.
- Let us know that the relations between India and Bangladesh have been good. Nevertheless, through this agreement, the bilateral relations of both the countries will be further strengthened. This agreement will directly benefit the farmers and the common people, which will further strengthen India's 'public diplomacy'. Public diplomacy is an important point between India-Bangladesh, as most Bangladeshi citizens attribute India's role to independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Apart from this, India's 'public diplomacy' has also proved to be better due to the Bengali language.
- Since there is already a dispute between India and Bangladesh over the water of 'Teesta River'. In such a situation, when Bangladesh is taking loan from China for various projects on the Teesta River, then this agreement becomes very important. Mutual trust in India-Bangladesh will increase through the Kushiyara River Agreement, which will affect China's expansionist ambitions and reduce China's influence in South Asia.
- Earlier, Bangladesh had done cleaning and dredging work in the nearby canals through the 'Upper Surma-Kushiyara River Project'. But it could not progress due to lack of cooperation from India. In such a situation, this project is also likely to gain momentum.

CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

Actually, India shares the longest border with Bangladesh in which more than 50 small and big rivers are shared by both the countries. There are two major rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Nevertheless, the problem of water management remains a persistent one. Along with this, there are many types of disputes regarding the flow and pollution of rivers, which have not been resolved yet. Various problems remain constant in the agriculture sector due to river water pollution. It is noteworthy that due to being a border area, proper development of economic infrastructure has not been done, due to which problems like migration, infiltration, hunger, ethnic violence exists in this area. It is very important to solve all these problems.

On the other hand, India is a federal system under which the role of the states is equal with that of the Central Government. States are also considered equal partners in international agreements. The views of the states may also differ from that of the Center – for example, West Bengal has somewhat different expectations regarding the Teesta Water Treaty. The special thing in the Kushiara River Agreement was that it directly involved the Central government and Bangladesh. No Indian state was involved in this, so that this agreement could be easily embodied. Therefore, there is a need to create a common consensus to resolve other similar disputes.

Till now no concrete decision has been taken between India and Bangladesh regarding Teesta River water. In such a situation, both the countries should execute an agreement soon keeping in mind

their respective national interests. Bangladesh is taking loan from China for several projects in Bangladesh. In such a situation, it is necessary to understand for Bangladesh to stay away from China's 'Debt Trap Policy'. An example is before us of Sri Lanka, which has faced economic and political crisis in many ways after taking loan from China. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to be vigilant about relations with China. Thirty years of 'Ganga River Agreement' is being completed in 2026. There is every possibility that this treaty will be renewed. But it remains to be seen what new dimensions will be in the treaty, which will define today's India-Bangladesh relations.

CONCLUSION

Rivers have played an important role in India Bangladesh relation. So, the basis of the above analysis, it can be said that this agreement will play a big role in the strengthening of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. Similarly, there is also the Teesta River issue between two, which needs to be resolved. India-Bangladesh relationship has progressed significantly in the past few years. The two countries should strive to maintain this positive trajectory and explore pathways of enhancing the growth of the relationship. Identifying the issues that might disrupt the relationship will be useful in framing suitable policy responses.

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