

Teesta Water Issue: A Few Hard Facts

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The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh is considered a failure in public perception in Bangladesh because his visit was much hyped as the heart of resolving long-standing water sharing issue on the Teesta River.

Although there were many productive agreements signed during the visit on areas, such as, demarcation of land border, exchange of enclaves, adverse land possessions, access of twenty four hours to Bangladesh enclaves of Dahagram and Angorpota, and increase of ready-made garments for duty free access to India, all were overshadowed by failure to sign a promised deal on water-sharing of the Teesta River.

For people of Bangladesh, water-sharing on trans-boundary rivers is very important as 54 major rivers flow from India to Bangladesh. India reportedly withdraws water from 43 common rivers by building artificial structures on them and this diversion is against all good neighbourliness.

Out of 54 major rivers, water-sharing agreement of only one river-the Ganges- was signed in 1996 for a period of thirty years.

Teesta is the most important river in northeast of Bangladesh and is the 4th largest river of the country. The river 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 the state of Paschimbanga (West Bengal).

The river enters Bangladesh near Tin Bigha of Lalmonirhat district and according to one river-expert, the total length of the river runs about 315 (some say 400km) kilometres, 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 cum roadbridge 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. The population ration is 70 for Bangladesh: 30 for India.

India built a barrage at Gazaldoba from which 85% percent 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 river banks 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 waters from the Teesta and during the dry season, since Indian states--Sikkim and West Bengal-- withdraw increasingly water from the Teesta, the flow has drastically been reduced to the detriment of the farmers of Bangladesh.

Initially, Dhaka proposed equal sharing of the water keeping 20% per cent for river flow of Teesta. This means the sharing would be out of 80% per cent remaining water and Bangladesh would get 40% and India 40%. But India wanted 55% percent. Furthermore India wanted a 15-year agreement on water sharing of the Teesta River.

Later it was reported in the media in June 2011 that two sides agreed that India would get (42.5%) while Bangladesh 37.5% percent out of 80% of water.

The Teesta river accord could not be signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Dhaka visit in last September due to last-minute opposition from Paschimbanga Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

It is reported that when India's National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon provided the water division figure during a meeting to West Bengal Congress lawmaker Abu Hashem Khan Chowdhury, he was opposed to the figure and wrote a letter to the Indian PM conveying his fear that the water-sharing agreement might affect the agriculture of West Bengal "perversely".

Lawmaker Chowdhury told the BBC in early September that India would retain 75% percent of Teesta river water while Bangladesh would receive the rest (25% per cent). He reportedly said: "Presently, we are taking only 39 percent of Teesta water. But after the agreement we will get 75 percent. So, it will be very beneficial."

Ms. Mamata Banerjee reportedly had said after meeting with Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni in November last year that she had appointed an expert committee to study the Teesta water-sharing issue.

West Bengal River expert Kalyan Rudra, who heads the committee, set up by the West Bengal government on November 15, 2011 to find an acceptable solution to the Teesta water issue was scheduled to submit his report by December 2011 at the latest but he reportedly failed to submit his report and wanted more time. It is not known when Rudra would submit the report. Given the background, the Teesta water issue will remain stuck for an uncertain period of time.

In recent times tension has increased between Congress Party and Trinimool Congress on the issues of foreign investment in retail trade, petrol price hike and interference in federal structure. It is noted the survival of Manmohan Singh's 20-party coalition government depends on the support of 19 MPs from the Trinimool Congress of Ms. Banerjee. Therefore New Delhi cannot afford to annoy politically Ms. Banerjee.

Coalition governments everywhere suffer conflicting pressures from different party components and India is no exception and the Teesta water-sharing appears to have become a victim of political maneuvering between New Delhi and Kolkata.

Interestingly records tell us that Bangladesh could not sign any water agreement either with the Congress or BJP- led government in New Delhi. The 1977 Ganges Water Agreement (for 5 years) was concluded with the Janata government led by Morarji Desai and the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty with the United Front coalition government led by Deve Gawda..