

# TEESTA RIVER DISPUTE BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH

Abdul Waheed Parry



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 Analysis

The Teesta basin is among the more underdeveloped areas of South Asia and deals with numerous issues spanning across economy, governance, politics, environment, security and its riverine ecosystems. All these issues varying greatly in intensity and nature are linked together by the Teesta, which acts as a common thread running through them.

The basin is known for the lack of an agreement between India and Bangladesh over its waters sharing. There are other internal disputes and significant issues tied to the bilateral relations between the two riparian nations.

Water resources in South Asia have been directly connected to national sovereignty and security for many reasons. The growing demand of water due to overpopulation, rapid urbanization and scarcity of the resource has increased the intensity of conflict. The basin has a growing and urbanizing population dealing with poverty and a low living standard. The river, due to

heavy damming, chemical contamination, deforestation and climate change is experiencing irregular flows with a sharp decrease of water. Besides, there is lack of trust and serious efforts to cooperate over the conservation of the river and the development of the basin.

## The Origin of Teesta:

The Teesta River originates at TsoLamo, India, and flows through the states of Sikkim and West Bengal in India and the Rangpur division in Bangladesh before pouring into the Brahmaputra River at Chilmari, Bangladesh. Her total length is 414 km with an average annual flow of 60 billion cubic meters (BCM) of water – roughly the amount of water carried by 24 million Olympic level swimming tanks. Over 30 million people live in the Teesta river basin and are dependent on the river for drinking, domestic use, irrigation, industry as well as cultural and religious activities.



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Teesta is the fourth largest river among the 54 rivers shared by India and Bangladesh. The total area of the Teesta river basin is 12,159 km<sup>2</sup> i.e. roughly thrice the size of the 2,004 km<sup>2</sup> Indian state of Goa. Within India, 6930 km<sup>2</sup> or 86% of the basin lies in Sikkim. The flow of the river is highly variable. At the Dalia barrage in Bangladesh, the average maximum flow of the Teesta has been recorded as high as 7,900 m<sup>3</sup>/s while the average minimum flow has been recorded as low as 283 m<sup>3</sup>/s. Further damming and control of the river has reduced the flow to 28 or even 14 m<sup>3</sup>/s, especially in times of drought. Teesta's average annual flow is about 60 BCM. The seasonal variation rate of Teesta is about 1:10, i.e. 90% of her water, roughly 54 BCM, flows in rainy season from June to September. This means that the flow through the rest of the year is a mere 6 BCM. It is this phenomenon – reduction of Teesta's flow during lean season – that is the bone of contention between India and Bangladesh.

The Teesta River flows through three states/divisions of two countries, namely India's Sikkim and West Bengal states and Bangladesh's Rangpur division. The TsoLamo Lake, located 5,280 m above sea level, is the origin of the Teesta River, which is fed by the TeestaKhangse glacier descending from the Pahaunri peak located on the India-China border in North Sikkim. The river first flows as a small stream named Lachen Chu up to Chungthang where it joins Lachung Chu and takes the name Teesta.

The Teesta River Basin is densely populated. It is home to around 30 million people – which is half the size of Italy's population – out of which roughly 2% are located in Sikkim, 27% are located in North Bengal and the rest 71% are located in North Bangladesh. It must be noted that the actual number of people living in the Teesta basin in Bangladesh is 9.5 million, but more than 21 million people in the country are dependent directly or indirectly on the river for livelihood.

Out of the 30 million people, 23.4 million or 78% of the population stays in rural areas. West Bengal alone is home to 53% of the rural population of the entire Teesta basin. The rural

population is characterized by the low level of economic activity, poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment and an overall low Human Development Index (HDI) score on both sides of the border. The rural population of the Teesta basin is highly dependent on the river for its survival.

## The Issue:

Teesta is a perennial, rain-and-snow-fed river characterized by extreme variability in her flows throughout the year. Over 90% of her flow occurs in rainy season from June to September while the rest 10% occurs in the remaining eight months. As a lower riparian, Bangladesh is completely dependent on India, the upper riparian, for keeping minimum flows in the Teesta River. India has been unilaterally constructing a series of dams up north which have reduced the river's flows to as little as 14 m<sup>3</sup>/s during times of drought, greatly hurting the livelihoods of thousands of farmers, fishermen and boatmen in Bangladesh. Conversely, during monsoon season, Indian dams on the Teesta release excess water, causing heavy floods and again disrupting thousands of livelihoods in Bangladesh. The intensity of damage is particularly more acute in Bangladesh as the size of population and economy dependent on Teesta in Bangladesh outstrips its counterpart upstream in India. Bangladesh demands a fair share of the Teesta waters in lean season and guaranteed minimum flows throughout the year formalized in a treaty signed and ratified by governments of both countries. Negotiations on the Teesta River have been going on for decades and a draft agreement has been prepared, however, the Teesta deal between New Delhi and Dhaka fell through in 2011, and no concrete progress has been made since.

## History of the Teesta Dispute:

Up until the Partition in 1947, since the Teesta River flowed as a single unit through the then princely state of Sikkim and the province of Bengal, both under British India, there was no question of trans-boundary governance and sharing. During the Partition, the All India Muslim League was the first to hint at the looming

dispute by asking for Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts to be incorporated in East Pakistan on the ground that they were the catchment areas of the Teesta River. The rationale was that with the entire middle and lower Teesta basin lies in East Pakistan, the country would be in a better position to use the erstwhile and future hydropower projects. However, mainly due to their non-Muslim composition, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri were handed over to India.

After the Partition, Sikkim continued to be a protectorate of India right up to its merger with the latter as a state in 1975. During the 1950s and 1960s, Indian and East Pakistani officials began talks over the damming and sharing of Teesta. At the same time, India and Pakistan were negotiating agreements on the Ganga and Indus rivers due to which the Teesta issue took a backseat. After signing the Indus Water Treaty in 1960, the two countries turned their focus on negotiations on the Ganga River, and the Teesta issue jumped up the ladder. East Pakistan outlined a plan to build a barrage on their side of the Teesta, which India opposed. Suggesting 'other rivers' for fulfilling India's irrigation and other needs, East Pakistan decided to go ahead with the plan; however, it was only in 1990 that a barrage was completed on the Teesta in what was now Bangladesh.

### **The Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC)**

After the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the two countries resumed talks over sharing the Ganga, Teesta and other rivers. In 1972, India and Bangladesh established the Indo-Bangladesh

Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) with the aim of "working together in harnessing the rivers common to both the countries for the benefit of the peoples of the two countries", but originally focused on the joint management of the Ganga river basin. As per Article 4 of the Statute of the JRC, the Commission has the following functions –

- To maintain liaison between the participating countries in order to ensure the most effective joint efforts in maximizing the benefits from common river systems to both the countries,
- To formulate flood control works and to recommend implementation of joint projects,
- To formulate detailed proposals on advance flood warnings, flood forecasting and cyclone warnings,
- To study flood control and irrigation projects so that the water resources of the region can be utilized on an equitable basis for the mutual benefit of the peoples of the two countries, and To formulate proposals for carrying out coordinated research on problem of flood control affecting both the countries.”

South Asia has a history of water disputes. India trying to act as a big brother in the region is exploiting the less powerful countries. India-Bangladesh and India-Pakistan water crisis are two clear examples of India acting as a hegemonic power in the region. This needs to be checked, as it is affecting vast and poor populations in India's neighboring countries.