

Transboundary Rivers

Converting Challenges into Opportunities.....

From Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh in the east, the South Asian countries are criss-crossed by numerous transboundary rivers that originate in the Himalayas. The dominant narrative on transboundary rivers has been one of sharing, evocative of division of the spoils (or scarce and dwindling resources), based until now on the premise of zero-sum games. There are very few examples of agreements reached to date. Notably, treaties were arrived at only on two of these rivers to date: the Treaty between India and Pakistan on the Indus River and the Treaty arrived at bilaterally on the Ganges River between Bangladesh and India in December 1996. None of the other Himalayan rivers are governed by any agreed-upon framework between the countries through which these rivers mender.

My personal involvement in the finalization of the Ganges Treaty led me to certain conclusions about pathways to arriving at solutions. Prior to its resolution, the dispute over the sharing of the Ganges River waters between Bangladesh and India had come to be viewed as the defining function of bilateral relations between these two countries. Once the treaty was signed, it opened the doors to progress in other sectors that had become dormant.

How was the Ganges conundrum solved? For me, parsing the dynamics of the negotiations there were eight factors that had to come together before arriving at the point of resolution. First, it was absolutely necessary that the political will existed at the highest level possible made the critical difference. Second, both sides realized that the political dynamics had to take precedence over technical-mechanical drivers. The negotiations were now led by the Foreign Ministries of the two countries, and not the Water Resources Ministry, since both acknowledged that resolution mechanism had to be political, not technical. Third, in a federal configuration, the state/provincial governments had to be co-opted as primary stakeholders and made active participants in the negotiating process. Without West Bengal become an active partner in seeking a solution, the final resolution would not have been reached. Fourth, the web of diplomacy had to be expanded beyond engaging primarily (and only) with the ruling establishment of the other side. The Bangladesh side engaged in intense diplomatic contacts at senior levels that extended beyond merely the senior officials and cabinet members of India and also reached out to leaders in opposition at national and state levels, and also enlisting media and think-tanks' sympathy and support. Fifth, breaking down embedded myths that generate suspicion helps the process immensely. The engineers on the Bangladesh side had a deep-rooted suspicion, which had over time been transformed into deep-seated conviction as without visiting the Farakka site, that India was siphoning off water through additional measures at the Jangipur Barrage that they had built downstream of the site of the original Farakka Barrage. When the same engineers were taken to the site, that myth was shattered and the suspicions laid to rest. Sixth, enlisting personal/emotive ties of provincial leaders/officials on other side also helps immensely. Seventh, setting a firm time frame for completing negotiations rather than keeping it open-ended can be of critical importance. Open-ended negotiations had become self-perpetuating, without any compulsion for arriving to a mutually satisfactory solution. Eighth, de-linking solution of different issues from each other, and pursuing negotiations on different issues on separate but simultaneous tracks, facilitates arriving at practicable solutions. The linkage of augmentation of waters at Farakka had tied up both sides from reaching any solution on the issue of water sharing, because the approaches of the two sides on augmentation were diametrically and radically opposed to each other conceptually – building dams in Nepal (that required a third party being involved), or upper reaches of India as favoured by Bangladesh, vs. linking the waters of the Brahmaputra with the Ganges by constructing a canal within Bangladesh, as favoured by India. In the face of this, the Bangladesh side, for a change, took a pragmatic

approach – as certaining that even without augmentation, there was sufficient water at Farakka that could be shared, and then arriving at an arrangement for sharing that. Thereby, both sides could get on with their lives and with their other plans for development.

The Ganges Treaty enabled both sides to break out of a hostage situation and move on with their lives. It is another matter that many subsequent opportunities for resolving other contentious issues, or even moving forward on areas where cooperation was feasible, were frittered and lost. However, the region is now confronted by enormous ecological challenges, that would be well beyond the capacities or capabilities of anyone country to address alone, on its own. However, if all the countries who belong to the realm of these trans-boundary waters were to finally get together to collaborating on managing these vast basins, I do believe the situation would change dramatically, and we could transform the challenges into vast opportunities.

The eastern Himalayan rivers affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people who inhabit the most densely populated geographic region of the Indian sub-continent comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, northeast India, Sikkim and West Bengal. Taking account of recent welcome developments on basin management of rivers in this region, I believe this sub-region now needs to consider a scheme for holistic management of river basins. Collaborating on holistic basin management in Bhutan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal (BBIN) of associated shared commons – water resources and forestry – would transform what appears to be a daunting challenge into an opportunity with vast consequences for the countries and their inhabitants. It must necessarily engage proactively with the people who inhabit the countless villages, towns and cities, and restore to them a sense of ownership and pride in their shared commons. If we wish to restore navigability of these rivers, sorely neglected over the last sixty years, we would need to undertake:

- Dredging, for sustaining navigability (and in the process, even perhaps regain some land for human habitation and agriculture)
- Expansion of existing irrigation channels (that would also serve as overflow drainage channels during high season floods),
- Shoring up the embankments
- Creating water conservation reservoirs / pond age generation of hydro-electricity

Opening the rivers to better and more optimized use of river transportation, in turn will open new service sectors and industries. Dying rivers would be revived, progressive siltation of river-beds would be reduced, and the ecology resuscitated. The generation of hydro-electricity would also serve the purpose of rendering surplus hydrocarbon resources for intra-regional use or export abroad. They would also dramatically reduce the current rate of deforestation (for fuel as well as for illegal logging). The regeneration of forestry and increasing forest coverage would create new, and enhance existing, carbon-sequestration zones.

We are at the cusp of transforming these mighty rivers, that nurture and sustain our eco-system, from continuing to be the rivers of confrontation and conflict that they have become over the last over seven decades, into rivers of cooperation nurturing comfort and our well-being. Let us seize the moment, not lose or squander it.

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