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What Bangladesh wants from the Ganga Water Treaty

By: Sk Tawfique M Haque

India and Bangladesh are due to renew their river water sharing agreement. Apart from politics, the 30-year-old treaty has been overrun also by climate change.

The Ganga Water Treaty is crucial to India-Bangladesh relations because it guarantees a systematic process for water sharing between the two riparian states.

The treaty, signed in 1996, expires next year. It needs to be renewed in the interests of both India and Bangladesh. Preliminary negotiations are already being made to re-negotiate the treaty.

Although the Ganga Water Treaty has promoted collaboration, there are still issues, particularly with seasonal water scarcity and the requirement for a more comprehensive transboundary water-sharing structure. Both nations will need to negotiate a more thorough and climate-resilient deal.

On 12 December 1996, then-Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and his Bangladeshi counterpart Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed the Ganga Water Treaty. The 30-year treaty will end in 2026.

In the last three decades, the treaty has been criticised, especially by Bangladesh, which has often claimed that it was biased in India's favour and has resulted in severe water shortages in Bangladesh.

Water allocation is determined using historical flow data from 1949 to 1988 during a 10-day period at Farakka Barrage in India. The average flow at the barrage during the dry season (1 January 1 to 31 May), when water availability is critical, is the basis for the water-sharing formula of the treaty.

The treaty enjoins Bangladesh and India to split the water supply 50:50 if the flow is 70,000 cubic feet per second (cusecs) or less.

|| India frequently denies Bangladesh its fair share of water ... when both countries' water demand is at peak.

However, Bangladesh's share is 35,000 cusecs if the flow is between 70,000 and 75,000 cusecs, while India receives the remaining flow. If the flow is 75,000 cusecs or more, India receives 40,000 cusecs, with the excess flow going to Bangladesh.

The Ganga Water Treaty, however, does not provide a minimum 'guarantee clause'. It instead offers diplomatic negotiations.

Article II of the treaty mentions that "in the event flow at Farakka falls below 50,000 cusecs in any 10-day period, the two Governments will enter into immediate consultations to make adjustments on an emergency basis, in accordance with the principles of equity, fair play and no harm to either party."

There is a condition that "India and Bangladesh each shall receive guaranteed 35,000 cusecs of water in alternate three 10-day periods during the period March 11 to May 10."

The Joint Rivers Commission, which was set up by the two countries in 1972, has the role of ensuring compliance and resolving disputes. If disputes arise, both countries need to engage in diplomatic discussions. In case of failure, the matter is to be resolved through mutual negotiations or an agreed mechanism.

The provisions of the Ganga Water Treaty underline how crucial it is for Bangladesh and India to work cooperatively to manage their shared water resources.

The Joint Committee, established to supervise the execution of the treaty, met for the 86th time in Kolkata on 6 March 2025. This regular technical meeting, which is supposed to occur thrice a year, is part of an institutional procedure for the treaty's implementation. Matters such as water flow measurement and other topics of shared interest, were covered during the discussion.

Given that the states of India through which cross-border river flows must approve a water-sharing pact or its renewal, the West Bengal government is likely to play a significant role in renewing the Ganga Water Treaty.

It is pertinent to recall that even though Bangladesh and India had agreed on the Teesta River water-sharing treaty in 2011, it was the West Bengal government that [scuttled it](#) then and [continues to oppose it even now](#).

|| The ecologically sensitive Sundarbans delta may dry up if the Ganga water flow upstream is curtailed.

In August 2023, the West Bengal government nominated its representative to the internal committee set by the central government in India to consult the stakeholders in the Ganga Water Treaty. West Bengal raised its concerns and participated in three of its four meetings. Additionally, on 5 April 2024, West Bengal wrote a letter to the committee outlining its industrial and drinking water needs [after 2026](#).

Low-flow water-sharing disputes are common during the lean season. Because of India's growing upstream water withdrawals and climate change, Bangladesh feels that the treaty understates the effects of increased climate variability on the lower riparian.

Water specialists have reviewed the Ganga water sharing from 1997 to 2016 and discovered that Bangladesh did not receive its share during most of the [crucial dry times](#), contrary to the treaty provisions.

According to some [experts](#), in 94 of 300 cases between 1997 and 2016, Bangladesh got less water at the Hardinge Bridge than India's Farakka barrage. They claim that during the same period Bangladesh did not receive its stipulated supply 39 times out of 60, assuming the necessary dry spells are taken into consideration. Between 2008 and 2011, these failures were frequent during the dry seasons.

During the dry season, India is required by the rules of the treaty to provide Bangladesh with a specific amount of water every ten days. India frequently denies Bangladesh its fair share of water during the period between 11 March and 10 May, when both countries' water demand is at peak. Additionally, by releasing more water than is required during its remaining water-sharing seasons, India can declare [itself in compliance](#) with the agreement virtually any year.

By analysing the 1996 treaty's performance in water sharing during the lean season, water experts in Bangladesh demand both [qualitative and quantitative analyses](#). This is required to assess the treaty's success or failure.

The secretary-general of Riverine People, a civil society organisation based in Dhaka, Sheikh Rokon, claims that the treaty's focus on the water supply at the Farakka Barrage, a single location, is one of its flaws. Instead, the flows of the Ganga from its source to mouth need to be considered. He also fears that the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans delta may dry up if the Ganga water flow upstream is [curtailed](#).

|| The Ganga Water Treaty also needs to be re-evaluated in light of climate change.

When the treaty was signed thirty years ago, the Ganga's water flow was different. Now, Indian states like Bihar are dealing with [severe floods](#) during the monsoon season. Bangladesh also faces floods during the monsoon season and droughts during summer as a result of climate change.

In order to guarantee Bangladesh's fair share for the preservation of its environment, ensuring food security and energy production, flood mitigation and pollution management, experts recommend using a mix of modelling and enhanced river-flow observation to determine the reliable [availability of water](#). They believe that some of these issues result from India's unreported excessive upstream withdrawal of Ganga waters due to the lack of a transboundary institutional [mechanism](#).

The Ganga Water Treaty also needs to be re-evaluated in light of [climate change](#). Adaptive water allocation becomes paramount as river flows shift, balancing equitable distribution with ecological resilience. Proactive flood management, guided by data-driven insights, also needs to be incorporated into the renegotiated treaty.

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