

India-Bangladesh Ganga Water Treaty in 2026: Renewal and Recalibration

Neeraj Kumar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Patna University, Patna

Email: neerajpsir@gmail.com

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Abstract

Relations between India and Bangladesh occupy a central position in South Asia's evolving geopolitical and hydropolitical landscape. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, bilateral relations have oscillated between cooperation and contention, shaped by historical legacies, domestic political dynamics, and regional power asymmetries. Transboundary rivers represent an essential component of regional geopolitics and sustainable development in South Asia. The sharing of transboundary rivers has long shaped political, economic, and social relations between India and Bangladesh. Among these rivers, the Ganga River—known as the Padma in Bangladesh—occupies a central place due to its ecological importance and its role in sustaining millions of livelihoods. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty 1996 between India and Bangladesh was a significant milestone in South Asian hydrodiplomacy, establishing a 30-year framework for the allocation of dry-season flows at Farakka and instituting procedures for collaboration. The Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 is a pivotal accord in South Asian hydrodiplomacy, illustrating both the possibilities and constraints of collaborative water management. This paper delves into a comprehensive overview of the Ganga Water Treaty, exploring its complexities and considering the future implications following its completion of the 30 years of the treaty stipulated in 2026 and prospects for its renewal and recalibration.

Keywords: Water Disputes, Treaty Renewal, Geopolitics, Ganga Water Treaty, Hydrodiplomacy

Introduction

India and Bangladesh are intertwined through an intricate weave of history, geography, language, culture and an extensive network of transboundary rivers. The commendable bilateral relations exemplify a comprehensive alliance grounded in principles of sovereignty, equality, trust, and mutual understanding, transcending the mere confines of a strategic partnership. (MEA GOI, 2024). The Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 is a significant accord between India and Bangladesh, establishing a framework for the fair distribution of dry-season flows of the Ganga at the Farakka Barrage and serving as a confidence-building instrument for the management of a critical shared water resource in the region. The pact, signed after decades of contention and temporary agreements, represented a transition from unilateral water governance to collaborative hydrodiplomacy on the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent (Salman & Uprety, 2002).

Objectives

- To analyse the Ganga River water dispute and the diplomatic negotiations leading to the Ganga Water Treaty 1996 and assess the effectiveness of the treaty in managing India–Bangladesh water relations amid contemporary political, technical and institutional challenges.
- To analyse the future viability of the Ganga Waters Treaty considering climate change & exponential demographic growth of the region, increasing water scarcity, shifting regional geopolitics and changing internal politics of both the nations.



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Address for correspondence:

Neeraj Kumar, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Patna University, Patna

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Methodology

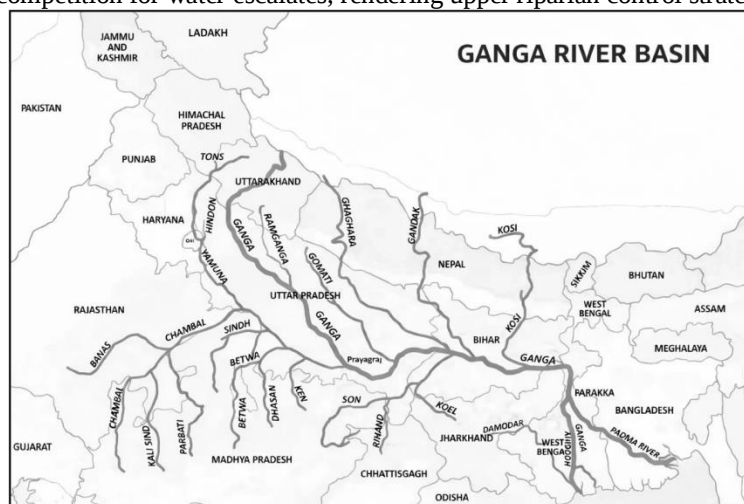
To accomplish the study purpose and objectives, this paper primarily relies on secondary data sourced from publications, including books, monthly journals, online resources, and research articles.

History of India-Bangladesh Relations

India, alongside Bhutan, was among the pioneering nations to acknowledge Bangladesh as a sovereign entity on 6 December 1971. India significantly contributed to the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971, fostering the foundation for a profound initial bilateral relationship (Raghavan, 2013). The Treaty of Friendship, Collaboration, and Peace that was signed in 1972 was a clear indication of the close cooperation that existed between the two nations at the time when Bangladesh was emerging on the global stage as an independent nation. The treaty of friendship was also popularly known as the Indira-Mujib treaty. It is important to note that India possesses its longest border, measuring 4,096.7 kilometres, with Bangladesh, which ranks as the fifth longest border globally (Chaudhury, 2025). The bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh has profound implications for millions of individuals in both nations, as well as for the broader South Asian region and beyond. Bangladesh holds significant relevance within the framework of India's neighbourhood policy, particularly when viewed through the lenses of geopolitics and geostrategy. It is quite notable that the relations between the two nations saw oscillations in the late 1970s and 1980s due to successive government changes and the coming of military and quasi-military regimes at the helm of power in Bangladesh, border disputes, and arguments regarding river water allocation, notably involving the Ganges (Goldman & Crow, 1996). The reinstatement of democratic administration in Bangladesh throughout the 1990s enabled a gradual normalisation of relations. The mid-1990s were a pivotal moment, culminating in the ratification of the Ganga Water Treaty 1996. Since that time, despite occasional conflicts, bilateral relations have exhibited increasing resilience, driven by pragmatic factors that foster economic development in the whole region, which is essential at this juncture.

The Ganga River system: Physical and Geographical Context

The Ganga River is a significant transboundary river in South Asia, originating at an elevation of around 3,239 meters above sea level from the Gangotri Glacier in the Uttarkashi District of Uttarakhand, India. The river flows roughly 2,525 km south eastward, passing through numerous Indian states before entering Bangladesh, where it is referred to as the Padma. In Bangladesh, the Padma River merges with the Brahmaputra, also known as the Jamuna, and combined with the Meghna River, it forms a vast deltaic system. The variations in the seasonal flow of the Ganges affects the nations sharing its waters. According to an estimate approximately 80% of annual discharge of water in this river system occurs in the monsoon months. While the dry-season i.e. January-May sees a significant drop in discharge. During this lean phase, competition for water escalates, rendering upper riparian control strategically crucial.



Source: Compiled based on the Survey of India and Bangladesh Water Development Board basin maps.

Transboundary River Water Sharing: The Ganges

The Ganga River water dispute can be traced back to the colonial era times water management practices and post-independence development priorities of the emerging nations, notably India's construction of the Farakka Barrage in the 1960s, located in the Indian state of West Bengal, approximately 16 km upstream from the India-Bangladesh international border aimed at diverting water for navigation in the Hooghly River (Crow et al., 1995). Bangladesh, the erstwhile East Pakistan, expressed concerns regarding diminished downstream flows, ecological degradation, and socio-economic effects, particularly during the lean season. One of the principal disputes between the two nations concerning the Ganges River arose in the early 1970s when India created the Farakka Barrage to divert water into the Hooghly River, aiming to improve the navigability of the port of Kolkata. Bangladesh, situated downstream, expressed concerns that the possibility for dry-season diversions would lead to diminished water flows, intensifying saline intrusion and adversely affecting agricultural and fishery sectors on a large scale, on which the majority of the

Bangladesh population is dependent (Crow & Singh, 1999). In 1951, the Government of India decided to construct a barrage at Farakka, situated around 17 kilometres upstream from the western border of Bangladesh with India. The construction of the barrage started in 1962, culminating in the completion of a 75-foot-high and 7,000-foot-long structure in 1970 (Bindra, 1982). The construction of the Farakka Barrage was finally finished in 1971. The barrage became operational on April 21, 1975, after the completion of a 26.5-mile feeder canal to the Bhagirathi River, which took an extra four years for its completion.

Negotiations and Interim Agreements Following 1971

During Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Bangladesh in 1972, a treaty of friendship, cooperation, and peace was signed, stipulating that both countries agreed to conduct joint studies and undertake collaborative actions in flood control, river basin development, hydroelectric power, and irrigation. The outcome of this was the creation of the Joint River Commission with the mandate to the Commission experts to formulate ideas about advanced flood alerts, as well as to study flood control and irrigation projects concerning the principal river basins shared by both nations (Bindra, 1982). The interim agreement of 1975 proposed by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to end the deadlock over the sharing of Ganga waters enabled India to operationalise the Farakka Barrage. The contract was executed on April 18, 1975. It was valid for a duration of forty-one days, from April 21 to May 31, 1975. Bangladesh secured significant concessions from India as initially, Bangladesh was allocated 44,000 cusecs of water and was projected to get up to 49,500 cusecs during the latter phase of the dry season (Hossain, 1998). Following the advisory of the United Nations, the two nations begin their discussion, which led to the 1977 India and Bangladesh agreement on sharing of the Ganges water at Farakka. This protocol is considered one of the first of the formal agreements for Ganga water sharing between both nations, which has the provisions for seasonal water allocations from January 1 to May 31 each year. The 1977 river water sharing agreement was effective for five years and expired on May 31, 1982, coinciding with the end of that year's dry season (Bindra, 1982). Many short-term agreements and MoUs were signed during the years 1977 and 1988 by both these nations, however, none of these agreements resulted in long-term stability. These interim agreements didn't showcase any unified hydrological approach rather they signalled greater political shifts undergoing in their respective nations at that time. The fundamental problem lies in how seasonal variations in rainfall and low water flows in river systems are managed, which serves as the main source of conflict in India-Bangladesh hydro relations (Jyoti, 2022).

The Ganga Water Treaty 1996

Following General Ershad's resignation and Khaleda Zia's ascension to power in 1991, multiple meetings were convened, including sessions of the Joint River Commission; however, the impasse persisted regarding Bangladesh's desire for the development of water storage facilities in Nepal, which India opposed. India lobbied for the development of a connecting canal (Hossain, 1998). In the year 1996 with coming of Awami League party at the helm of the power in Bangladesh both governments were able to sign a long-term treaty on sharing of the waters of the River Ganges. The Ganga Water Treaty 1996 established a 30-year water-sharing framework, procedures for collaborative monitoring, and stipulations for dispute resolution, embodying principles of international water law, including fair and reasonable use (Salman & Uprety, 2002). The treaty further strengthened the Joint Rivers Commission as the primary bilateral institution for daily flow monitoring and consultation and exchanging of flow data. Along with that the JRC was responsible for issuing any alert or notification in regards to any issues at Farakka and facilitating technological collaboration and research. This treaty from an institutional standpoint, signified a transition from unilateral measures to negotiated cooperation. It is regarded as one of the most resilient transboundary water accords in South Asia, signifying that even unequal riparian relationships may be effectively handled through legal and diplomatic mechanisms (Mirumachi, 2015). The pact facilitated the depoliticisation of daily water management by integrating technical collaboration into a legal framework. The treaty narrowly focused on the flow allocation at a singular place this restricted its adaptation to hydrological fluctuations, leading to its inadequate enforcement measures. This has been one of the most major shortcomings of this pact and has attracted criticism. One of the other main concerns is that the institution of the JRC possesses a technical role, but it lacks any effective dispute resolution mechanism which is essential for the uncertainties caused in the future by climate changes (Sands, 1997). The treaty puts extra pressure on India as an upper riparian to regulate its upstream water utilisation, manage monsoon fluctuations, and manage reservoir while adhering to treaty obligations—an arduous task amid evolving climatic conditions and conflicting domestic requirements (Lad & Jaybhaye, 2024).

Challenges and the way forward

Institutional and legal

Despite its extensive schedules and collaborative measurement techniques, the 1996 treaty lacks some contemporary components, and the renewal of the treaty had been left to mutual consent between both nations after the ending of the stipulated 30 years. As the treaty lacks conflict resolution mechanisms that match the contemporary data environment and multistakeholder engagement processes. The renegotiation taking place would have to consider whether to establish a renegotiated treaty with the scope to establish a legal framework with adaptive, trigger-based allocation rules in the present environment of climate change & to develop a shared basin institutions with enforcement capabilities or to maintain a more straightforward political agreement (Islam et al., 2013).

Geopolitics, regional alignments, and internal politics

Bilateral accords are never established in a political vacuum the present situation and political relation between two parties always plays a role in negotiations and changing dynamics of relations between the two nations. The currently prevalent dynamic geopolitical situation in the region will significantly influence the renegotiation process. The Ganga Water Treaty negotiations will be influenced by the bilateral India–Bangladesh relationship as well as third-party factors like Bangladesh's relationship with China, regional strategic issues, and internal political pressures in both nations. Specially in the case of India where water is a state subject it is of utmost importance to consider the States involved as a major stakeholder in the negotiation process.

Climate change and glacial-hydrological uncertainty

The impending climate changes globally have impacted the Indian subcontinent, resulting in the melting of glaciers and an increased frequency of extreme events such as floods and droughts. The alteration of rainfall patterns has led to flood-like conditions in basin areas during the monsoon months and diminished flow in the remaining months, exacerbating uncertainty in water availability. The 1996 accord, was negotiated under stable hydrological conditions present at that time but it does not contain specific climate-adaptive measures. It becomes quite imperative to include the prevailing circumstances of climate change and the rapidly changing hydrology of the region in renegotiation processes.

Monitoring and Transparency Issues

To facilitate effective water sharing between the two nations, reliable hydrological data sets must be shared accompanied by collaborative monitoring. The 1996 treaty provided provisions for regular joint management; nonetheless, discrepancies in execution and varying technical methodologies have led to disagreements over the observed flows. It will be crucial to have a standardised measuring technique to facilitate real-time monitoring and exchange of flow data which has been independently verified.

Conclusion

As the 30-year period concludes in 2026, India has a political and technical negotiating challenge where it has to be reconciling domestic irrigation and urban needs with the necessity of maintaining favourable bilateral ties. The Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 is an essential aspect of India–Bangladesh ties and an exceptional instance of enduring transboundary water cooperation in South Asia. Although it has offered stability and predictability, its limitations are evident in the changing exponentially growing demographic composition, climatic circumstances, and developmental concerns. The renewal of the Ganga Water-Sharing Treaty 1996 in 2026 provides an opportunity to reframe cooperation around overall river basin-wide development and to modernise a significant bilateral agreement. Taking into consideration the challenges presented by enhancing climate changes, incorporating a wider geographic reach by taking Teesta river into consideration. It is also a requirement of the present-day times that there should be a focus on enhanced collaborative scientific efforts and institutional enhancements to address complexities. However, the renegotiation of the treaty faces a substantial ecological, legal, technical, hydrological as well as political challenges. The conclusion of the 30-year Ganga water treaty in 2026 and the ensuing discussions for its renewal present a chance to restructure the cooperation efforts for a comprehensive river basin development. The negotiations for the renewal of the treaty need to take into consideration a revitalised, modern framework that can defend livelihoods, ecology, and regional stability. The future of India–Bangladesh hydrodiplomacy is contingent on legislative frameworks, political commitment, scientific collaboration, and a mutual acknowledgement that the Ganga constitutes a shared ecological system rather than a divided resource. An integrated basin management strategy should be adopted for its development.

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