

Troubled Waters: India-Bangladesh Relations in a Post-Hasina Era

February 21, 2025



On February 18 and 19, the Teesta River Protection Committee in Bangladesh held a 48-hour protest across the five districts where the transboundary Teesta River flows between India and Bangladesh. The demonstrations were organized by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) Rangpur Organizing Secretary Asadul Habib Dulu, focusing on the India-Bangladesh dispute over the Teesta's waters and fair water sharing arrangements. At the event, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam publicly [criticized](#) India, the Awami League, and the interim government.

On India: "We want to tell India clearly, release Teesta River water first...stop killing people along the border; and, stop behaving with us like an elder brother... Surely we want to see India as our friend, which would be based on dignity."

On the Awami League: "We have been talking about fair share of

Teesta River water for a long time. The Awami League formed a government. Initially, many people thought they would get Teesta water as AL is a friend of India. But nothing was done in 15 years.”

On the interim government: “We want to tell this government clearly...you cannot maintain neutrality on this issue...You have to tell India, we want our fair share of water. Nothing comes without a fight. We will bring water in the Teesta River through a fight. We will realise our rights.”

The BNP leader’s remarks came a day after EAM S Jaishankar met Foreign Advisor Touhid Hossain on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat. Here, the Bangladesh MFA’s readout stated that FA Hossain emphasized the importance of renewing the Ganges Waters Treaty, and [highlighted](#) the importance of holding SAARC Standing Committee meetings. As a high-level Bangladesh Border Guards delegation [visits](#) New Delhi for their bi-annual Director General level talks with India’s BSF (for the first time since Hasina’s ousting), what do these developments mean for India-Bangladesh ties?



Technical Complexities and Political Opportunism

Issues related to the Teesta River and the Ganges Treaty are remnants of the Sheikh Hasina administration. After Hasina's India visit in June 2024, New Delhi and Dhaka planned focused discussions on both issues. An Indian technical team was set to [visit](#) Bangladesh for a "mega-project" on Teesta River conservation, while both countries would [begin](#) technical talks on renewing the Ganges Treaty. Water sharing has long been a challenge between India and Bangladesh, which share 54 transboundary rivers. Even at the best of times with Hasina at Dhaka's helm, both states have taken years to settle outstanding issues—resolving most, including maritime boundaries—but the Teesta dispute remained unresolved. While border issues also lingered, dedicated forums like the BGB-BSF biannual meeting facilitate discussion and resolution. The current developments are best understood at two levels – technical and political.

The India-Bangladesh Teesta dispute dates back at least 40 years when a 1983 temporary water-sharing arrangement (36% of the dry-season flow to Bangladesh, 39% to India) failed to develop into a permanent treaty. A 2011 attempt (allocating 37.5% to Bangladesh) also [failed](#) after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the deal and refused implementation. In subsequent Hasina-Modi meetings, both states repeatedly reaffirmed their intent to revisit the treaty. On the other hand, the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty is an existing arrangement that will expire in December 2026. Though there is no active dispute over the treaty (aside from minor implementation differences), its approaching expiry increases the urgency to renew/rework it.

At a technical level, the BNP's three-pronged charge is grounded in strong rationale. Fakhrul Islam, while accusing India of damming all 54 transboundary rivers, [asserted](#) that

such hydropower projects do not leave enough water for Bangladeshi fishermen, or for farmers to produce grain, causing an “unbearable situation”. On the other hand when India does release water, it washes away homes and assets downstream in Bangladesh. The Teesta River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, originates in China as the Tsangpo. India is the upper riparian to Bangladesh, while China is the upper riparian to India. The BNP’s concerns over the Teesta mirror those in India and Bangladesh regarding China’s [planned](#) ‘mega-hydropower project’ in Tibet, set to be the world’s largest. Beyond water-sharing concerns, India fears China could deliberately flood downstream areas in Arunachal Pradesh during a conflict. Regardless, the Brahmaputra is already notorious for its volatility, triggering seasonal floods in India (Assam) and Bangladesh. The challenge lies in how India and Bangladesh can establish a framework for sustained negotiations to resolve the dispute. But it is here that a puzzle emerges.

The BNP has targeted both the interim government and India. However, Bangladeshi experts [acknowledge](#) that fully resolving the river dispute is impossible without multilateral cooperation (read: India). In any case, the Yunus government swiftly [highlighted](#) concerns over the Teesta after taking power in Dhaka, threatening international arbitration against India if the latter does not agree to restart [negotiations](#) from where they left it in 2011. The BNP, meanwhile, is [leveraging](#) another factor—the Teesta Master Plan with China—which it pledges to implement if elected. The [plan](#)—a comprehensive river management system for erosion control, flood management, disaster reduction, land reclamation, transportation, and ecosystem restoration, among others—has long been delayed, with an extension on Bangladesh’s MoU with POWERCHINA being agreed upon last month.

For the BNP, leveraging the Teesta serves a dual purpose—it addresses a justified yet populist issue while expanding its

support base. But it also allows for greater pressure on the interim administration, which the BNP looks to eventually replace after the elections. Due to its extra-constitutional and transitional nature, Dhaka's interim government is an unstable negotiating partner for India—far from the ideal partner the Awami League government was, despite its own failure to resolve the dispute. Essentially then, Bangladesh too now has a dilemma of agency in such negotiations, given political equations. Thus far, only India has been in such a position, with the West Bengal CM blocking proposals due to disagreements over water allocations to her state. If the BNP succeeds in pushing for India-Bangladesh talks, it can credit its 130km long march for drawing attention to the issue. If negotiations don't happen, the BNP gains another pressure point to demand early elections. India's dilemma is whether to engage with a non-democratic transitional government—despite four decades of failed talks—or wait for elections in Bangladesh to negotiate with a more empowered leadership.

Navigating Deadlines and Diplomatic Pressures

Regardless of political considerations, India holds the ability to delay resolving the Teesta dispute; both states have weathered any storm related to the river thus far. In any case, Mamata Banerjee is expected to remain in power until at least March 2026, when West Bengal's elections are scheduled, with the BJP already [preparing](#) for the polls. Regardless of the election outcome, the numerous uncertainties make good-faith negotiations unlikely in the meantime.

It is the Ganges Waters Treaty that requires engagement on water sharing before December 2026. In both cases, Bangladesh, as the lower riparian, is more reliant on treaty settlements with India. Regardless of political equations in Bangladesh and how Yunus' successes or failures affect the BNP's

electoral prospects, Dhaka will have to find a way to insulate other issues and bring India to the table for talks. For India, the issue of water sharing will eventually be an opportunity to counter Bangladesh's ability to open fresh fronts of pressure—especially amid Hasina's continued provocations from New Delhi—and demand talks in good faith, respect for red-lines, and a recognition of Indian interests.