

Paradiplomacy and the Teesta river water dispute: National interest vs regionalism

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*As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh visits India, **Falguni Tewari** takes stock of the Teesta river water dispute which is a key discussion point. She writes that the stalemate over water sharing has highlighted the limitations of subnational diplomacy, and that West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee must recognise the need to balance state and national priorities in negotiations.*



Bangladesh premier Sheikh Hasina is set to make her much-awaited state visit to India later this month and her impending visit assumes importance due to recent developments. First, the visit is a talking point after two earlier postponements of December 2016 and February 2017 for undisclosed reasons, and second, the BJP's resounding victory in recently concluded assembly elections has put a seal of public approval on nearly three years of the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. The Modi government does not find itself in trouble about the uncertain consequences of demonetization and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) is almost set to roll out by July this year.

At such a time, PM Hasina's visit will arguably bring back the Teesta river water dispute in limelight, which pertains to the Indian foreign policy domain of which paradiplomacy is an essential dimension. The Teesta originates from the North Eastern state of Sikkim in India and traverses through West Bengal before entering Bangladesh. It is the fourth largest trans boundary river in Bangladesh after the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, and according to the 2011 and 2012 data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (cf. [Prasai, Sagar and Mandakini D. Surie. 2013](#)), the livelihoods of around 21 million Bangladeshis directly or indirectly depend on the Teesta.

Negotiations between India and Bangladesh can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s when authorities in India and East Pakistan (as it then was) began discussing projects on the river. After Bangladesh came into being in 1971, an Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission was constituted, and an ad-hoc agreement over sharing the Teesta water was reached in 1983. India was allotted 39% and Bangladesh got 36% of the water, with the remaining 25% water being left for future allocation subject to studies. Between 1997 and 2005, the efforts of the Joint Committee of Experts (founded to examine the sharing of the waters) and Joint Technical Group (JTG) drew a blank. The Committee's frustration was that the lean season flows of the Teesta could not meet the needs of both India and Bangladesh, "and hence any sharing formula for the lean season flows should be based on shared sacrifices." (cf. [ibid](#))



The river Teesta. Credit: [Abhijit Kar Gupta](#) CC BY 2.0

The Teesta's water sharing agreement was almost concluded in Indian PM Manmohan Singh's regime in September 2011, when the deal was being signed between India and Bangladesh on an equal sharing basis. However, the deal was shelved when Mamata Banerjee, the CM of West Bengal refused to accompany PM Manmohan Singh to Dhaka on the grounds that the interests of Bengalis had been overlooked and the draft agreement was materially different from the one that was shown to her. The knee-jerk action of Mamata Banerjee not only made PM Singh a laughing stock in the global community but it also worked to derail the process of bilateral agreements between Indian and a friendly neighbor, Bangladesh. There is little reason to disbelieve the then Prime Minister when he asserted that CM Banerjee was duly apprised by none other than the National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon more than a month before the proposed Dhaka visit.

Lamentably CM Banerjee's stance on the Teesta remains unchanged. While addressing the 'Indo-Bangla cultural Adda' in 2015, the West Bengal CM [remarked](#) that 'the fencing can never stop love to spread.' She appealed to the 'intelligentsia of Bangladesh to trust her over Teesta water sharing issue and assured them that she and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina would find out a 'formula' that would serve both the nations'.

There is no denying the fact that CM Banerjee is well intentioned and genuinely concerned about the interest of West Bengal. She has her own arguments regarding Centre-state relations, and promptly recounts the West Bengal government's cooperation in the GST, Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and enclave transfer. However, her rigid stance over Teesta places the concept of paradiplomacy into question. The main cause of worry, in this case, remains the worsening relations between Mamata's government in West Bengal and the Modi government at the Centre. The Ministry of External Affairs was wise to have postponed the scheduled visit of the Bangladesh PM in December 2016 in view of Mamata's shrill opposition to the central government on account of demonetization. Against this background, the proposed visit of PM Hasina this month is viewed with lot of expectations by both the countries and international observers as well. In addition to this domestic status quo in India, Sheikh Hasina and her ruling Awami League Party face severe criticism from the main opposition Bangladesh National Party for being over friendly to India. Therefore, it becomes imperative for Bangladesh, both politically and economically, to reach an early and respectable solution to the Teesta water distribution with India.

In addition to the Teesta, India and Bangladesh have 53 other river disputes to address and solve. The significance of reaching this settlement can be gauged from Pravin Swami's [writing in The Hindu](#) wherein he wrote, "the (Teesta) treaty, which will provide a template for agreements to share the waters of 53 rivers with Bangladesh will also help India establish principles for pressing its claims to rivers originating in China." The Teesta water distribution issue assumes more significance at this time when at the behest of PM Modi, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is now

giving importance to states in foreign policy formulations. The Indian government is fully aware that in the formulation of foreign policy relating to bordering countries, the counsel and cooperation of bordering Indian states is imperative. For this very reason the relations between India and Bangladesh [are bound to affect](#) the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal.

PM Modi's endorsement for paradiplomacy is understandable. The prosperity of Gujarat during his tenure as its CM was largely achieved through foreign direct investment as a result of successful paradiplomacy. Unfortunately, Indian foreign policy makers did find themselves in a tough spot when, in relation to Indo-Sri Lanka relations (2012-13), PM Manmohan Singh's government, under pressure from its ally DMK, was forced to vote in favor of US-sponsored resolution in the UNHRC against its friendly neighbour, Sri Lanka. To avoid a similar embarrassment, CM Banerjee's accusation that the Centre did not take her into confidence with regard to the Teesta water pact, needs immediate redressal.

A positive settlement of the Teesta water-sharing dispute will work to further cement Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations. Paradiplomacy suffers a jolt when narrow political interest of constituent states comes as a stumbling block in the smooth conduct of national foreign policy making. To CM Banerjee charging the Centre of destroying India's federal structure, Gopal Baglay, the MEA Spokesperson, [talks of 'co-operative federalism'](#) in resolution of the dispute.

It is for states to understand that despite their increased role in conducting diplomacy, foreign policymaking is and remains a highly sensitive issue with the MEA having a pre-eminent and specialist role in the formulation of India's foreign policy. The foreign policy of a country needs a holistic approach that takes into account the prevailing geo-political situations. Perhaps it is apt to quote Prof C P Bhambhri who [remarked](#) that 'India is likely to pay a very heavy price if it makes foreign policy a football game where "regionalists" begin to dictate and decide the direction of policy'.

Bangladesh is one of the most valuable allies and a neighbour to India. Despite PM Modi's inclination towards and advocacy of paradiplomacy, subnational diplomacy has its limitations. In India's case, the final call on a nation's foreign policy has to be taken by the Centre keeping the interest of the nation in mind. When it comes to the Teesta dispute the interest of West Bengal, although relevant, is subordinate to that of India. It is time CM Banerjee, shunning a regional outlook, acknowledges the same and makes space for a larger understanding of foreign policy.

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