Impact of West Bengal Politics on India–Bangladesh Relations

Anand Kumar

Abstract: It was expected that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Dhaka in September 2011 would transform India–Bangladesh relations. However, this did not happen as India could not sign the Teesta water sharing agreement, the biggest deliverable of the visit. It also made some people brand West Bengal (Paschimbanga) Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as a spoiler. But did West Bengal stop central government from achieving a historic diplomatic breakthrough for narrow political objectives, or were its leaders only protecting their state interests, which central government may not have been fully able to understand being far away from the region? This article examines the impact of West Bengal politics on India–Bangladesh relations and argues that the role played by the states can often add value to foreign policy making and might actually prevent the centre from jeopardising local interests, thereby protecting national interests as well. The India–Bangladesh relationship can improve if treaties are negotiated in such a way that they become win-win for both sides. This will happen if the treaties are signed after due diligence, taking into account all stakeholders, and if they are implemented sincerely.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Dhaka in September 2011 was expected to be a watershed in India–Bangladesh relations, but it was muddied over water sharing issues between the two countries. The agreement over Teesta water sharing that was presented as the biggest deliverable could not take place because of the last minute withdrawal of West Bengal (Paschimbanga) Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee from the entourage of the prime minister. This embarrassing development on the eve of the prime minister’s visit—the first visit by an Indian prime minister in 12 years—prompted a section in India to label Mamata a spoiler of India–Bangladesh relations. According to them, ‘capricious’ Mamata threw a spanner in the works and prevented Mr. Manmohan Singh from taking this relationship to the next level. But did West Bengal stop the central government from achieving an important foreign policy objective for political reasons, or were its leaders simply protecting their state interests, which the centre may not have been fully able to understand being far away from the region.

There is no doubt that the atmospherics of India–Bangladesh relations perceptibly improved with the coming to power of the Awami League government. Some substance was also added to it when Bangladesh cooperated with India on security issues leading to the arrest and handing over of several top northeast insurgent leaders. This was a body blow to organisations like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Moreover, when Bangladesh acted against Islamist militants inside the country, it dismantled several modules of terror outfits, some of them headquartered in Pakistan.

Dr. Anand Kumar is Associate Fellow at IDSA, New Delhi.
The bonhomie generated was further elevated when Sheikh Hasina visited India in January 2010 and signed some agreements. A process was started to remove roadblocks from most outstanding bilateral issues. This was supposed to link India and Bangladesh in several ways. When the Indian prime minister visited Bangladesh in September 2011 it was hoped by many on both sides that something equally dramatic would happen, which would transform the bilateral relationship. Something dramatic did happen, but it only succeeded in embarrassing the central government.

This article examines the impact of West Bengal politics on India–Bangladesh relations and argues that the role played by the states can often be enriching in policy making and might actually prevent the centre from jeopardising local interests, thereby protecting national interests as well. There is no doubt that an improved and trouble-free India–Bangladesh relationship is in the interest of both countries, but the problems have to be resolved in such a way that it becomes win-win for both countries. This is only possible if the treaties are signed after due diligence, taking into account all stakeholders, and if they are implemented sincerely.

Foreign policy formulation is generally thought to be a function of central/federal governments. However, in recent times the role of sub-national units (political units in their own right with some features of a sovereign state) in influencing foreign policy has become important. In India, although the role of states in influencing foreign policy is increasing, it is still far below the US federal system where states are also playing a growing role in implementing even national security policy.\(^1\)

Kripa Sridharan has studied the role of sub-national units or non-central governments in the conduct of foreign policy and the changing dynamics of centre-state/provincial relations in a federal system. She argues that while the constitutions generally ‘endow the central or federal governments with sole authority to manage the foreign relations of that country, in recent times the exclusive grip of the centre in this area is slowly being weakened by the activities of the units/members in federal unions’.\(^2\) These units are non-sovereign entities but have a fair degree of autonomy. They have different names—states, regions, provinces, lander or canton. This also means foreign affairs have become more inclusivist where concerns of states have to be accommodated. This expansion of the foreign policy agenda has reduced the gap between foreign and domestic issues. Moreover, foreign policy today has also become foreign economic policy with the integration of world economies. It is now increasingly difficult for the central governments to play the role of gatekeepers and to decide on policies that impinge on the interests of sub-national units. Today, central governments and their constituent units are facing issues such as multilateral trade, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) or even borrowing from multilateral organisations. These issues have allowed constituent units some degree of external authority.

However, people such as Rob Jenkins claim that this role of states in making India’s foreign economic policy is very limited and India cannot be classified as a case where states are engaged in performing ‘constituent diplomacy’. This would be to ‘understate the central government’s continued role in managing such important policy matters as external borrowing (from private and multilateral sources) and the regulation of core infrastructure sectors, including electricity, where despite states’ key roles, the central government maintains control over certain critical decisions’.\(^3\)

Domestic politics and foreign policy are often linked, but it is difficult to explain these linkages on the basis of a single theory. It is generally accepted that countries with different political structures and arrangements respond to the constraints of the international system with different foreign policy strategies. It has also been pointed
out that the emergence of states/provinces as important players in the shaping of foreign policy has actually hampered India’s search for a grand strategy in the post-Cold War era. Arijit Mazumdar thinks that ‘the emergence of coalition governments at the national level since the early 1990s, the country’s federal structure, weaknesses in India’s foreign policy institutions and the lack of a strategic culture within the country together constrain India’s search for a post-Cold War foreign policy’.4

During the last two decades, significant changes have taken place in the electoral politics of India. Now India has moved away from the dominant party system prevalent in the Nehru era to a truly multi-party system. During the Nehru era, foreign policy making was completely centralised and there was little difficulty in accepting non-alignment as a framework. Now, with the emergence of coalition politics where partners have disparate ideologies, the governments are more interested in ensuring their survival than making attempts to forge a coherent strategy that cuts across ideological barriers.

Constitutional provisions in India regarding foreign affairs
India is seen as a quasi-federal country. The Indian constitution empowers the central government to deal with foreign affairs and also makes it responsible for diplomatic, consular and trade representation. Dealing with the UN, participating in international conferences, associations and other bodies and implementing decisions made thereat also come under the purview of the central government. The central government is authorised to enter into ‘treaties and agreements with foreign countries and implementing of treaties, agreements and conventions with foreign countries’.5 The unitary feature of the Indian constitution is clear from Article 257, which confers the central government with the power to give directions to states in certain cases, thus making them subservient to the centre in those instances. Thus, on the face of it, it would appear that states have little role to play in foreign affairs, but the reality is somewhat different. Historically, Indian states have played a significant role in foreign affairs. Most of the time, treaties signed by the central government deal with politico-security matters, but some also relate to issues such as foreign trade, taxation of foreign nationals and external credit. The constitution empowers the centre to sign such treaties and states have generally not shown undue concern about them, but there have also been occasions when states have shown unease when such treaties were expected to deal with items under state subject. States have also shown discomfort when they thought that the treaties would profoundly impact them and they felt they had not been duly consulted.

Increasing role of Indian states in foreign policy making
In India, the role of states/provinces in foreign policy making is gradually increasing. This is mostly related to a change in the balance of power between the centre and states. The equilibrium existing between the two is a dynamic one. States start asserting themselves more in foreign affairs with a politically weak centre. This assertion increases further in a coalition government. In the last two decades, India has seen the collapse of the dominant party system, leading to a demand for a more decentralised federal system from the regional parties. Until the 1980s, people voted in state assembly elections as if they were voting to elect a prime minister, but from the early 1990s they cast their votes with the primary objective of electing a state government. In this situation,
it becomes important for chief ministers and local leaders to take care of local interests. The game in present-day Indian politics is to consolidate a regional base so that one can have a larger say in central politics. The increasing importance of states is evident in India’s relations with its immediate neighbours, where bordering states are playing a greater role.

**Local state politics and India–Bangladesh relations**

Local state politics has influenced India–Bangladesh relations for a long time. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that local politics to some extent was responsible for the creation of Bangladesh. Although various theories have been put forward for India’s participation in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, an important reason was the presence of nearly 10 million Bangladeshi refugees who had spilled over into India. Their presence made states such as Tripura, Assam and West Bengal lobby with the centre to actively participate in the liberation of Bangladesh. However, the issue of Bangladeshi migration did not stop with the liberation of the country and subsequently became a major issue in the Indian state of Assam, leading to a prolonged violent movement. It has influenced India–Bangladesh relations in the past and continues to do so. The presence of illegal Bangladeshis in India is a major bilateral issue.

**The prime minister’s visit and India–Bangladesh relations**

During the visit to Dhaka of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in September 2011, it was expected that India–Bangladesh relations would receive a big boost and that India would make major concessions to Bangladesh following the Gujral or Gujral plus doctrine. As is well known, this doctrine proposed that India should make unilateral concessions to its smaller neighbours without looking for reciprocity. This doctrine was starkly different from the India doctrine talked about in the 1980s, which conveyed to neighbouring states that India would not tolerate any activity by outside powers in its neighbourhood that was considered detrimental to its interests. Thus, India conveyed to its smaller neighbours that they would have to recognise India’s primary interest in the region. However, many believed that India lacked sufficient strength to enforce it.

The three landmark agreements which Mr. Manmohan Singh was to sign pertained to trade, land borders and the sharing of Teesta water. For a long time, Bangladesh has been protesting a huge trade deficit. They have claimed that this deficit is due to the various tariff and non-tariff barriers imposed by India, whereas the Indian argument has been that Bangladesh has a small trade basket leading to smaller exports. Bangladesh, however, has been insisting that India should make concessions in the textile and ready-made garments sector where India has a strong presence. A section in India managed to sell this point, stating that since India has such a huge surplus it would not be significantly affected by granting these facilities. It was also conveyed in certain sectors that because of the trade lobbies, India was not opening up. This could be partly true and it was the case to some extent in Jamadani Sarees and Batteries. India went ahead with the trade concessions because it wanted to compensate Bangladesh for the security cooperation it had received.

During his visit, Mr. Manmohan Singh acknowledged that India was ‘fully alive to the problem of trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh’. To consolidate the bilateral ties he announced duty-free import of 61 items from Bangladesh that were barred from entering India. Of these, 46 related to textiles, particularly readymade...
garments.\textsuperscript{11} The list of the other 15 items was declared in November 2011.\textsuperscript{12} The trade concessions were not opposed by the government of West Bengal because it was only partly affected.

However, the other two issues that were likely to directly impact West Bengal—the land border issue and the Teesta water sharing agreement—were strongly resisted by the state. In fact, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee refused to join the prime minister’s entourage even though it included chief ministers of Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. As these issues are of great significance, it would be useful to examine them in detail.

**Sharing of river water**

India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers. The sharing of river waters has been a very contentious issue. A treaty to share Ganga water was signed between India and Bangladesh in 1996, but even this did not remain free from controversy. In fact, today Bangladesh accuses India of causing desertification and flooding during the rainy season. Similar accusation is levied in all other cases where an agreement for water sharing has not been signed. Bangladesh also accuses India of planning to divert water by building Tipaimukh dam in Manipur.\textsuperscript{13} With this background, it becomes extremely important to closely examine the sharing of Teesta water, which India and Bangladesh had agreed to share in a 52:48 ratio.

**Water resource situation in West Bengal**

West Bengal has 8 per cent of the Indian population but just 2.7 per cent of national territory. The state has 7.5 per cent of national water resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce with the uncontrolled growth of population, expansion of the irrigation network and developmental needs. The Bengal delta now has an acute shortage of water in the lean months. The state faces the problems of flood and drought because of the spatial and temporal variability of rain. The shortage of water is causing problems with navigation in rivers and even the Kolkata port faces the problem of siltation despite artificial augmentation of water from the Farakka barrage. The rivers flowing in the state have frequently changed course and some have disappeared from the map.

The irrigation sector followed by the inland navigation sector are the two largest consumers of water. The demand for water in the agriculture sector increased with the introduction of high yielding paddy in the early 1970s. The state has been utilising only 40 per cent of the surface water and has been over-exploiting ground water, leading to the problem of arsenic poisoning in 75 administrative blocks of the state.

The increasing dependence on ground water for irrigation and drinking led to the decay and abandonment of the age-old surface water management system of Bengal. The ponds and check dams built in earlier periods were replaced with the construction of linear embankments along the banks of deltaic rivers with a view to control flooding. This was a direct intervention into the fluvial regime which interrupted the annual distribution of sediment over the flood plain.

Monsoon rain is the main source of river water, and is concentrated within three months. The conservation or storage of water in this tract is difficult because the upper catchments of most of the rivers lie in Sikkim or Bhutan, beyond the territorial
boundary of West Bengal. In fact, the huge water resource of North Bengal enters Bangladesh without being intercepted.

The creation of additional storage and demand-side management are dual challenges of present water management. West Bengal is currently trying to reduce its over-dependence on ground water so that it is utilised within the rechargeable limit. The state is contemplating the use of another 20 per cent of surface water to meet its needs. This is also likely to help in tackling the arsenic problem.14

Sharing of Ganga water and the involvement of West Bengal

India built a barrage at Farakka in 1975 and diverted some Ganga water to keep Kolkata port functional. This development led to a dispute over sharing of Ganga waters between India and Bangladesh. In India there was a feeling that Bangladesh had greatly overstated its water needs and its claim was disproportionate to its fair share by any logic. Bangladesh also magnified the adverse effects due to reduced flows and unfairly blamed India for its flood problem. The whole issue became more complicated as there was a feeling on the part of the concerned state government that their interests were not adequately taken care of by the centre while negotiating with Bangladesh over this issue. This led to a virtual stalemate between central and state governments which continued for several years after 1990.15

However, West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu played an unprecedented role in the resolution of the Ganga water issue during the term of the United Front government. He made a six-day official visit to Bangladesh and negotiations conducted during this period paved the way for the water sharing treaty between the two countries in December 1996. It was impossible for the centre to resolve this issue without addressing the sensitivities of the state government, and the involvement of Mr. Jyoti Basu was therefore considered crucial. This was also acknowledged by then foreign minister Mr. Gujral in the suo moto statement he made in parliament, in which he placed on record his ‘appreciation of the very constructive role played by the Chief Minister of West Bengal and his cabinet colleagues in bringing about improved atmosphere in which the treaty between India and Bangladesh has become possible’.16

Importance of Teesta water sharing for Bangladesh

The Teesta originates from Tso Lhamo Lake in north Sikkim. It flows for virtually the entire length of the Himalayan state, then runs through Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal and merges into the Brahmaputra in Bangladesh.

Teesta is the most important river in north-west Bangladesh and the country is very keen to have a water sharing agreement with India. An agreement is expected to pave the way for the signing of a similar agreement on the Feni river and five minor ones—Dudh Kumar, Manu, Khowai, Gomti and Muhuri.17 The issue is important because Teesta water is likely to irrigate the granary of Bangladesh—the greater Rangpur area. In this area, the first phase of the irrigation project has already been implemented. Bangladesh now wants to implement the second phase, but this cannot be done unless it is assured of the supply of a certain amount of water from the Teesta river. Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, after the first Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) meeting with her counterpart S.M. Krishna, said: ‘On Teesta there is a huge expectation in Bangladesh. I think if India cannot deliver on that expectation, our relations will take a huge hit. I’m not sure our relationship can afford it’.18
Difficulties in negotiation

India and Bangladesh were facing difficulty on the eve of Mr. Manmohan Singh’s visit in reaching an agreement over Teesta water sharing. Somehow the agreement was stitched together because of the pressure from Bangladesh, and both sides agreed to share water in a 52:48 ratio. It was seen more as a political agreement than a technical one.

In India, however, confusion over the agreement remained. Mamata Banerjee remained unconvinced about the treaty when National Security Advisor (NSA) Shiv Shankar Menon met her. The independent data collection by the central water resources ministry and the government of Bengal on the Teesta’s flow in lean season were reportedly highly divergent, leaving the chief minister alarmed enough to refuse to travel to Dhaka.19

Mamata was denounced for being temperamental and indulging in political grandstanding at the cost of a historic diplomatic breakthrough with Bangladesh. Some even alleged that she was doing this to build a political base for herself in North Bengal’s Malda, Jalpaiguri and North Dinajpur districts, where the Left and Congress have been traditionally strong.20

The centre claimed that Mamata was adequately consulted. However, Mamata had objections both to the content of the treaty and the treatment given to her state over an issue that was going to directly impact it. She even stated that had the Left Front been in power, they would not have been treated in this way. While officials on both sides were working overtime to iron out the details of a range of agreements, there were not enough efforts at the political level to bring Mamata on board.21

Since Mamata was the coalition partner of Congress, and was also known to have good relations with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her support was taken for granted. Mamata had been very supportive of other aspects of the India–Bangladesh agreements—including the contentious boundary settlement—which led many to believe that she would go along with the centre on the entire package being worked out for Dhaka.

This was in contrast to the Ganga water agreement in 1996, when the Left Front government—and Jyoti Basu personally—were consulted at every stage. The West Bengal government was completely on board and according to India’s then high commissioner to Dhaka, ‘everything happened only after they were persuaded’.22

Political consensus in Pashimbanga over Mamata stand

In West Bengal there was political consensus regarding Mamata Banerjee’s valid point. She was taken for granted. It was alleged that a senior Congress leader from West Bengal at the Centre, handling Bengal affairs, tried to ignore the state’s concerns. He also tried to convey that foreign policy was a central function. But Mamata’s representative expressed the likely difficulty in convincing people about this treaty, which they believed would lead to protests.

The state unit of Congress actually supported Mamata and there was no acrimony towards her. One Congress leader went to the extent of criticising the central government, saying that ‘the national interest cannot be in conflict with the state’s interests. It appears the whole gamut of issues had not been carefully analysed before finalising the deal’.23 A number of state Congress leaders blamed NSA Shivshankar Menon and ‘mismanagement’ at the central level for the fiasco. They alleged that Mamata was taken for granted.24
The Left parties also agreed that a 52:48 sharing ratio was not desirable for northern Bengal. They felt that the agreement could have seriously affected agriculture in North Bengal. However, they tried to score a political point by disapproving of the manner in which Mamata Banerjee reacted to the issue. During the rule of the Left Front in the state, there was a tacit understanding that Bangladesh would get only 25 per cent of the Teesta waters. The Left wanted Mamata to discuss the issue as an outright boycott would affect ties between West Bengal and Bangladesh and also put certain issues such as transit and trade on the backburner.

But Mamata did not want to spoil the relationship with Bangladesh. During her tenure as railway minister she actually took many positive steps.\(^{25}\) When Sheikh Hasina was in India in January 2010, Mamata met her in Delhi.\(^{26}\) Her victory in state elections was celebrated in Bangladesh and Hasina personally called her to congratulate her.\(^{27}\) In fact, as late as 27 August 2011, when Home Minister P. Chidambaram laid the foundation stone of an Integrated CheckPost (ICP) at Petrapole, she was present and expressed the hope that the ICP would go a long way in ensuring smooth business and trade between the two countries and reducing the time required for customs formalities. Mamata said: ‘We are going to Dhaka to strengthen ties between India and Bangladesh. We want to further improve relations between the two countries’.\(^{28}\)

**Longstanding Teesta Barrage Project**

The Teesta Barrage Project was started in 1976 at a cost of Rs 69.7 crore with the target of irrigating 9.22 lakh hectares in the six North Bengal districts. The plan included generating 67.5 MW of hydropower. However, after spending Rs 1,200 crore in 35 years, even the first sub-phase of the project’s Phase I has not been completed. Presently, the project provides irrigation water to only 66,000 hectares and produces 20 MW of electricity. The main Teesta barrage has gone up at Jalpaiguri’s Gajoldoba, while two smaller barrages have been constructed in Darjeeling’s Phansidewa and North Dinajpur’s Chopra. Four canals, on either side of the Teesta, take water to the interiors of North Bengal.

The Centre declared the project a national one in 2010 and agreed to provide 90 per cent of the total cost. It has been putting pressure on the state government to complete the project by 2015, failing which it has threatened to convert the Rs 2,998-crore grant into a loan.\(^{29}\) The project has been facing problems over the issue of land acquisition. The cash-strapped state government is now trying to sort out the problem as it knows that it would not be able to bear the burden of Rs 2,998 crore.

At the same time, the centre was going to sign the Teesta agreement which could have defeated the very purpose of the Teesta Barrage Project, aimed at providing irrigation water to North Bengal and generating electricity.\(^{30}\) The sharing of water on a 52:48 basis would not have left enough water to irrigate the fields of North Bengal in the dry months from December to April when the Boro crop is cultivated. Clearly it was an untenable situation. In this instance, the domestic and foreign policies of the central government were not dovetailing.

The state sentiment over Teesta became very clear when water was released for the first time from the Teesta barrage to farmlands along the left bank. For this achievement, Irrigation Minister Manas Bhunia was congratulated by both Trinamul Congress’s Gautam Deb and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) MP from Jalpaiguri, Mahendra Roy. This was a rare display of amity at a time when Congress and Trinamul were engaged in a turf war in North Bengal and the CPM was making every attempt to attack the government.\(^{31}\)
Constitution of Kalyan Rudra committee

After withdrawing from the prime minister’s team that went to Bangladesh, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee appointed a one-man committee headed by noted hydrologist Kalyan Rudra to examine the availability of Teesta water, particularly during the dry season, and the quantum that could be shared by India and Bangladesh. Rudra was also to highlight the point of sharing—the location from where water could be released to Bangladesh. Although the report has been submitted but not made public, an attempt has been made to draw inferences from Rudra’s various studies and statements. They have indicated that this agreement was hastily crafted and that there is no science and sustainability. It was also not in tune with the United Nations protocol for transnational water sharing which talks of equitable and reasonable agreement based on demographic and socio-economic factors such as the population involved, the catchment area and whether the population has alternative water sources.

According to Kalyan Rudra, glacial water in the Teesta is insignificant compared with the 12.26 billion cubic metres of rainwater that the river carries in its catchment area in India. Rudra’s research indicates that the Teesta’s average peak discharge is around 70,000 cusecs in the months of July, August and September. Around 90 per cent of the water that the river carries flows in this period.

However, in the lean months from December to April it comes down to 3,000–4,000 cusecs, and sometimes even down to 400 cusecs in April. The problem in the area is that when the supply of water is the highest, the demand is the least because there is rain, but when it is the lowest, the demand is the highest. According to Rudra, even now, when Bangladesh gets around 25 per cent of the waters, the water from the Teesta is not able to meet the requirements of its catchment area in northern Bengal, which is around 3,294 sq km in size.

Moreover, the increasing dependence on ground water in the region has resulted in further reduction of the base flow of the river in the lean season. Rudra also found fault with the pact for not taking into account the water generated in Bangladesh, as 16 per cent of the river is in the neighbouring country. Kalyan Rudra and other state government officials alleged that ‘inflated data and backdated knowledge’ is what caused the fiasco. He added that the flow to North Bengal would decrease further with the proposed 23 low dams in Sikkim.

Rudra in another study reveals that Bengal rivers historically meandered between 1767 and 2010. Teesta, which was feeding large tracts of North Bengal through its three distributaries, no longer does so. The river that was merging earlier in Ganga shifted eastward after a devastating flood in 1787 to join Brahmaputra (at Chilmari, now in Bangladesh). Bangladesh has been getting more than its share of the Teesta waters, right from the source. On the other hand, only Jalpaiguri district (between Sevoke and Burigram on the India–Bangla border) gets some of the water, while large tracts of North Bengal are no longer fed by the Teesta.

Clearly, the data gathering left much to be desired. In the absence of proper data, going ahead with a water sharing agreement was a big mistake.

Confusion in Bangladesh over the Teesta agreement

Interestingly, while both governments were preparing to sign the Teesta agreement, there was confusion prevailing even in Bangladesh. The local media in Bangladesh were talking of a West Bengal Congress MP, Abu Hashem Khan Chowdhury, who had said in an interview with the BBC that after the agreement India would get 75 per cent
of the water.\textsuperscript{37} This would be highly beneficial as India presently gets only 39 per cent of the water. He also allegedly opposed India’s NSA Shivshankar Menon’s water division figure during a meeting and wrote a letter to the Indian prime minister conveying his fear that the water sharing agreement might adversely affect the agriculture of West Bengal.\textsuperscript{38}

It is quite clear that even if India had signed an agreement over Teesta, at the cost of West Bengal’s interests, the section hostile to India would not have allowed any goodwill to come to India. They would have made the whole agreement appear against the interests of Bangladesh and would have blamed Hasina for selling out to India— their favourite tool in attacking the Awami League government.

**The Centre’s effort after the fiasco**

The central government still believes that the issue became stuck because of West Bengal politics. Indian Rural Development, Drinking Water and Sanitation Minister Jairam Ramesh hoped that Bangladesh and India would formulate the Teesta water sharing pact and implement the border agreement soon. He said: ‘We cannot sit idle because of regional (state) politics. Both the issues are of utmost importance for the sake of relations between the two close door neighbours’.\textsuperscript{39}

The central government wants to help the India-friendly Sheikh Hasina government with a treaty that endorses a 50:50 sharing ratio of Teesta water well before it goes into election mode. At the same time, it wants to take the Bengal government on board. Water Resources Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal is of the view that the problems lie in ‘differing perceptions’ and not in the details of the agreement. The officials of the ministry say that the deal would not hurt the state’s interests and the 50:50 formula would be as good as 75:25 in favour of West Bengal in actual terms.\textsuperscript{40} According to them, the complex sharing agreement has for the first time sought to have water discharge measured and taken into account the natural replenishment of the river on the other side of the border. It seems that unless the treaty is explained in a proper manner to both sides, confusion will remain.

**Teesta and transit**

Indians have been under the impression that if the Teesta deal is signed, they would get transit from Bangladesh. Criticising the Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal government for opposing the signing of the Teesta water treaty with Bangladesh, former Indian diplomat Ronen Sen observed: ‘A transit-connectivity pact between the two countries is held up because of the Teesta Water treaty’.\textsuperscript{41} However, Bangladeshis have never committed to this. Even before Mamata had cancelled her visit, reports emanating from Bangladesh clearly indicated that Bangladesh was not going to sign a transit pact with India or at least allow road transit in the near future.\textsuperscript{42}

Even the foreign minister Dipu Moni is unwilling to make a direct linkage between Teesta and Bangladesh, giving transit rights to India. She suggested that it would ‘create a conducive environment’ for other, more difficult agreements.\textsuperscript{43}

**Land boundary agreement**

India shares its longest border with Bangladesh and some part of it is disputed. This dispute is over land in adverse possession, enclaves existing in both countries and 6.5 km of undemarcated border. There are 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh
and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves on Indian soil. The enclaves are islands of Indian and Bangladeshi territory surrounded completely by the other country’s land. They are clustered on either side of Bangladesh’s border with the district of Cooch Behar, in the Indian state of West Bengal. They include about two dozen counter-enclaves (enclaves within enclaves), as well as the world’s only counter-counter-enclave—a patch of Bangladesh that is surrounded by Indian territory which in its turn is surrounded by Bangladeshi territory. These enclaves are pockets of abject poverty devoid of many public services. It is estimated that about 150,000 people live in these enclaves and are virtually stateless. While Indian enclaves in Bangladesh are spread over 17,149 acres, Bangladeshi enclaves in India are located over 7,110 acres.

To resolve this issue, additional protocols for the Land Boundary Agreement 1974 were signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Dhaka in September 2011. However, to make the new border line official, a constitutional amendment is needed as an exchange of land is involved. If India goes ahead, it stands to lose just over 4,000 hectares of its territory, or about 40 square km. This proposed transfer would certainly simplify the boundary immeasurably but it would also mean a net loss of roughly 10,000 acres for India.

Bangladesh has already ratified the pact and has been repeatedly reminding India to do the same. The Indian government has been maintaining that it is trying to create political consensus. The government needs to take the opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), into confidence to ensure the amendment is passed by two-thirds of members ‘present and voting’. While Mamata Banerjee had initially given her consent for the pact, she is later said to have again expressed reservations, putting the government on the back foot. In Bangladesh, there is complete unanimity over this issue as it stands to gain territory.

The land boundary agreement is of great importance to India provided it is properly negotiated. The government has been touting it as a major foreign policy achievement, but what is perplexing is that it has left out Dahgram and Angorpota from the exchange list. This could have reduced the loss of territory for India. These two enclaves are a serious problem for border management. India’s Border Security Force (BSF) claims that they are used to push illegal migrants into India and are a hub of criminal activity. This could also have sorted out the issue of the Tin Bigha corridor. Not including this was a major mistake.

Cross-cutting state interests

When Mamata Banerjee withdrew from the prime minister’s delegation, she was presented as someone obstructing the improvement of India–Bangladesh relations. She was seen differently from other chief ministers who accompanied Mr. Manmohan Singh. But it is important to note that it was Mamata Banerjee’s state that was to bear the cost of improving India–Bangladesh relations. Her state was supposed to lose 10,000 acres of land and to share water of the Teesta to the detriment of their own interest.

The chief ministers of Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya were the beneficiaries of the improved bilateral relationship. The action against insurgent groups improved the security situation in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. Even today, Manik Sarkar, chief minister of Tripura, continues to ask Bangladesh to dismantle terrorist camps. Protests have taken place even in Assam over the exchange of territory and the Assam government is also opposed to it. Parties such as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) have said that they will oppose the agreement when it is tabled in parliament.
Tripura and Bangladesh have a win-win economic relationship. Bangladesh has a trade surplus with Tripura. This economic engagement with Bangladesh helps the improvement of infrastructure in Tripura. The Feni river agreement is also likely to benefit Tripura. Tripura’s contribution to the India–Bangladesh relationship is largely symbolic, for instance opening museums and parks or honouring Sheikh Hasina with an honorary degree. But West Bengal was to suffer materially by losing territory and water.

**India’s inability to highlight its contribution to bilateral relations**

It seems the security cooperation offered by Bangladesh has managed to hog the limelight. On the other hand, India has not been able to highlight its own contribution to India–Bangladesh relations. For unknown reasons, we are on the defensive. The most important contribution coming from the Indian side is major concessions given to Bangladesh in trade and economic issues. It has given a significant boost to Bangladeshi exports to India. One would hardly find another example of this kind. India has facilitated 24-hour unfettered access to Bangladesh nationals at Dahagram and Angorpota through the Tin Bigha corridor. The two countries, for the first time since 1947, signed the boundary strip maps to settle disputes along the border. Cross-border trade has received a boost with the opening of new land ports and the building of a new immigration building and truck terminal at India’s Petrapole port bordering West Bengal. A coordinated border management plan is now in operation which will help to reduce incidents on the border, including illegal and criminal activities. Border haats are now in operation and new ones are due be opened in Tripura and Mizoram. India should be ready to export 500 MW of power to Bangladesh by the summer of 2013. India has declared that $200 million out of a $1 billion credit line will be a grant. In reality, it is Bangladesh that is dragging its feet on certain projects.

**Conclusion**

There is little doubt that the cooperation India received from Bangladesh helped it to improve its internal security situation. It provided a blow to insurgency in the northeast and contained the terrorist activities of religious extremists. A change in mindset of the borderguarding force of Bangladesh was also seen. It created a widespread feeling of goodwill towards the present Sheikh Hasina government. There was also a feeling in India that the present government in Bangladesh provides a window of opportunity which should be utilised to sort out other issues that bedevil this relationship and, if possible, steps should be taken to take this relationship to a new level.

India has focused more on security issues as it lives in a troubled neighbourhood. On the other hand, Bangladesh gives more importance to territorial and water issues. Unfortunately, both sides tried to go too far too soon before getting into the intracacies of the matter. The impression created by the Bangladesh side in India was that since the country has cooperated with India in security matters, it should be compensated in a big way so that the detractors of the present regime who always accuse Sheikh Hasina of selling out to India can be silenced. A section in India wanted the country to follow the Gujral or Gujral plus doctrine as a model, hoping that unilateral concessions would lead to strategic advantage for the country, as it would befriend its eastern neighbour. This would have been a major achievement for India, which faces a difficult neighbourhood in South Asia. India certainly tried to do this when it made unilateral trade concessions.
But making concessions and receiving concessions in return in other areas proved to be difficult. Issues such as Teesta water sharing, land boundaries and transit proved to be complicated and could not be sorted out in a hurry. It appeared that there was no due diligence before proposing to sign these treaties. Interestingly, Bangladesh kept putting pressure on India to sign the Teesta agreement, making it appear as a symbol of changed India–Bangladesh relations, without committing itself on the transit issue. It also wanted India to quickly implement a land boundary agreement that was immensely beneficial to it. It managed to keep Dahgram and Angorpota out of the list of enclaves to be exchanged.

Cooperation between India and Bangladesh is desirable. But how to make agreements sustainable is an important issue. It is true that sometimes treaties are signed as political settlements, keeping in view the geopolitical interests of the country, and the central government in such instances is better placed to decide upon the national interest. The agreements have a better chance of being sustained if they accommodate the interests of all major stakeholders. Moreover, even if India signs some of these agreements, ignoring the interests of bordering states, it is possible that they still may not be seen in a positive light given the hostile section existing in Bangladesh. This has been seen in the past and could happen again in the future.

The concept of non-reciprocity towards smaller neighbours with the hope of earning their goodwill has inherent flaws. It assumes that if India is generous to its smaller neighbours it will evoke similar feelings, leading to an environment of friendliness in the neighbourhood. On the contrary, it is possible that the neighbours might take the benefit and continue with their hostile behaviour. This was recently seen in the case of the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Many fear that Bangladesh would do the same in the absence of Sheikh Hasina. Moreover, it must also be realised that goodwill often proves to be effervescent. Hence, it is important to properly negotiate treaties before signing them.

Agreements can only be sustained if they benefit both parties equally. Agreeing to things that we cannot deliver is causing maximum damage to bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. A bold but realistic approach from both sides is expected to make measures durable.

Notes


34. Ibid.
35. The research entitled ‘Atlas of Changing River Courses in West Bengal’, a project of the Sea Explorers’ Institute and funded by the centre and state governments, was started in November 2009.
47. ‘India–Bangla Relations’, *The Shillong Times*, 10 May 2012, at http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2012/05/10/India-bangla-relations/.