India's Giant River-link Project

Will Bangladesh Dry Up?

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In the backdrop of great concern regarding India's giant river-link project the recently held minister-level talks in Delhi could not have come at a more opportune time. The meeting survived quite a few near-deadlock situations as the Bangladeshi side kept insisting on raising the issue of the controversial project and India kept refusing to discuss it. The meeting extended upto 8 hours more than the stipulated time before the talks finally ended amicably with both the ministers smiling as they signed the joint statement. But what have we to actually smile about?

After a lot of bargaining and wrangling the only thing Bangladesh seems to have achieved is to include the project issue in the meeting minutes. Experts believe it would be naïve to consider it a great achievement. The task in our hand is to keep up the pressure and make India go by its promise that it would consult Bangladesh if and when it goes for materialising this controversial project.

Before venturing into the details of the proposed river-link project it is necessary to get an idea about the physical positioning of our rivers. Three major rivers of the region, namely the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna/Barak (GBM) have a common terminus into the Bay of Bengal and thus form a river system. This river system falls in a number of countries in the South Asia region, including China, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Of these, China contributes solely to the flow of the Brahmaputra, and Nepal to the flow of the Ganges. Both China and Nepal are upper riparian countries and the tributaries originating in these countries contributing to the GBM system are not yet fully utilised. As a result, these countries do not face any contentious water issue with their lower riparian neighbours. The remaining two countries, India and Bangladesh, depend heavily on the waters from the GBM system. Due to the rapidly growing population and consequent increase in demand for agricultural, domestic and industrial water, these two neighbours face a growing list of water-related contentions. Although, the region as a whole receives many times more water than is necessary over the year, the spatial and temporal distribution of water availability is very uneven. Thus, the dwindling supply of water in the dry season has become one of the key issues between India and Bangladesh. The situation is particularly critical for Bangladesh, as about 80% of its annual fresh water supply comes as transboundary inflows through 54 common rivers with India.

Now what is this river-link project all about and how does it concern us? These are the two most important questions that need to be answered right at the beginning. Termed as “the national water perspective” Water Recourses Ministry in India undertook this project way back in 1980. After two years the Indian government set up the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), which after working for 20 years came up with a plan to take waters from one basin of a river to another and thus solving the water crisis in the draught-affected regions in India. For this they identified 30 connecting points in different rivers which would be connected by digging canals.

They have almost completed the task of examining the feasibility of 6 points out of those 30. Towards the middle of 2002 the Indian government formed a task force under an MP who would work to build consensus among different states regarding this project. By 2005 the task force hopes to complete the feasibility test of all the remaining 24 points and by 2016 it aims to complete the entire project.

The purpose of this $200 billion mega-project that India looks all set to undertake, is to solve the water scarcity of its different states including Horiana, Gujrat, Rajsthan. The plan is to connect the Ganges in the north and the Brahmaputra in the east and then to add it to the Kaberi and Mahanadi in the south, and from Mahanadi to the Biash in the west. This will allow channeling the surplus water of the Brahmaputra during the monsoon to the draughty areas and also keep the tributaries and other big and small water bodies flowing.

Again the Brahmaputra and the Teesta would be connected to take waters from the former to the latter and from the latter to the Farakka Barrage. For this purpose they need some 30 connecting canals which (if joined) together would be around 10,000 km in length. Besides nine big and 24 small dams--four of them in collaboration with Bhutan and Nepal--would also be built as required in the master plan.

This huge project, if implemented, will allow India to bring in 34 million more hectares of land under the irrigation system with the surface water and 8 lakh hectares more with subterranean water.

India also plans to produce 34 million KW (kilowatt) waterpower under the same project. The policymakers, moreover, in India believe this river-link project is worth the huge expenditure as they take the multi-faceted benefits from this project into consideration. Though the Indian Resource Minister Arjun Charan assured his Bangladeshi counterpart that the project is still in its conceptual stage, the fact remains that efforts are already on to procure this sum. A committee was formed under the former minister for power Suresh Prabhu for this very purpose and a few months ago Prabhu had gone to the US and sought the assistance of the US through the US Congress and the US President as well as of the World Bank. One success of Prabhu's visit to the US was he could mobilise the Indian-born Americans who showed interest in and promised investment in the project.

Another thing that added motion to the Indian government's initiatives in materialising the project is a verdict of the Indian Supreme Court. The court verdict, which came after a public interest case was filed with it, ordered the government to realise the project by December 31, 2016. Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam has spoken in favour of this project recently while the BJP govt. has been calling it “Indian's dream project” and promising to materialise it for quite some time now.

In fact, political analysts in India are of the view that “Ram Mandir” and the 'River-link project' issues are going to be used as trump cards in the upcoming national election by the rightist fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Now, if India goes ahead with this project -- it now appears to be a strong possibility -- the fallout will be devastating for Bangladesh. The proposed river-link project is worked out depending on the two major rivers of the region -- the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. As for India these two rivers are also of equal significance to us, whose flow provide and determine to a large extent the flow of other small rivers and tributaries. Now, when the river-link project comes into Operation, India will start withdrawing water from both the Ganges and the Brahmaputra and instantly water flow of the rivers in our north-west, north-middle, south-west and south-middle areas will fall sharply. Consequently different types of water bodies like beels, canals, wet lands of those area will go dry. The deadliest effect however will be the increase of salinity to a dangerous level. The combined flow of the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna goes through the lower Meghna and finally falls into the Bay of Bengal. In the dry season at present 90 percent waters of this combined flow is contributed by the Brahmaputra. For this, the salty water cannot get inside the country through the lower Meghna basin. But if the waters coming from the Brahmaputra decrease because of withdrawal of water in the upstream, waterflow will also fall in the lower Meghna and consequently saline water will get inside and spread up to the mid-point of the country. That is exactly what happened to our south-western part of the country because of Farakka. In that case it was the Gorai river which suffered from low flow of water.

According to a Washington Times report on September 20, the Indian plan would cause severe flooding during the monsoon rains and worse drought during the dry season in Bangladesh. The report cites Jayanta Bandopadhyaya of the

Centre for Development and Environment Policy at the Indian Institute of Management in Kolkata as saying that once the Indian plan is implemented, the world could lose the richest fisheries in south Asia. Bandhopadhyaya points out that salinity would also make inroads into the region, affecting thousands of hectares of arable land [and] affecting the lives of millions of people living on agriculture in Bangladesh. Mangrove forests too, he says, will be

disastrously affected as they depend on the steady rise and fall of tides for their roots to breathe. Arresting the natural flow of rivers could be a death knell for the world's largest remaining coastal forest a World Heritage site shared by the delta regions of Bangladesh and India.

Many Indian states with surplus water fear that New Delhi's plans could adversely affect the existing systems of irrigation and power generation both in India and Bangladesh. The wisdom of linking up rivers is not beyond question because more than 70 percent of Indian river water is polluted by linking them and then allowing them to enter into Bangladesh will poison all our water bodies, human beings and wildlife.

As the river-link project will connect rivers that flow through both India and Bangladesh and in some cases Nepal they are international rivers and without consulting Bangladesh about the project India has flouted all international treaties and conducts that prohibit unilaterally altering the natural course of international rivers.

Bangladesh is a riverine country and we are so greatly dependent on our rivers that our very existence will come under threat if our rivers are affected. Our agriculture, river traffic, trade and commerce, fisheries, wet lands, biodiversity, ecology and almost every part of our life will incur irreparable destruction.

Now what can we do to stop this project from being implemented? Water resources expert Professor Ainun Nishat, a former teacher of BUET and presently the Country Representative of IUCN, Bangladesh, is indignant at this question: “We must have been sleeping for the last one year. It has been more than a year since the Supreme Court of India ordered the Indian government to realise this project. The Indian government on its part formed a task force, and already some feasibility work has been done. But here we have been sitting idle. “It took us months to convey our concern regarding this project to the Indian government.”

One also wonders what The Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) has been doing. It should have cautioned the government long before. Clearly the seriousness of the issue was not felt though warning did come from some particular quarters. Nishat himself is one of those who raised it quite some time ago, but failed to make the concerned authority care.

Nishat, however, praises the role of the media, which, though started late, eventually brought the issue to the public notice. At the moment our main job is to create public awareness by regular dissemination of information about the magnitude of the crisis the project poses for us. Different professional groups and civil society will have to work alongside different government agencies to create strong public opinion against this controversial project.

The JRC has a major role to play here. One area in which the JRC is lacking is public participation. People know very little about the workings of the JRC, although recommendations made by the JRC may have profound implications for them. Like many other international commissions, it should have a channel of information dissemination geared towards raising public awareness and getting constructive feedback. This will make the JRC more accountable and credible to the peoples of both India and Bangladesh.

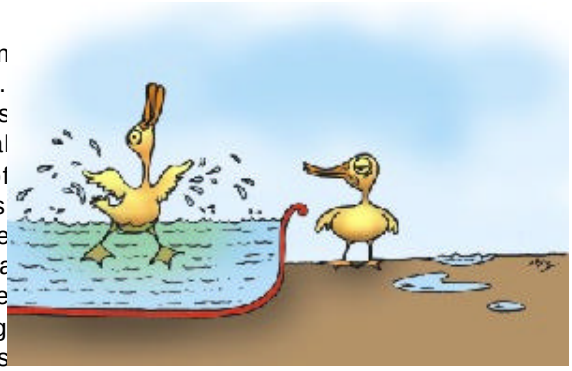
One major problem is that Bangladesh doesn't have any precise information and data about this project, such as from which specific part of the rivers’ waters will be withdrawn, the exact amount of the withdrawn water and exactly when and for how long that will be done. Thus Nishat gives great emphasis on gathering of information without which we cannot determine “the quantitative affect” and unless we know that we cannot even forcefully formulate our allegations and convey our grievances. And here, he says, we should make use of the JRC to its full potential.

Nishat in his paper titled “International Negotiation”, published in a journal called Kluwer Law International discusses in detail the drawbacks and the scope of JRC's work area. He writes that JRC should engage in regular collection and sharing of data on the quantity and quality of common waters. This is very important for two reasons, he explains. One, it will help develop collaboration and friendship between experts and technicians from both sides. Two, information Collected can be used to set the baseline or existing conditions. Existing conditions help monitor performances of ongoing treaties and to draft new ones for the future.

Nishat, who had been a member of JRC for 18 years, then focuses on some of the pertinent problems JRC has been facing since its formation in 1972 and suggests some remedial measures to make it a more productive organisation. He feels that JRC doesn't have adequate authority to work effectively. Although the JRC and various committees appointed by it had met many times on common water issues, so far, few of the recommendations made by it have been implemented. Suggestions put forward by the JRC are not automatically accepted as its status as “a recommending body” doesn't give its recommendations enough force to be considered quickly and seriously. Its constitution and scope should be reviewed with the aim to making it functional and efficient.

The functionality of the JRC is significantly dictated by the prevailing political mood. The JRC could not meet even once in three consecutive years during the late 80s because there was no political interest on the Indian side (the JRC is supposed to meet four or more times a year). When Awami League (AL) came into power in mid 1996, the JRC met several times and a 30-year Ganges Treaty could be drafted and signed within a few months of AL's coming into power. This clearly shows to what extent the activities of JRC are influenced by political willingness. Nishat believes, all the political parties, ruling and opposition included, should have a consensus in this issue and should talk in the same voice to create optimum pressure on India.

It is required in the statutes of the JRC that two of the four members of the JRC team from each country be engineers. This may lead to technical bias in the proposed solutions in addition to the political bias that have already complicated the process. If the technicians are not trained in formal international negotiations, they may fail to guide the politicians accordingly. If special technical advice is needed, a subcommittee can be formed. Again, composition of other similar bodies can be looked into. The 'Joint Water Committee' under the Israel-Jordan peace accord is comprised of three members from each country who can come from any appropriate background. This Joint Committee may form, 'as it deems necessary, a number of specialised sub-committees and assign them technical tasks.'



Nishat also writes of Multi-Track Diplomacy that often comes handy in complex negotiations between countries. Diplomatic efforts made by the concerned governments are called Track 1 diplomacy, in other words formal diplomacy. With the increasing complexity of contemporary issues and time and resource constraints faced by the governments, today's diplomatic efforts are pursued through multiple channels. “Track 2 diplomacy”, a term coined by Joseph Montville, refers “to a broad range of unofficial contacts and interaction aimed at resolving conflicts, both internationally and within states” which is being used to great effects these days.

In our country the finest example of Track 2 diplomacy is the signing of water treaty in 1996. Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) of Bangladesh and Center for Policy Research (CPR) of India arranged meetings on the Indo-Bangladesh relation where various issues, including trade and water sharing, were discussed. These meetings were attended by senior and influential politicians and technocrats who had a certain degree of authority in conveying the messages to the respective government. This initiative had helped bring the two sides closer to each other, particularly the (then) opposition leaders of India and Bangladesh. As a result, when the governments changed shortly after the meetings, the prevailing political mood was positive and a quick follow--up and signing of the agreement became possible.

Until very recently we had been in the dark about an impending danger that has the potential to destroy our existence. The $200 billion worth river--link project undertaken by India will devastate our water resources and consequently our ecology and economy. The rivers will dry up, draught will reign all the year round and salinity will make our once fertile land impotent. Though the concerned government agencies are guilty of pressing the alarm button unforgivably late all is not over yet. Gearing up public pressure by means of creating mass-awareness, a uniformity opinion among the political parties in this issue and voicing our realistic concern in the international forums are immediate necessities to make India forsake this destructive project or at least to make sure that the project doesn't harm Bangladesh .