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## Regional Infrastructure

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# Dispute with India stalls water program

by Paul Zykofsky

Water is the key to the development of Bangladesh's agricultural potential. While Bangladesh receives large amounts of water from rainfall—203 million acre feet—and 870 million acre feet through its rivers, most of it is concentrated in a few short months. During the monsoon period flooding of the rivers causes enormous damage, while during the rest of the year there is often shortage of water.

Because the land is mostly flat, there are no major natural sites for storing water to reduce the flood level during the monsoon season and save water for the dry season. The Bangladesh government hopes to build barrages on the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers so as to divert water to the southwest and northeast regions, respectively. During the past few years, using labor-intensive methods, it has also embarked on a canal excavation and re-excavation program which has improved irrigation somewhat.

However, any lasting solution to the water problem will depend on a water-development scheme in collaboration with neighboring India, through which the major rivers flow before entering Bangladesh.

Disputes between the two countries over water utilization date back to the 1950s, when India first decided to build a barrage on the Ganges River at Farakka, 11 miles before it enters Bangladesh, to divert water into the Hooghly River so as to clear out the silt which accumulates in the river during the dry season and thus keep Calcutta's port open. A barrage is a low dam-like structure which creates a body of water that can be diverted into canals for both irrigation and navigation purposes. However, because it does not have the height of a conventional dam, it cannot be used to generate hydroelectric power.

When the Farakka barrage was completed in 1975, there existed an understanding that the two countries would reach an agreement on sharing water during the dry season before the barrage would be operated, since, as the 1974 joint declaration issued after meetings between the Prime Ministers of the two countries, Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi, stated, "There might not be

enough water to meet the needs of Calcutta port and the full requirements of Bangladesh." Agreement was reached on trial operation of the barrage in April and May 1975, but India reportedly continued operating it beyond that; Bangladesh claimed that this caused a record low of water in the Ganges and created drought conditions during the lean season of 1975-76.

The issue was brought to the United Nations, and in November 1977 a five-year Ganges Waters Agreement was signed which fixed the share of water for the two countries during the lean season and called for finding a long-term method of augmenting the dry-season flow of the Ganges.

India's plan for achieving that calls for the transfer of 100,000 cubic feet per second of water from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges through a 209-mile long, half-mile-wide link canal, a third of which will pass through Bangladesh and join the Ganges at a point above Farakka in India. The 100,000 cubic feet per second drawn off from the Brahmaputra during the lean season would be compensated for by building two dams in the upper reaches of the river in India which would store monsoon waters to be released during the dry season. India also claims that the link canal would help reduce flooding in Bangladesh by lowering the water level during the monsoon season.

Bangladesh has meanwhile proposed the construction of storage dams in the upper regions of the Ganges in Nepal and India which will retain monsoon waters for release during the lean season. It claims that the dams will permit generation of 10,000 megawatts of electricity and augment dry-season flows by 180,000 cubic feet per second.

Bangladesh has officially rejected the link canal proposal as technically and economically unfeasible. It argues against constructing a canal running in a southwesterly direction which would cross a number of minor and major rivers flowing at right angles to the canal, since the canal would obstruct natural drainage of these rivers and aggravate flood problems in northern Bangladesh. The Dacca government also claims that it will force the relocation of large numbers of people in densely populated areas.

India, on the other hand, argues that the long-term solution rests in diverting water from the Brahmaputra, which otherwise goes to waste, since increased storage of monsoon waters on the Ganges in Nepal and India will be required to irrigate large parts of Eastern India. At present, only about 30 percent of the Ganges basin areas in India are irrigated.

The water dispute between India and Bangladesh has become a highly charged political issue in both countries, and it is unlikely to be resolved until past suspicions are overcome and a friendly working relationship is established between Delhi and Dacca.

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