Unilateral water diversion, or withdrawal of water from international or common rivers, has been the long-standing policy of India. India has seldom bothered to think about the impact of such policies on a lower riparian country, such as Bangladesh, in diverting water from common rivers.

Ever since India began constructing the Farakka Barrage on the India-Bangladesh border in 1972, 17 rivers in Bangladesh have already "died" and another eight are on the verge of drying up due to reduced water flows. The navigable length of the rivers in south-eastern Bangladesh has also reduced due to low water volume. A number of tributaries have either dried up or have become too shallow for vessels to use. The low river flow has increased salinity, which in turn has caused loss of vegetation. Industries in south-western Bangladesh face the problem of getting usable, saline-free water.

The cost of Bangladesh's direct losses due to Farakka is estimated at half a billion dollars a year. According to studies conducted by Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), about 80 rivers in Bangladesh have dried up within three decades after the Farakka Dam was built.

India is withdrawing waters of almost all the common rivers by building dams upstream, which will eventually cause Bangladesh to turn into a desert. The Padma River is drying up in Rajshahi after construction of Farakka Barrage. Twenty tributaries of the river have turned into streamlets.

The Tipaimukh Dam is not just a political issue, but also a scientific one. The livelihoods of millions of people who rely on the Meghna River system for freshwater, for their livelihoods, and for the overall food security of the region, are at stake. Bangladesh is already battling with water shortages due to global warming and consequent climate change. The Tipaimukh Dam would add to the environmental cataclysm already predicted by environmentalists.

The role of the Bangladesh government in this matter is quite confusing. Despite the rising protests from all corners, the government seems to be downplaying the threats posed by the construction of this dam. Only recently the prime minister has said that the government intends to form a committee to evaluate all aspects regarding construction of the dam before making any decisions on this controversial project. It might be that the government is envisaging some benefits from the construction of this controversial dam, namely import of electricity. In April 2009, the Indian government invited a Bangladeshi delegation to see the construction of the planned Tipaimukh Dam.

It would cause the Surma and Kushiara to run dry during November to May, which would eventually hamper agriculture, irrigation and navigation and lead to a shortage of supply of drinking water, etc.

The Bangladesh government must take a stand to clarify its position on the Tipaimukh Dam, on the basis of scientific evidence and expert opinion, and not on the basis of mere assurances of the Indian government. There is evidence of the reluctance of the Indian government to fulfill its commitments in the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, in which Bangladesh in recent years has been receiving significantly less water than promised. The Indian government has not responded even after repeated official protests by Bangladesh on the issue of water shortfalls. Therefore, it is imperative that the Bangladesh government re-examine the scientific evidence on the possible ill effects of the Tipaimukh Dam before it signals its approval.

The opposition party is criticising the government on the issue of the Taipaimukh Dam. It seems that the opposition party is trying to make a political issue out of it. In different media, BNP and its former water resource minister are accusing the government for not taking immediate action against this issue.

But the current government has been in power for a few months whereas the Taipaimukh Dam project is a decade long project by the Indian government. During the BNP regime (2001-2006) the then-water minister had a more than one meeting with his Indian counterpart regarding Taipaimukh Dam. But what was discussed during those meetings has never been reveled to the public.

The construction of the Taipaimukh Dam is a national problem. All the political parties must keep aside their differences and be united on this issue. We have seen the consequences of Farakka and we don't want another Farakka for Bangladesh.

After meeting with the Indian high commissioner, the prime minister announced that a team of the parliamentary committee will visit the Taipaimukh Dam area. As suggested by BNP, along with the parliamentary team, water experts must also visit the site. The committee needs to submit a report to the government. Based on the report, the government through a bilateral discussion should solve this issue. India is our friendly neighbour and we hope through cordial discussions they also will look for an amicable solution for both the countries.

Dr. Nadim Jahangir *is an Associate Professor at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).*