

PM'S INDIA VISIT

Water sharing should top the list

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India from April 7 to 10 has raised our expectations of resolutions of various prickly issues. Engr M Inamul Haque, Chairman, Institute of Water & Environment, talks to The Daily Star's Naznin Tithi about the long awaited Teesta treaty and other water sharing related issues that should be discussed during this visit.

We have learned that the Teesta water sharing agreement may not be signed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's upcoming visit to India. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's reluctance is often cited as a major reason for the delay. What's your view on this?

In the 37th meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission in Delhi, the then Bangladesh Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Roy demanded 50-50 distribution of the Teesta water at Gazaldoba point. At that time, he expressed satisfaction by getting 3,500 cusec of water without asking for it, and said that by holding talks we could get more water (*The Daily Star*, March 18, 2010). In January 2011, after a secretary level meeting, it was in the air that the Teesta water sharing agreement was imminent, with the formula of dividing the flow 50-50, keeping aside 20 percent of the total flow for the river. But then we heard some contradictory standpoints of the then Bangladesh government in the media. The then PM's advisor Dr. Moshir Rahman said that experts were yet to know the volume of water of the Teesta. He said, "So, we will measure the volume of the water in the next 17 years. Later, we will go for a permanent treaty." (*The Daily Star*, September 3, 2011).



Engr M Inamul Haque

The Hasina-Manmohan Summit in Dhaka on September 7, 2011 ended with no agreement on the Teesta water. It was in the media that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee wanted to give Bangladesh

25 percent share only, and so the summit failed. On September 8, the then Bangladesh foreign secretary Mijarul Quayes said at a press conference, "Teesta agreement is finalised; we are not to give any more concession." Thus it is not clear what actually is in the proposed agreement.

What is the logic behind building the Ganges Barrage? What are some of the risks for Bangladesh if this barrage is constructed?

We need a barrage on the Ganges River inside Bangladesh in order to divert water to the Sundarbans and supply irrigation water to the G.K. Project and Pabna Project areas. There is no big risk in this project. But the proposed location of the barrage at Habaspur, Rajbari, is too far from the G.K. Project area. So it will not be possible to supply water to the project area from this barrage. We have heard that monsoon water will be stored in the proposed Ganges Barrage. But storing monsoon water in the Ganges Barrage is impossible for practical reasons. Moreover, a barrage only regulates gates to let flood water flow and control lean flows, while a dam is built to store river water for producing electricity and there is provision for letting flood waters pass

through spillways. Indians are objecting to this barrage saying that if built, it would inundate Indian territories. We have Teesta Barrage only 8 km away from the border. It is not causing any inundation across the border to the Indian territories. The Ganges Barrage in Bangladesh should be relocated at a site near the G.K. Project head works, which is about 50 km away from the border.

How can we ensure fair share of water for both countries? How does India's unilateral move such as the river linking project, construction of dams, etc., affect our trans-boundary river management?

Basin-wide river management for the Ganges or the Brahmaputra can be done for navigation purpose only. Basin-wide river management for other purposes will give control of our rivers to India. The present day norms for non-navigational uses of international rivers are governed by the UN Watercourse Convention of 1997. Article 7.1 of this convention states that "Watercourse States shall, in utilising an international watercourse in their territories, take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm to other watercourse States." And article 7.2 says that "where significant harm

nevertheless is caused to another watercourse State, the States whose use causes such harm shall, in the absence of agreement to such use, take all appropriate measures, ..., to eliminate or mitigate such harm and, where appropriate, to discuss the question of compensation." India is already diverting Teesta water through its River Interlinking Canal #1, which is causing significant harm to our life and economy. But because both Bangladesh and India have not ratified this convention, we have to resolve the issues of trans-boundary rivers bilaterally.

What are the other water related concerns of Bangladesh that should be addressed in the upcoming visit but are not getting due attention?

Although the Indian government promises to do no harm to Bangladesh by their intervention in the common rivers at various president, prime minister or ministerial level talks, widespread mining in the Meghalayas is discharging toxic wastes in the rivers of haor areas and also untreated sewage from Agartala city is coming to the rivers of Bangladesh. These are the issues that should get attention in trans-boundary river talks.

Rethinking history education

MOYUKH MAHTAB

It would be superfluous to repeat here the details of the mass killings and systematic sexual violence committed by the Pakistani military on Bangladeshis in 1971. Accounts by journalists, diplomats, and those who participated in the war preserve much of the horrors, and subsequent research has only added to the strong case of calling the events a genocide. And yet, many Pakistanis today suffer from a historical amnesia when it comes to 1971. Why this denial of history after almost 50 years?

Every nation has to deal with its past; the ways in which they do differ. Take the contrast between Germany's strict laws regarding Holocaust denial and Turkey's stance in denying the Armenian genocide - where one tried to learn from its shameful past, the other, lives in an alternate reality. In the case of Pakistan, the distortion and indoctrination of history starts with its school level history education.

School students in Pakistan today are taught to blame Awami League and India for the violence; the principal victims are shown to be Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis. One Scroll.in article this March, citing this distorted history, pointed to the Class 9 and Class 10 Pakistan Studies textbook of the Federal Textbook Board of Islamabad.

It reads: "Indians and Bengalis charged Pakistan Army with wholesale massacre and desecration of women. On December 19, 1971, world media teams were shown the dead bodies of Bengali professors, intellectuals and professionals who were allegedly killed during the said unrest. Large-scale killings were publicized in the media to defame Pakistan Army."

In school, a common joke, when studying the history, was asking which facts were correct for that particular year: they changed every time governments changed. It seems less funny now when one thinks of

the student who would grow up with a distrust of a subject where facts did not matter. For this student, the purpose of studying history is to aggregate the acceptable facts, remember certain dates and names, and regurgitate the events and interpretations as the writer of the textbook seemed fit. As one former teacher of the History Department of the University of Dhaka complained, the once celebrated department of the university now only receives students who fail to get admitted in any other subjects.

Use of history to propagate a nationalist version of the past, where the present day nation state is projected to the glories of pre-national civilisations, is not new. BJP's attempts to rewrite the history of pre-modern and modern India into a version where a utopian Hindu civilisation is destroyed by a supposedly "violent" Muslim invasion to give way to a society sharply divided along communal lines highlight this, ignoring actual historical work by

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authors such as Richard Eaton and Romila Thapar, which refute this communal version.

In Bangladesh, history has been made it into a squabble over national



ILLUSTRATION: PAUL BATEMAN

identity (ethnic or religious), in turn homogenising the plurality of Bangladesh.

Take the example of our Bangladesh Studies textbook for class 7 when it deals with the Santal rebellion as part of the history of rebellions which ultimately led to the Liberation War. Now teaching the Santal rebellion is laudable; but to appropriate this in a nationalist narrative is to ignore the unique identity and history of the Santal community. This is all the more disturbing because the same pages which glorify the attempts of the Santal for standing up against oppression fail to mention any of their afflictions today. The chapter, in seeking to give the Santal rebellion a nationalist character, claims that Hindus and Muslims of Bengal joined the Santals in their fight. But the fact is Hindus and Muslims were largely unsympathetic towards the revolution and strongly opposed it, even calling for its suppression. Alongside, the problem remains that history is still taught in a sanitised, dumbed-down way: there

is no overarching intellectual purpose which the textbooks try to teach its readers.

One is not made to memorise 2+2=4, but is taught how addition works. On the other hand, when the intellectual rigidity of history as a subject has moved on to many interesting avenues of critical thinking, the textbooks are stuck within an antiquated framework of kings and empires, of great men changing the world.

The NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) in 2005 took on the task of revamping history education, when Neeladri Bhattacharya, among others, was hired for the job. The writers of the books tried to impart to the student that there is no single linear narrative, to teach them events in the local and global context. It tried to teach students how to deal with primary sources and the analysis was left open-ended on purpose, to encourage students to try and work out their own resolutions.

Neeladri Bhattacharya in speaking

of this new syllabus, wrote: "The books do not focus on the history of any single territorial unity. They look at the way [...] how different people, different communities and classes, and different regions have participated in the making of the modern world as it is today." This approach to teaching history teaches to look at the past beyond grand narratives. It is built on the established assumption that there are multiple viewpoints of looking at the subjective past.

Such an approach needs to be built on a philosophy of history: that of engaging with the plurality of perspectives, opinions, and cultures. It teaches to look at the same history through different lenses of interpretations, and most importantly learn the process through which a "history" is created.

Such a syllabus might seem to be too complicated for school going students. But, students are not taught calculus in class 5; there is a graduation. If the syllabus can incorporate the idea of history as a subjective interpretation in the earlier classes,

this could be built on to involve more analysis and theory in the higher classes. Additionally, history should not be a fringe subject as it is now: it should be extended as mandatory to classes 11 and 12.

Of course we will not be able to make the jump in a short span of time. It is not only about what is taught, but how it is taught: why else are the "Creative Questions" of our new education system still accused of favouring memorisation over critical thinking? The textbooks today are much better, but as a glance through the Bangladesh Studies book shows, it is still parochial and selective of its subject matter. It highlights our glories, and glosses over our failures. It talks of Bangladesh in a global vacuum, and instead of teaching us to see ourselves as one nation among many, it isolates. It may be argued that instilling the love for one's motherland is necessary, but where does one draw the line between jingoism and patriotism? And, is history the right subject for this purpose? Should not history education be a reason for us to be less conceited and allow us to be open to multiple perceptions while blindly believing none? What the writers of the NCERT textbooks tried to do in 2005 is not the only way to approach this. But we must start thinking about it now. The onus is on our professional historians, and they should be leading the debate about what should be taught and how, not state officials.

Every country, from America to Britain, has suffered when it has chosen to forget its past. Why else is today America so scared of refugees and Britain suffering from a "glory to the days of Empire" syndrome? A modern, progressive, and non-partisan approach to history is crucial if we are to have future citizens who are embracing of plurality and unafraid of multi-culturalism. After all, education has a higher purpose than just ensuring a livelihood or instilling an ideology.

The writer is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Out-cropping
 - 5 Hogs
 - 10 Center of activity
 - 11 Hot
 - 12 Clickable picture
 - 13 Used a lot
 - 14 Retina component
 - 16 Not good with pitches
 - 20 Stand up to
 - 23 Rap's Dr. --
 - 24 Put in office
 - 25 Tenor's pride
 - 27 Dr.'s org.
 - 28 Liquor amounts
 - 29 Independent sort
 - 32 Dolt

- 15 Tag info
- 17 Do copy work
- 18 St. Louis sight
- 19 Charges
- 20 Authentic
- 21 Ticklish Muppet
- 22 Penn of "Milk"
- 25 Despicable
- 26 Casual
- 28 Printing array
- 30 Dark wood
- 31 Thesaurus contents
- 33 War of 1812 port
- 34 Utah ski resort
- 35 Active one
- 36 Back on a boat
- 37 Army address
- 38 Propose home



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

G I B B C O I N E
 A T E A M O M E
 M A R D I O M E G A
 E L I D R O P L E T
 R I N G L E T S A O
 A G N E S D E R
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 C A N S T A R L E T
 L E A F L E T A R E
 A L B E E E S S E N
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