

FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2021, MAGH 28, 1427 BS

22

Challenges and opportunities of river management



ASM ABDUL BATEN

Rivers are priceless gifts of nature to every nation. For “Nodimatrik” Bangladesh they are considered by many as its life-lines equivalent to the veins and arteries of a human body. There are as many as 700 or more names of rivers listed in various archives (Banglapedia, 2019). The Water Development Board, Bangladesh (WDB, 2019) has published documents with names of 406 rivers. This number varies from source to source as some rivers have already vanished with time and some have taken different names at different places. There are 57 international rivers in Bangladesh of which 53 flow from India and 3 from Myanmar.

All rivers influence our everyday life either directly or indirectly as these are potential sources of water for agriculture, fish and also provide an exciting mode of transportation for business and recreation. In order to get the benefits sustainably from our rivers, we need to protect and conserve this bounty of nature. The economy of Bangladesh is heavily dependent on functional waterways and its associated transportation industry. The country with a population of 170 million has about 24,000 km long waterways, where 16 percent (3,800 Km) of it is navigable during dry season and 25 percent (6,000km) during monsoon (BIWTA, 2018). There are almost 12,500 registered vessels for Inland Water Way Transportation as recorded by the Department of Shipping (DOS, 2019). Over a million country

boats ply along all water ways which are not registered but impact the economic wellbeing of people. Two major ports of the country handle almost 90 percent of the total import and exports, out of which a major share (more than 85 m Ton per year) is transported hinterland by inland water transports. In the recent past, the government of Bangladesh has strengthened the Protocol of Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) with India for enhanced opportunities of transboundary trade between the countries. Cargo transport through inland waterways between Bangladesh and India has just nearly doubled to 2.78 MT during FY 2019-20 from 1.44 MT a decade ago, (DS, September 6, 2020, BIWTA). Prime minister Sheikh Hasina has also instructed the concerned ministry for expanding communications with India’s north-eastern province of Assam as well as Bhutan and Nepal by waterways. It is, therefore, important to maintain the rivers which are often challenged due to various internal and external issues that need to be resolved for good.

Bangladesh is geographically located in the largest delta of the world, crisscrossed by rivers of different size and length originating mainly from three major river basins namely Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. It has been observed for a long time that the country is put under pressure throughout the year for not getting the rightful share of water from the upstream river systems at its time of need. The dams already built/under construction at the other side of the

border have affected the morphology of our major rivers negatively. Consequently, there is a surge of water flow causing inundation during monsoon and again huge shortage of the same during dry season. Both situations usher in great misery for millions of people in Bangladesh.

Again, China’s geographical location with respect to both India and Bangladesh, gives it an advantageous edge to regulate the Brahmaputra’s water flow. It is said that China has claimed ownership over Tibet’s waters, making it an upstream controller of seven of South Asia’s mightiest rivers—the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Yangtze and Mekong. These rivers flow into Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, and form the largest river run-off from any single position. It is estimated that more than 65 billion tons of surface water flows out of the Tibetan plateau and the Chinese-administered regions of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia to

survived even during war time. The famous Nile River Basin (One of the longest rivers in the world: 6,695 Km) is shared by more than 168 million people of 10 countries (Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, The Sudan, and Tanzania) because of successful partnership. These are good examples of international water resource cooperation supported by third-party-fund trusted by all stakeholders. Looking at 145 sectoral distribution of agreements on transboundary water resources, almost 76 percent of agreements were on the “use and hydropower of water” and rest due to navigation, flood control, pollution etc (UNDESA, 2005-2015). For such agreements to succeed the most important requirements so far noticed have been proper monitoring and mechanism for enforcement.

For managing international rivers, the 1997 United Nations Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses is one

believes it has sustained notable harm due to a co-riparian State’s use of an international watercourse, it will simply raise the issue with the second State. In the negotiations that follow, articles 5, 6 and 7 in effect provide that the objective is to reach a solution that is equitable and reasonable with regard to both States’ use of the watercourse and the benefits they derive from it. However, it is up to the participating bodies themselves to determine what these terms would mean for their own benefits. The experts on the subject should coordinate in a way that international watercourse agreements be concrete, outline measures to enforce treaties made and incorporate detailed conflict resolution mechanisms in case disputes arise. The treaty also requires states to take reasonable steps to control damage due to any reason. It must include provisions for managing damage to waterways, such as caused by drought or erosion, and mandated that sharing states notify immediately of emergency conditions related to the watercourse that may affect them.

A new move under “South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI)” has been well appreciated by different corners. The multi-donor trust fund of SAWI is supported by the United Kingdom, Australia, and Norway, and administered by the World Bank. Their activities focus on three river basins (Indus, Brahmaputra and Ganges) including Sundarbans area with broad objectives of strengthening awareness and knowledge about regional water issues focusing seven countries namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan. As long as the initiatives are not against the interest of any sovereign country, the endeavours may sustain for longer period.

Within Bangladesh, management of river and its maintenance is a colossal task for the nation. Our governments have been always striving hard to address the internal water related issues with maximum priority. Several laws have been enacted in this regard. But the major problem is with implementation. Our constitution has clearly indicated via Article 18(A) that: “The State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safeguard the natural resources, bio-diversity, wetlands, forests and wild life for the present and future citizens”. Other relevant acts are Bangladesh Water Act 2013 (Act no. 14 of 2013), National River Protection Commission (NRPC) Act, 2013, and The Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (upgraded in 2010).

CONTINUED ON PAGE 25



PHOTO: STAR

neighbouring countries each year. China’s status as “upper riparian” in this case may put India under different challenges for development. Bangladesh is a lower riparian with respect to India and the equitable distribution of the rivers’ waters has since 1970s been a source of friction between the two countries (Britannica, 2019).

History says, there may be complexity of the issues regarding sharing of international waters but disputes can be resolved diplomatically. There are instances of many legal agreements on water sharing, which have been negotiated and maintained even though conflicts have persisted over other issues. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have been able to cooperate since 1957 within the framework of the Mekong River Commission. Those nations value these agreements because they make international relations over water more stable and predictable. Many of the treaties

important instrument that specifically focuses on shared water resources. It established two key principles to guide the conduct of nations regarding shared watercourses: “equitable and reasonable use” and “the obligation not to cause significant harm” to neighbours. Article 5, contained in Part II, reflects the principle that is widely viewed as the foundation of the Convention: equitable and reasonable utilisation and participation. It requires that a State sharing an international watercourse with other States utilise the watercourse, in its territory, in a manner that is equitable and reasonable vis-à-vis the other States sharing it. Another important provision of the Convention is article 7 (Obligation not to cause significant harm). This article requires that States “take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm” to other States sharing an international watercourse. Very often the two articles are combined somewhat as follows: if a State



With many smaller rivers from upstream under the grip of encroachers, a few bigger ones like the Jadukata river in Sunamganj Sadar upazila is losing its unique characteristics due to massive contamination and disposal of waste during illegal and unscientific extraction activities by sand and stone traders.

PHOTO: STAR



Rivers around Dhaka face the double whammy of contamination and encroachment on a regular basis, as authorities struggle to find a lasting solution.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ