

## DISCOURSE OF FLOOD

# Power, politics and people



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August saw simultaneous heavy rain and cloud-burst in Northeast India, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya. Subsequently, water overflowed as the gates of hydropower project, barrages and dams were opened. The upstream flow crossed the danger level at 14 points in seven transboundary rivers of Bangladesh. Many flood control embankments, including the one on Gomati, have collapsed. Feni, Cumilla, Noakhali, Khagrachhari, Habiganj, Chandpur, Cox's Bazar, Munshiganj, Sylhet, Lakshimpur, Chattogram, and Brahmanbaria have flooded. Twenty people have died, while more than five million have been affected, we have no information about livestock and wildlife.

This whole event has started a debate on whether the August floods are natural or politically-caused. Such a question is incorrect because all disasters have both natural and political aspects.

The main cause of the August flood is excessive rainfall in a short period. We witnessed similar floods recently in Sylhet, Sunamganj, Bandarban and even in Dubai. Climatologists maintain floods due to excess rain and meteorological droughts are impacts of climate change. Scientists have also proven that global warming is exacerbating the climate crisis and rich countries with their fossil fuel dependent neoliberal, consumerist economies and systems are mainly responsible.

The connection between the August floods and the climate crisis is, in no way, apolitical. Floods are political irrespective of India's action of opening gates of power plants, dams, and barrages because the global politics centring the climate is a given. Besides, the unresolved joint river management undertakings between India and Bangladesh are also part of political discourse.

Also, the recent floods have given us a message that whether it rains or not, the avenues for water from upstream to downstream to flow naturally have, over the years, decreased. As rivers and wetlands have been filled up, many canals disappeared, and floodwater, finding no space to flow, spreads all around, inundating the land and caused waterlogging.

**A crisis of prediction and preparedness?** For a long time, we have been raising questions about disaster forecasting and preparedness. Lack of will, proactivity and accountability in providing forecasts and warnings has come to the fore many times. The practice of indigenous traditional forecasting—along with preparing for hazards by analysing cloud patterns, wind speed, temperature variations, constellations or various activities of flora and fauna—is now rare. The state never recognised the subaltern knowledge in the mainstream disaster management.

Mostly the Meteorological Department's forecasts are primarily considered now. Moreover, its information does not translate equally across the country, classes, gender and

professions. For example, "danger signal-8" does not mean the same thing in coasts, haors, hills and Barind tracts. Besides, we see no early warnings or effective forecasts when haors are severely submerged by flash flood or when Barind tracts are scorched by severe droughts. Interestingly, the Met is under the defence ministry, as the state considers forecasting and warnings to be a "defence" aspect.

Since Cyclone Sidr in 2007, forecasts relating to cyclones have been regularly broadcast. After Cyclone Aila in 2009, forecasts and disaster preparedness became more structured. Previously, disaster broadcasts were disseminated through radio, television, newspaper, and loudspeakers or flag pulling at the local level. During cyclones Bulbul, Fani, Amphan, Jawad, Roanu, Yaas, Sirrang and Mithili, online platforms and social media are also played an important role in cyclone warning. Besides the Met office, many independent meteorologists and organisations are providing forecast information too.

However, the tradition of disaster preparedness varies across the country with its diversified geography and culture. A social narration of forecasting and disaster preparedness has developed relatively well in the coasts—not in all the 19 coastal districts, but predominantly in the Satkhira-Khulna region. In the Northeast's haors, especially in Sunamganj, Kishoreganj and Netrakona, people only prepare for disasters to harvest paddy in Boro season. In the north, the people of Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari or Gaibandha have many local pre monsoon preparedness. Haors face disaster risks in March-April, coastal areas in May-June and November, and other parts of the country in monsoon. But floods in August are a new phenomenon, at least according to the elders of Feni, Noakhali, Khagrachhari and Cumilla.

So, was there no prediction or advance early warning for the current flood? There was, both before and after the July uprising. At the beginning of August, the Meteorological Department of Bangladesh forecasted short-term floods in north, north-central and southeast regions. It pointed to heavy monsoon rains as the cause. According to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre of Water Development Board, the waters of seven transboundary rivers were flowing above the danger level. Even the outgoing head of state, at the beginning of July, relayed the possibility of floods. The South Asian Climate Outlook Forum predicted them way back in April.

Even after so many predictions, why weren't our preparations strong enough? I think, the present government had virtually no time to prepare in advance, as many things happened at incredible speed after the uprising. At the same time, India delayed in giving comprehensive advance warning of excessive rainfall and floods. This is a breach of previous transboundary river management related commitments and agreements.

### Transboundary river dictatorship

In 2005, when we identified the haor problem as a transboundary crisis, there wasn't a large enough movement on this issue. People in general opposed the Farakka barrage, there were expectations regarding sharing Teesta's water, and some were against the Tipaimukh dam.

I tried to understand the transboundary crisis by visiting the common river-basin

Bangladesh-India Joint River Commission, formed in 1972, has not yet taken all the necessary decisions about all transboundary Rivers and surrounding water ecosystem. In the 1996 Ganga Water Sharing Treaty, both India and Bangladesh are responsible for equitable and transparent management of the river. According to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD1992), states cannot carry out activities that

butchered, as Bangladesh has also imprisoned rivers through barrages, embankment, encroachment, and pollution.

While there is debate over the release of excess water stored in reservoirs, such incidents are taking place on a smaller scale right inside the country. The rubber dams built on Sukh river in Thakurgaon or Khasiamara in Sunamganj or Ganeswari in Netrakona wrong the villagers living both upstream and



Twenty people have died, while more than five million have been affected in recent floods in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: NAHID MAZHAR

villages and towns of Bangladesh and Northeast India. Additionally, I have regularly written about the crises in downstream Bangladesh due to the construction of large dams upstream, hydropower projects, roads, bridges, ecological destruction, deforestation, and harmful mining works in the border hills. In 20 long years, I haven't found any vibrant voices who started now "anti-India" protests by bringing up August floods.

The National River Conservation Commission listed 1,008 rivers in the book *Bangladesh Nod-Nodir Shonga o Shonkha*, published in 2023. The Water Development Board has divided the country's rivers into 17 hydrological regions and identified 57 rivers as common transboundary rivers. However, many more transboundary rivers like Mahadeo or Ganeswari (Rongdi) are still out of the list. In almost every Trans boundary Rivers and streams, India has built large dams, hydroelectric projects or structures, or blocked the flow of inter-state water flow through different development project or encroachment and pollution. This transboundary dictatorship is endangering not only downstream Bangladesh but also upstream people's lives, wildlife and ecology.

This dictatorship is contrary to international agreements and commitments on transboundary river management. The

endanger the biodiversity of neighbouring countries. In the 38th meeting, meeting of the Joint River Commission held in 2022, it was decided that India would inform Bangladesh about floods at the right time. As we have seen in the August flood, people did not have ample opportunity to take preparation for saving lives and property because the authorities concerned have failed to inform on time.

### Flood trauma and water justice

A state's one-sided, authoritarian stance on transboundary rivers inflicts severe disaster and flood-trauma on the people of other states. At the same time, water retention and control from upstream create public discontent in downstream townships. And the narrative to fight for river-democracy and water justice gains momentum.

In 2019, the High Court ruled that rivers are living entities. But both the state of Bangladesh and also India's neoliberal system and colonial attitude do not treat rivers as living entities. Both states chop up rivers, control them by force, and engage in plundering. Although Bangladeshis marched against Farakka barrage, the state of Bangladesh supported the Kaptai dam, which displaced one lakh people from their birth place, submerging homesteads and farmland. Forget the upstream, the downstream is also being

downstream by trapping water in dry season or releasing it in monsoon.

While voices from Bangladesh claimed that the opening of India's barrage gates is the cause of August flood, at the same time Bangladesh also had to open the gates of Kaptai Hydropower plant due to overflow. There are many more examples of such water-injustice with the people of upstream and downstream by the river-killing development systems. In 1985, Bangladesh built a dam on Feni river. In 2021, the Maitri Bridge built by India on Feni was inaugurated. Meanwhile, India also constructed the Dumbor dam on Gomati river, which is dangerous, evident by its collapse during the recent floods. All this while, in the name of sand trade, Gomati has been mutilated in Bangladesh.

All these river-killer events profess our anthropocentric development philosophy centring rivers. Neither state has yet stood for the free flow of all kind of water bodies including river. So, it is important to present this philosophy to demand water justice in joint river management discourse. People should urge that all dams and structures be removed from upstream to downstream of transboundary rivers. Water's essence is to flow from top to down, cloud to soil, from upstream to downstream, without any hindrance from the authoritarian powers that be.

# Navigating energy efficiency for Bangladesh's energy security

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According to the International Energy Agency, a fundamental tenet of energy security is having a steady supply of energy at reasonable prices. Between 2009 and 2024, Bangladesh primarily focused on scaling up power infrastructure, while efforts to develop energy resources fell short. The country's exposure to the volatile international fossil fuel market increased during this time, leading to challenges in maintaining a steady energy and power supply. Soaring tariffs amid inflationary pressure in the last two years made energy less affordable to the low and lower-middle-income groups.

The government's efforts in the last one and a half decades contributed to economic growth; however, the road ahead is still bumpy, with fuel imports likely to spiral, which in turn might worsen the country's energy security.

At this time, it would be prudent to change the highly import dependent energy model. With different energy-consuming sectors providing significant energy efficiency (EE) opportunities, Bangladesh's approach to accelerating energy security should include EE at its core. Going forward, enforcing EE policy instruments and creating a favourable ecosystem for them to thrive in will be all-important to promote EE. Bangladesh's energy efficiency and conservation master plan up to 2030 shows viable EE and conservation potential of 21 percent and 28.8 percent in the

industry and household sectors respectively. However, a 10 percent efficiency gain on grid electricity consumption could lessen the country's power demand between 1,500 megawatts (MW) and 1,700 MW (based on day and evening peak power demands during April to July 2024). Demand management could offer a multitude of benefits, such as

the immediate demand for capital-intensive and large fossil-fuel-based power plants, the country can use freed-up resources to bring down T&D losses. This investment appears timely, given that the country registered T&D losses of around 10.3 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2022-23 against the global average of less than eight percent. Analysis by Institute for Energy

display a notable gas-saving opportunity. IEEFA's study substantiated that EE in industrial captive power generation can reduce liquefied natural gas (LNG) import bills of \$460 million per annum. EE in industrial processes demonstrates additional gas-saving potential. Likewise, due to billing systems for gas burners in most households not accounting for consumption quantity, people often exhibit wasteful gas consumption behaviours. If such behaviours are rectified through raising awareness, it could contain spiraling gas consumption and result in substantial national resource savings.

While EE can optimise energy consumption and accelerate energy security, Bangladesh needs to focus on policy enforcement to achieve the desired results.

The energy audit regulations (EAR), issued in 2018 and revised in 2024, specify guidelines for performing energy audits and the certification of energy auditors and managers. Furthermore, the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) declared 189 enterprises as large energy consumers (designated consumers) that are mandated to carry out energy audits and submit periodic reports.

A logical progression should ensure that designated consumers carry out energy audits and submit reports to the SREDA periodically. However, this step will only generate data on the EE potential of audited consumers and can at best motivate some consumers to implement a few energy-saving measures. Instead, setting up annual or periodic energy-saving targets for designated consumers will guide them towards EE for compliance purposes. SREDA should crosscheck the annual EE results of designated consumers and prescribe corrective measures to underperforming consumers.



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delay or lessen the investment in new and large fossil-fuel-based power plants, and minimise fossil fuel import bills on the back of reduced demand for power.

Usually, Bangladesh has competing priorities in the power sector. It feels the burgeoning pressure to consistently invest in incremental power generation capacity and to improve transmission and distribution (T&D) systems. As EE provides relief by delaying

Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) concludes that a one percent improvement in the country's energy generation needs by 884 gigawatt-hours (based on FY2022-23 data). This will help avoid oil import bills worth Tk 12.38 billion (\$106.3 million) per annum (assuming the average fuel cost of producing electricity from oil-fired plants is Tk14/kilowatt-hour).

Moreover, industries and households