

## Revive our rivers by securing flow and stopping pollution

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FROM PAGE 30  
predicting Bangladesh's large-scale submersion is increasingly questioned. Global discussions are now reconsidering earlier projections.

The second major issue is water resource management. The Delta Plan emphasises embankments and infrastructure projects, but it cannot generate additional water—it can only manage what naturally exists, whether from rainfall or upstream sources.

As a lower riparian country, how can Bangladesh effectively address transboundary river water-sharing issues with India?

Since independence, Bangladesh and India have had a Joint River Commission with experts from both sides. However, over the past 54 years, our representatives have often attended meetings unprepared. Indian delegates present well-researched proposals, while our officials tend to agree without thorough analysis.

When the Teesta water-sharing agreement was discussed, I was among the first to highlight concerns. I published an article with satellite images of the Gazaldoba Barrage, showing how water was being diverted. In 2012, satellite imagery confirmed this diversion, yet I doubt our negotiators fully understood its implications.

Bengal is a shared geographical and cultural space, historically a single entity divided politically into West Bengal and Bangladesh. Despite this division, we share rivers, floodplains, and livelihoods. Official negotiations must be backed by rigorous research, facts, and strategic planning.

The Teesta agreement failed because Mamata Banerjee opposed it, citing water shortages. However, no one questioned where the water had gone. If Bangladesh had not received it and West Bengal also claimed scarcity, then where was it? The answer lies in Sikkim, where multiple dams hold up the water. These dams should follow a "run-of-the-river" principle, ensuring natural minimum flow while storing excess rainwater. Instead, they are blocking even the lowest flow, causing severe shortages downstream.

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treating this as a Bangladesh-West Bengal conflict, it should have been framed as a shared issue affecting both regions. The deprivation is mutual, and cooperation—not confrontation—is key.

For transboundary rivers, both sides of Bengal must acknowledge their shared ecosystem. The problem is not territorial but psychological, social, and political. Some believe resolving land disputes, such as Tin Bigha or the Chicken's Neck corridor, is the solution, but the real issue is effective water management.

**What is the best way to resolve the Teesta Barrage issue amid India-China interests and India's pending water-sharing deal with Bangladesh?**

As I've emphasised, thorough research must precede negotiations, and a collaborative approach should be adopted. This is a shared problem that requires cooperation, not division.

China is not directly involved in the Teesta issue. While it could play a role in navigational projects, beyond Assam, no viable navigational route exists. The

▲  
A part of the Teesta River has dried up, serving as a reminder of the importance of sustainable water resource management.

PHOTO: STAR

waterway extends only up to Sadiya in the Dibrugarh region, remaining within Assam, with further connectivity leading to the Bay of Bengal.

China has undertaken major water-related projects, but these do not directly threaten Bangladesh. Earlier, there was speculation that China would divert Brahmaputra water to its mainland, but this is economically and technically unfeasible due to mountain ridges separating Tibet from China's heartland.

China's hydroelectric projects are tunnel-based and primarily serve its energy needs. They do not divert water at a scale detrimental to Bangladesh. Discussions about China's involvement often distract from the core issue—ensuring fair water-sharing between Bangladesh and India.

The focus should be on the Bengal Basin and its people, not India as a whole.

Currently, when water shortages arise, one side suffers while the other remains indifferent, each prioritising its own interests. But if both sides unite, they can approach Delhi with a single voice: "Why are you not releasing water? We are both

suffering." This shared responsibility is crucial for securing fair water distribution.

This is why I reject superficial cooperation without a foundation of unity. True cooperation must be built on a sense of shared purpose and fairness. Only then can we achieve meaningful, long-term solutions.

The government plans to restore 19 channels and a 125-kilometre river network. However, similar commitments in the past have failed. What are your recommendations for ensuring effective implementation this time?

While excavation projects are undertaken, a critical issue is the disposal of excavated material. Typically, soil and waste are dumped along the banks, only to erode back into the water within a year or two, rendering the effort futile.

In Dhaka, the problem is compounded by excessive garbage accumulation, particularly in areas like Keraniganj, Gazipur, and Narayanganj. A more effective approach would be to incinerate extracted waste immediately, especially in winter when conditions are favourable. This would not only eliminate waste but also produce ash, which could be used as fertiliser.

Despite the potential, such methods are ignored. For two decades, Dhaka City Corporation has discussed generating electricity from waste but has failed to act. Cities like Bangalore complete metro rail projects in under three years, while in Bangladesh, even basic infrastructure takes decades. Dhaka produces 5,000-6,000 tons of solid waste annually, which could power waste-to-energy plants generating at least 10 megawatts each. Without such solutions, dredged waste will inevitably return, repeating the failures of past decades.

**How can the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) effectively tackle river encroachment?**

The NRCC should be independent and answerable to parliament rather than controlled by a ministry. Ideally, all commissions should fall under an ombudsman, ensuring impartial oversight. Currently, the NRCC operates under the Shipping Ministry, which has limited jurisdiction. For true effectiveness, it must be free from political influence and act in the nation's best interest.

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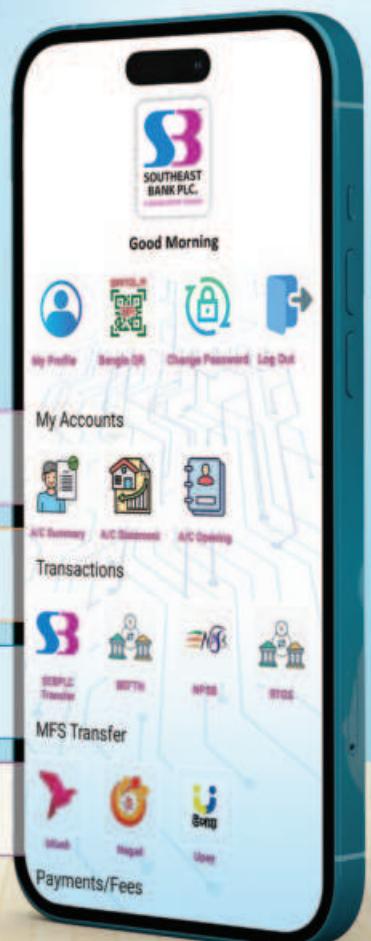
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