



India's withdrawal of water during the dry season leaves the riverbed near Hardinge Bridge almost dry.

FILE PHOTO: HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU

## TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS TREATY The future of Bangladesh depends on it



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A pre-liberation time slogan, "Tomar amar thikana - Padma-Meghna-Jamuna (the Padma-Meghna-Jamuna is our address)," depicts the inherent connection of rivers to the very existence of Bangladesh as a country. The geographic territory of Bangladesh is created by river-borne sediments over a long period of geologic time. All major rivers that flow into Bangladesh originate outside the country's boundaries. In that sense, Bangladesh does not have any control over the river flow in transboundary rivers that are vital to her economy, ecosystems, and survival. Bangladesh is located at the most downstream part of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basins, which span over parts of China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Although only 8% of the basins belong to Bangladesh,

### KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's survival depends on fair, basin-wide management of transboundary rivers originating upstream.
2. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is limited, inconsistently implemented, and expires in 2026.
3. Reduced dry-season flows have caused severe economic loss, salinity, ecological damage, and displacement.
4. Integrated basin-scale compacts, not narrow treaties, offer sustainable benefits for all co-riparian states.
5. Bangladesh must prioritise hydro-diplomacy and ratify international water law frameworks.

25% of the 600-million population in the GBM basins live here. Of the 54 transboundary rivers that are shared among the countries in the GBM basins,

there exists only one 30-year treaty between India and Bangladesh on the sharing of Ganges water during lean months. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty will expire at the end of 2026. The Ganges basin spans India, Nepal, and Bangladesh; however, the treaty was signed between India and Bangladesh only. There exists a separate treaty between India and Nepal on the flow of the Gandak and Kosi Rivers, which are tributaries of the Ganges River.

It is widely accepted that river basins are single entities - despite flowing through different states or countries - and should be managed as such. All international laws, rules, and principles that deal with the management and planning of transboundary rivers promote the concept of integrated water resources management at the basin

scale. For example, the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997) is a global treaty providing a framework for cooperation, management, and protection of shared river basins for uses like drinking, irrigation, and energy, emphasising principles of equitable and reasonable utilisation, not causing significant harm, and the obligation to cooperate. This law serves as a backbone for bilateral agreements on shared freshwater resources. Another example of integrated water resources management involving all stakeholders is the European Water Framework Directive (WFD), which considers the interconnections between surface water, groundwater, and related ecosystems in transboundary rivers.

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