
Topic: **INDO-BANGLADESHI COMMON RIVERS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION**

Presenter: **AZHAR KHAN CHICKMAGALOUR AKBAR**, POST GRADUATE RESEARCHER OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE, BANGALORE.

External Experts: **PROF. JAYANTA KUMAR RAY AND PROF. PRANAB KUMAR RAY**

Date: **18.06.2013**

Time: **3.00 pm**

Venue: **MAULANA AZAD MUSEUM, BALLYGUNGE CIRCULAR ROAD, KOLKATA**

RAPPORTEUR: DR. AMRITA DEY, RESEARCH FELLOW, MAKAIAS

The dispute over the Ganges water management has eroded Indo-Bangladesh relations since the latter's independence in 1971. Over and again Dhaka has complained about scarcity of water availability to thousands of Bangladeshi people, especially those in the country's northern region who have been the worst victims of desertification, deforestation, reduced fish catch, reduced navigability and reduced industrial production. They have often accused India of unilateral withdrawal of water flow to lower Bangladesh and the construction of the Farakka Barrage which instead of discharging water has been diverting the flow during the dry season.

Azkhar Khan Chikmagalur Akbar (a Post-Graduate student of Political Science) in his paper entitled "*Indo-Bangladesh Common Rivers: Challenges and Prospects for Cooperation*," has dealt with the problem of four common rivers—Brahmaputra, Ganga, Meghna and Teesta—that have been the cause of tension between the two 'inseparable' neighbours. Azhar Khan examined the challenges and implications of these disputes, analyzed the institutional frameworks behind these water politics and discussed the prospects and possibilities of cementing a relationship between New Delhi and Dhaka. He also explored the issues of regional imbalance, geographical proximity, disputes over common river sharing, problems arising from scarcity of fresh water supply, the other influencing factors, the treaties, agreements and Memorandums of Understanding that have been concluded over and again between the two partners with little effective result. "Each time India talks to Bangladesh," said Azhar, "its tone changes, reflective of its superior position and dominating voice," quite contrary to its gestures while dealing with China on their outstanding maritime issues. Thus urging New Delhi to shed its "double-standards", Azhar Khan suggested the following possibilities:

- a) Greater collaborative arrangements between the neighbours;
- b) Cooperation and development of basin management;
- c) Proper utilization of underground water and water conservation throughout the year;

Based on the principle of need the two neighbours can cooperate and benefit mutually.

Discussion Session

Professor Jayanta Kumar Ray, having congratulated Azhar Khan for presenting a comprehensive paper on such a relevant issue, suggested the following:

- To correct his observations on Indo-Bangladesh problems being restricted to sharing of common rivers alone, as there are other issues harming our bilateral relationship—related to terrorism, status of minorities, fencing and illegal migration;
- To confine his study to one major river of contention instead of four common river problems;
- To cross-check the provisions of the pacts and primary information on the diplomatic talks between the two neighbours before tagging India a ‘*hegemonistic*’ power;
- To examine the pragmatism behind treaties. “Since Ganga is a turbulent river,” said Prof. Ray, “can a 30-year treaty be realistic?”

Professor Pranab Kumar Ray appreciated Azhar’s work, pointing out that it was normal not to be able to do justice to all aspects of such a vast area. As a veteran expert on this topic, Prof Ray advised Azhar to look at the systemic loopholes that have stalled any long-term solution to this problem—the lack of effective planners, the hegemonistic mind-set of Indians, the corporatization of the water sharing issue, the absence of stakeholders, or the way in which water conservation is carried out, all signs of callousness and ignorance over the proper utilization of water resources, mired in vote-bank politics and poor decision-making on either side.

Dr. Sreeradha Datta, Director, MAKAIAS congratulated Azhar for his well articulated presentation and advised him to restrict his study to a particular bilateral river system and thoroughly weigh the pros and cons of the issue before submitting his paper for final publication.

Comments and observations from the floor highlighted the following issues:

- Questions were raised about India’s double-standard, as New Delhi has rarely been belligerent either to Bangladesh or China;
- Questions were raised on the current status of Joint River Commission talks; whether the meetings have true value, and the importance of river problems compared to other issues;
- There were discussions on China’s foreign policy strategy in handling India as a lower riparian country and whether such a strategy is applicable in Indo-Bangladesh river sharing disputes;
- Discussions were also held on the balance of power equations and whether India situates every power equally in peacefully resolving its outstanding disputes with its neighbours.