



India and Bangladesh have just agreed to discuss one of the thorniest problems facing their governments—the diversion of the waters of the Ganges to Calcutta. MARTIN WOOLLACOTT, in Dacca, explains how thirst can come to a country criss-crossed with water

The drought in the delta

THE BIG SOVIET helicopter beats slowly through the dry air over the shrunken Ganges as the Bangladesh officials aboard excitedly point out the empty village water tanks, the cattle clustered around the few straggling functioning water holes, the enormous wind-rippled sand bars in the river. "This isn't our Bangladesh," one of them shouts against the whirl of the blades. "It looks like West Pakistan."

Down on the ground, a District Commissioner says: "When I go to the villages, I am surrounded by people crying 'pam, pam' ('water, water'). What will the cattle drink? they ask. What will we drink? 'Pam, pam,' it's all I hear these days." When asked what he replied, he jerked his thumb to the north, in the direction of the Indian dam at Farakka which since April, 1975, has been diverting water from the Ganges for the long cherished Indian project of flushing out the Hooghly, Calcutta's river, to restore its navigability for big ships.

The issue of Farakka has blown up to major dimensions in the last few months. Together with continuing border clashes, it has led to a hostility between India and Bangladesh that would have been unthinkable before the death of Sheikh Mujib. To the Bengalis, water and rivers are part of the myth of the nation and that has given the dispute an almost religious aspect.

Much quoted in Dacca these days is a play by Rabindranath Tagore, most famous of Bengali writers. This is a symbolic piece in which a wild country boy, a

"son of the river" denounces the builders of a dam as an evil force strangling his "mother." He destroys the dam, crying as he does so, "Mukta dhara" ("Let it flow free"), which is also the title of the play. Needless to say the cautious new rulers of Bangladesh are not thinking of blowing Farakka — "That would be insane, it would be the end of Bangladesh," one senior officer said — but they are intensely angry and aggrieved.

In retrospect it is difficult to see why Bangladesh ever agreed to Farakka. It is essentially a scheme which benefits India and which cannot, at least in isolation, do anything but harm to Bangladesh. The plan goes back to British days, when the idea of switching water from the Ganges into the debilitated Hooghly was conceived.

With the completion of Farakka at a cost of £90 millions in 1969, and its commissioning last year, India achieved its basic ambitions for Ganges control. Upriver storage reservoirs take off water in the wet season for irrigation in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, while Farakka provides the means of flushing the silted Hooghly and "saving" Calcutta port.

The most that Bangladesh can hope for is some secondary flood control effect in the wet season, but even this may be cancelled out by the unprecedented build-up of shoals in the dry season. During the dry season, Bangladesh must inevitably get less water than she has been used to, and at some periods less than her minimum requirements, if Farakka is to be run at all.

The dispute ostensibly centres around the "lean period." India defines this as the six weeks in which there is not enough water for both sides' minimum requirements. Bangladesh has virtually the whole of the dry season from November to May. In reality the problem is how Farakka should be fitted.

Bangladesh wants the Indians to use the storage reservoirs they have built or are planning in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, not for irrigation purposes but to hold water for release into the river in the dry season. They also suggest the building of reservoirs in Nepal for the same purpose.

One can see why this would appeal to Bangladesh, particularly in the context of its demand for month-by-month allocations. At no cost to itself Bangladesh would get a permanent reduction of winter flooding as well as a normal flow of water in the dry season. The peasants of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, desperately in need of irrigation water at certain times of the year, might see it differently.

The scheme that India naturally prefers is to build a canal across Bangladesh from the Brahmaputra River to Farakka. As the Brahmaputra rises two months earlier than the Ganges, its waters could augment the supply at Farakka during the critical summer period India would thus get irrigation water for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and water for the Hooghly without harming Bangladesh and at the same time the completion of a large segment of the great National Water Grid that has

long been an Indian ambition. The Bangladesh response is that such a canal would cause disruption of agriculture, would take years to complete, and would create a situation in which not just one but both of Bangladesh's major rivers were controlled by India.

At this moment it cannot be denied that Bangladesh is being damaged in obvious ways and that the long term effects of the Farakka withdrawals could ultimately be disastrous. Officials believe that perhaps a twelfth of the coming "boro" rice crop will be lost. They claim that the fish population has fallen, particularly the delectable hilsha, a salmon-like fish much relished in both parts of Bengal. Increased salinity as sea water moves up the river system has forced the closure of a power station and some factories and could in time have a very bad effect on crops and timber.

Even the Indians don't dispute some of the effects. Samar Sen, the Indian High Commissioner in Dacca, says: "I have no doubt there has been some damage. But this trouble will not be solved by shrieking and shouting." Among international aid officials attitudes vary from scepticism about the extent of immediate damage to real anxiety. "If what they say about salinity is true, what the hell are we all doing?" said one. "It's a pretty important factor when the world is putting so much money into this place."

There is an incantation in both India and Bangladesh to assume that the Farakka question is primarily political. "What they're trying to say to us is 'We control your water, take heed,'" said one

senior Bangladesh official. "What they (the Bangladesh Government) are trying to do is to consolidate their domestic political position by running an anti-Indian campaign." said an Indian official. But the truth seems to be that it is primarily hydraulic, a genuine dispute over resources.

Some Bangladeshis have become so incensed that there is talk of what might be termed "hydraulic revenge." A barrage could be built across the Ganges in Bangladesh in such a way as to create flooding in large parts of India, one official explained. "Calcutta would disappear under the waves," he added grimly.

It appears now that the Indians have accepted various Bangladesh demands which, irritatingly for New Delhi, were at one time changing week by week. A technical delegation from India arrived in Bangladesh today to study the effects of Farakka, and a similar Bangladesh delegation will go to West Bengal soon. If all goes well these technical exchanges will be followed by higher level talks.

Major General Ziaur Rahman, the young soldier who now effectively runs Bangladesh, said in an interview last week, "I am very hopeful that the problem can be solved if we collectively sit down and work on it. Once we see good intentions, then everything can be settled." But it is also obvious that, talks or no talks, Farakka is an insoluble problem in isolation. It can only be solved in the context of a larger joint water scheme — with all the political and technical difficulties that such a scheme will bring in its train.