

The Ganges — A Temperamental Divinity

By Amaury Laporte

The Ganges is not the world's longest river, nor is it the most powerful, but it is without a doubt the most venerated river on the planet. Hindus believe its water can wash away sins and purify places and objects. Water containing even the minutest amounts from the Ganges is deemed holy, and thought to have healing powers. The Ganges even takes on a critical role in the Hindu afterlife — its current is believed to guide the ashes of the dead, and thus their souls, to paradise.

This veneration could well be justified for less exalted reasons as well. The 1,560-mile long Ganges supplies water for 350 million people and it flows through the two most populous countries in the world, India and China, as well as the most densely populated one, Bangladesh. Indeed, Bangladesh sup-

ports its high population density precisely because the Ganges forms a delta that allows up to three harvests a year.

Unfortunately, the Ganges is a temperamental benefactor. It alternately brings too much water, or too little.

In 1998, over 22 million Bangladeshis were left homeless or marooned, and 700 lost their lives, when the Ganges and its offshoots overflowed their banks after record monsoons. Such floods, usually affecting about a third of Bangladesh, are a yearly occurrence.

Just as Bangladesh suffers the most from the floods, it also bears the brunt of the river's dry spells. The shortages of water associated with the dry season, while less deadly, severely disrupt the livelihoods of the area's many inhabitants.

By the time the river reaches Bangladesh during the dry season most of its water has already been diverted into Indian canals. India has also built a barrier just before its border with Bangladesh in order to ensure a constant water supply for Calcutta's port, and fifty more dams are on the drawing board to regulate the river's flow and generate power.

Bangladesh, which has long been anxious about its gigantic neighbor's inten-

tions, is deeply worried. The Ganges issue complicates an already very complex relationship between the two neighbors.

India played a decisive role in 1971 when it helped Bangladesh secede from Pakistan. Bangladesh nevertheless views India with suspi-

cion. It blames a closed Indian market for its massive trade deficit, it fears that India will carry out its threat to deport over 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, and it strenuously denies Indian claims that it is harboring al-Qaeda terrorists.

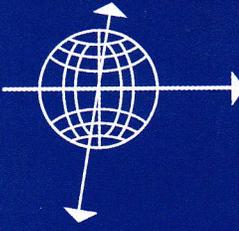
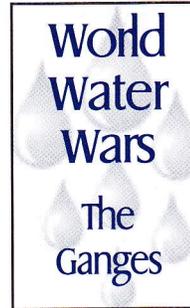
At the same time, India is losing patience with Bangladesh for allegedly sheltering Indian separatists and for refusing to grant transit rights across its territory, which would considerably simplify access to India's Northeastern territories.

Despite their differences, India and Bangladesh signed an agreement in 1996 which spelled out how the Ganges's water would be shared. In exchange, Bangladesh later agreed to grant India transit rights. This seemed to vindicate the "Gujral doctrine," which asserts that India should offer unilateral concessions to its smaller neighbors in order to improve relations in hopes of receiving later benefits.

With new tensions between the two countries, transit rights have been denied. The Bangladeshi government now believes that the Ganges treaty unfairly favors India, and wants it revised. India and Bangladesh have been unable to reach an agreement concerning 50 other rivers, and the Ganges is becoming ever more exploited and ever more polluted.

Both nations face a pressing need to improve water management, in hope that progress on this issue will carry over into improved relations on other issues as well. ■

Amaury Laporte is a contributing writer to *Monday Developments*.



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