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## CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN SOUTH ASIA WITH REFERENCE TO GANGA WATER CONFLICT

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### Abstract

South Asia is one of the most conflict prone regions of the world. Inter-state relations in South Asia are characterized by the existence of a number of bilateral disputes which proved to be too difficult to resolve. While some of them are rooted in the historical past, others are in the current dynamics of bilateral as well as intra-state relations. The lists of these disputes are too long. But here the major bilateral disputes have been discussed. In fact, inter-state relations involve territorial disputes inherited from the colonial past like Indo-Pak dispute, the dispute over the sharing of water resources of common rivers including that of the Ganga like between India and Bangladesh, intra-state conflict involving ethno-linguistic and religious groups with cross-border affiliation, and conflicting economic interests and other issues etc. Thus, such issues have actually been the source of conflicts in South Asia. However, these issues have the potential to escalate into violent conflicts at the same time they are also proving to be a source of bilateral or multilateral cooperation among the states. In fact, the nature of such conflicts is such that their resolution needs continued collective efforts of the sovereign state actors across borders.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Bilateral Disputes, Cross-Border.

### Introduction

South Asia is one of the important regions of the world. Most of the countries of this region have traditionally been the subject of colonial rule. They got independence in the last decade of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all the countries of this region are characterized by similar history, culture, socio-economic development etc. The factors like religion, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, population growth etc. influence the politics of almost all the countries of this region. The presence of such common problems among the South Asian countries provides a good ground for cooperation to resolve them peacefully. However, in the past there have been very few instances of such cooperation in this region. The factors that reflect the similarity in this region also contribute toward making it as a region of mutual mistrust, endemic tension and occasional hostilities.

The inter-state relations in South Asia in recent years have shown little signs of improvement and cooperation. The areas and issues of conflicts have been on the rise while those of cooperation remain dormant. The emergences of various conflicts in this region hinder the process of cooperation. The disputed boundaries, cross-border dispersion of ethno linguistic and religious groups, conflicting economic interests, problems in distribution and management of shared resources and above all the problem in the processes of nation building and economic development are amongst the factors that constitute roots of the conflicts in South Asia.

### South Asia profile

South Asia occupies an important strategic position in the world. Its population amounts to one fifth of the total world population. There is a big disparity among the countries of this region. In the world, it is most impoverished region where about half of the region's total population live below the poverty line. The ratio of resources to population is very low. The increasing pressure of population growth on the limited amount of natural resources leads to intensive exploitation of such resources. The growing subsistence needs ask for larger demands on water, arable land and forest. Almost all the countries of this region suffer from a series of environmental problems in the form of deforestation, soil erosion and fresh water scarcity. Moreover, the presence of these factors also precludes the possibilities of mutual cooperation among these states for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. These problems lead to the situation of conflict among these countries.

South Asia is also a region of great disparity in the terms of the size, population as well as military capability of its units. The region has been known by many unresolved conflicts for a long time. There are a lot of disputes between India and its neighboring countries. South Asian countries are also facing numerous internal cleavages and conflicts. These conflicts involve cross-section of classes, social strata, ethnic and linguistic groups, religions, communities and geographical regions. Religion plays a dominant role in the intra and inter-states relations of this region. Pakistan and Bangladesh are created on the basis of religion. Religion based confrontations have been a major source of long standing tension and periodic hostilities between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.



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### The conceptual and theoretical analysis of conflict and conflict resolution

Conflict is an all-pervasive social phenomenon. It is a situation where different actors are pursuing incompatible goals. Conflict exists where at least two parties try to pursue the same scarce resources at the same time. Conflicts are not static. They are dynamic. Conflict occurs at different levels of social life: interpersonal, inter-group, international and inter-organizational. Broadly speaking, the concept of conflict encompasses overt and latent interactions amongst contending groups and interests which may be non-violent or otherwise. The diverse urges, aspirations, and expectations of these groups constitute the propelling force behind perennial nature of the conflict. But actual conflict situations are precipitated when these components of propelling force are translated by the leadership of those groups into specific demands for prestige, status, share in power and concrete material gains. Conflicts can be constructive as well as destructive. They lead to cooperation among parties for peaceful resolution.

Conflict Resolution deals with the affairs of humans. It is a situation where the possibility of the use of force is reduced. Mediation, negotiation, good offices etc. are the technique of Conflict Resolution which are used for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. In the process of Conflict Resolution focus is shifted from incompatibility to compatibility between the related parties. Among the various paradigms of Conflict Resolution, power politics paradigm and analytical problem-solving paradigm are the most important. Analytical problem solving approach is an advancement on the power politics paradigm. The power politics model is premised on the unrestricted behaviour of states as sovereign territorial entities and on the prolific use of force or the threat to use such force to settle dispute among them. Whereas, analytical problem solving approach advocates the resolution of conflict with the help of a mediator who facilitates the parties to resolve the conflict. Analytical problem solving approach aims at minimizing the role of power in any form to the maximum extent for the peaceful resolution of conflict. It lays emphasis on the mutual and constructive efforts among the parties in the conflict for its resolution. The resolution of the conflict, it further reiterates, has to be equally beneficial for all the parties to the conflict.

### Conflict over the sharing of the Ganga water between India and Bangladesh.

This conflict has been the main conflict since the construction of Farakka Barrage. The work on Farakka Barrage started in 1961 and completed in 1971. It became operational in 1975. The Ganga River system is equally important for both India and Bangladesh. For India it is like a lifeline because it serves in several ways like hydropower generation, irrigation, navigation etc. For Bangladesh its uses are several such as irrigation, power generation, fisheries, navigation etc. Thus, it has been the most serious conflict between both the countries because different governments of the respective countries, at different times, took this issue from varying point of views. In fact, India's contention was that as an upper riparian country it has every right to utilize waters flowing in its territory. The diversion at Farakka does not create any shortage of waters into Bangladesh. Bangladesh's contention was that the withdrawal of waters by India at Farakka which has caused scarcity of waters into its territory is illegal, unjustified and inhumane. This problem remained unsolved during the Pakistan period. But the problem took a serious turn after the emergence of Bangladesh. Both these countries tried to resolve the problem of sharing of Ganga waters. For this purpose, both the countries concluded many agreements and accords to solve the problem. But they could not reach to any permanent solution for a long time. Because, the problem was not only the scarcity of water during lean season but was that of difference of perceptions, approaches, attitudes of the both parties towards each other. Due to these reasons over the last forty years the nature of the conflict continued to be fluid. Therefore, the nature of the agreements which were concluded from time to time to resolve this conflict has also been different. The most important agreement among these is December 1996 agreement. Earlier to this agreement many techniques of Conflict Resolution has been used like bargaining, consultations etc. but there was a lack of mutual understanding.



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## Ganga water conflict: Conflict Resolution Perspective

How Ganga water conflict is a conflict constitute the moot question of this chapter. For a conflict to exist, in the Conflict Resolution framework, there need to be a minimum number of two parties and at least one issue of contention among them based on the scarcity of its resources. All these elements for a conflict to exist were present in the case of Ganga water conflict between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh and India comprised of the parties; the sharing of lean season water flow fulfill the condition of the issue of contention which further fulfill the condition of scarcity in the form of availability of water during the lean seasons. Another important theme of this chapter highlighted the model of Conflict Resolution being applied on Ganga water conflict. Various efforts, agreements, accords and visits of the Prime Ministers of both the countries helped in shifting the focus from incompatibility to compatibility which is the necessary element of conflict resolution.

Another equally important element in the process of conflict resolution is the notion of scarcity. The December 1996 agreement is considered to be the most important for the resolution of the problem of scarcity during the lean season. Though, this agreement has been successful in resolving the conflict, but the problem of scarcity still remains there. The nature of scarcity in the present case revolves around the limited flow of water during the lean season, which fails to fulfill the respective requirements of India and Bangladesh. The resolution of the scarcity in this regard confined mainly to the equal sharing of the limited amount of water. Whereas, the actual amount of water remains scarce for both of the parties. In such condition the Conflict Resolution help only in the form of reaching to an agreement for sharing of the limited resources in a peaceful way. It is here that a delicate situation emerges where the scarcity of the resources comes to stay permanently. In case any of the party tries to jump the agreement, the ugly face of scarcity would engulf immediately the concerned parties into conflict. Conflict Resolution aims at managing scarce resources in such a manner that all the parties to the conflict express their willingness to the consensus and fell satisfy by the outcomes. In the case of Ganga water conflict this was done in 1996 agreement because this agreement was made by the mutual understanding and to the satisfaction of the parties concerned. However, the scarcity of the resources has not been resolved materially.

The parties have mutually agreed through the process of constructive interactions made possible by various visits of head of the state of both countries to each other and through their various consultative meetings. Through these efforts India and Bangladesh have unanimously agreed to shift the focus from incompatibility to compatibility over the issue of contention. Through various agreements which eventually culminated into a peaceful December 1996 agreement. This agreement made the provisions to successfully manage the scarce water flow during the lean seasons to the satisfaction of both the parties. The way of approaching the conflict was different in this agreement and this is the best example of Conflict Resolution in South Asia.

This approach can be extended to resolve other conflicts between India and Bangladesh and to other conflicts in South Asian countries. India and Pakistan can adopt this approach to resolve their long-standing bilateral conflicts. The dispute over boundaries, distribution of river water, Kashmir and nuclear issue etc. can successfully be resolved if both the parties willingly adopt this approach of mutual understanding towards each other. The problem of runn of Kutch has been resolved by India and Pakistan by adopting this approach. Besides Pakistan and Bangladesh, India has no serious conflict with other South Asian countries. So far as Bangladesh is concerned the serious problem of sharing of Ganga waters has been resolved through the conflict resolution process. There are still other minor problems between both these countries like Chakma refugee problem, New Moore Island, and border dispute. But these problems can easily be resolved by resorting to the same technique of mutual understanding.

In the end we can say that conflicts are inevitable to emerge in the international politics. But until and unless parties to a conflict are motivated to seek the underlying causes of their contention through self-introspectory and mutually interactive way involving dialogue, any attempt to settle or resolve conflict will ultimately lead to failure. If conflict results out of people's or parties struggle for incompatible goals or their efforts to fulfill their basic interests the resolution of the conflict then too lies in the very sincere efforts of the people or parties involved in the conflict. Thus, Conflict Resolution through mutual understanding is the most practical and ideal means to resolve them.

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