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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Beyond Renewal: Reimagining the Ganga Waters Treaty With Bangladesh

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

Beyond Renewal: Reimagining the Ganga Waters Treaty With Bangladesh

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Water-sharing treaties are usually framed as zero-sum. Can you design a renewal formula for the Ganga treaty where both India and Bangladesh gain, rather than one where each side simply defends its existing share?"

Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A treaty that only survives because no one has looked at it closely in thirty years is not evidence of a good design. It is evidence that no one has yet needed it to fail.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

River water-sharing between India and its neighbours is a recurring GS2 and GS1 theme, and the Ganga Treaty's 2026 expiry is the most current, dated example UPSC-style questions are likely to draw on.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood relations; bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies and politics of neighbouring countries on India's interests.

GS Paper 1: Important geophysical phenomena, water resources, distribution of water resources; drainage systems, changes in critical geographical features.

For **Prelims**, fix the treaty's exact name, signing year, duration, and the specific mechanism (ten-day flow-sharing blocks at Farakka), since UPSC frequently tests transboundary river agreements by name and mechanism.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
Ganga (Farakka) Waters Treaty, 1996	30-year agreement on dry-season flow sharing at the Farakka Barrage between India and Bangladesh	Distinguishes from other transboundary river treaties (Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan, Mahakali with Nepal) that are often confused
Farakka Barrage	Commissioned 1975, diverts Ganga water into the Hooghly to maintain Kolkata port's navigability	Tests the original purpose of the barrage, separate from the treaty that later governed its operation
Lean season	The dry period, roughly January to May, when flow at Farakka is lowest and sharing is most contested	Explains why the treaty applies only to part of the year, not annual flow
Joint Rivers Commission (JRC)	India-Bangladesh technical body, established 1972, for cooperation on common rivers	Frequently the institutional-mechanism answer expected in Mains responses on river diplomacy

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

DATE	DEVELOPMENT
1975	Farakka Barrage commissioned, enabling diversion of Ganga water into the Hooghly
1977-1988	Series of short-term ad hoc sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh, each expiring and requiring renegotiation
12 December 1996	Ganga Waters Treaty signed in New Delhi, valid for **30 years**, with review provisions
2024	Political transition in Bangladesh following Sheikh Hasina's departure from office, altering the composition and posture of the government India now negotiates with
End of 2026	Treaty's 30-year term expires, requiring renewal or renegotiation

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

What the 1996 formula actually does

The treaty divides Farakka's flow into ten-day periods across the lean season and applies a sliding-scale formula: when flow is adequate, both sides receive close to their preferred shares; as flow drops, Bangladesh is guaranteed an increasing minimum share to protect its downstream needs, particularly for the south-western region and the Sundarbans ecosystem, while India retains enough flow to keep the Kolkata port channel navigable. The formula was a genuine compromise for its time, ending nearly two decades of ad hoc, frequently renegotiated interim arrangements.

Why 2026 is different from earlier renewal moments

Three shifts distinguish this renewal window from a routine rollover. First, hydrological: sedimentation at and above Farakka has changed the barrage's effective discharge behaviour, and upstream abstraction in India's eastern states for irrigation and municipal use has grown since 1996, meaning the flow the formula assumes is available is not identical to the flow actually available today. Second, political: Bangladesh's 2024 transition installed a government with a different domestic coalition and, reportedly, a more skeptical public posture toward the 1996 terms, which Dhaka's opposition voices have periodically characterised as unfavourable. Third, climatic: greater year-to-year variability in Himalayan snowmelt and monsoon onset makes a fixed ten-day block formula less well matched to actual flow patterns than it was three decades ago.

The case for caution

A relationship already under strain is arguably the worst time to reopen a settled formula. Renegotiation could expose the talks to domestic political pressure on both sides, each government reluctant to be seen conceding, risking either prolonged deadlock (leaving both countries operating without a treaty) or a rushed, poorly designed replacement that satisfies neither.

The reply

The counter-argument mistakes the political relationship for the technical one. Water-sharing formulas are, at their core, hydrological engineering problems with political sign-off, not political problems with hydrological detail. Insulating the negotiation, technical experts from India's Ministry of Jal Shakti and Bangladesh's Ministry of Water Resources working through the Joint Rivers Commission on flow data and modelling, before political leaders finalise terms, is a standard diplomatic technique precisely suited to a moment like this: it lets the hard technical work proceed on its own timeline while political leaders retain final sign-off once the technical option set is narrowed.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Distinguish the political relationship track from the technical negotiation track. Many bilateral disputes that look intractable at the leadership level are more tractable when a defined technical body (a joint commission, a river authority, a boundary survey team) is allowed to do the underlying work first, narrowing the choice set before political leaders are asked to sign off. When an editorial or answer treats a technical negotiation as hostage to the political relationship, check whether an institutional channel already exists that could partially decouple the two, because that decoupling is usually the actual policy lever available, not a change in the political relationship itself.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture the Ganga at Farakka as a single pipe splitting into two channels, one toward the Hooghly and Kolkata port, one continuing downstream into Bangladesh. A valve at the split, the 1996 formula, was calibrated against a specific flow-pressure reading taken in the 1990s. Over thirty years, three things have quietly changed around that valve: sediment has narrowed the pipe upstream, new taps have opened along the Indian bank drawing off supply before the split, and the seasonal pressure pattern feeding the pipe has become less predictable. The valve itself has not been recalibrated. Renewing the treaty without renegotiation is equivalent to replacing the valve's expiry sticker without checking whether its calibration still matches the pipe it sits on.

WAY FORWARD

1. **Commission a joint hydrological review** through the Joint Rivers Commission, using updated flow, sedimentation and abstraction data, before political-level terms are finalised.
2. **Decouple the technical and political tracks**, letting engineers and water-resource officials narrow options first, with leadership sign-off reserved for final terms.
3. **Build in adaptive review clauses**, shorter interim reviews within a longer treaty term, so future flow variability does not require waiting another thirty years for recalibration.
4. **Address upstream abstraction transparently** on the Indian side, since a renewal that ignores India's own changed water demand invites the same "static formula" critique it seeks to avoid.
5. **Link the renewal to broader river cooperation**, including flood forecasting and joint disaster response, so the treaty is renewed as part of a wider cooperative framework rather than a narrow allocation exercise alone.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested transboundary river-water sharing through the Indus Waters Treaty and India's river-linking debates; the Ganga Treaty's 2026 expiry offers a comparably rich, dated case for India-Bangladesh relations and river-water diplomacy questions.

Practice question: "River-water treaties designed for a specific hydrological and political moment risk becoming outdated as both conditions change." Discuss with reference to the Ganga (Farakka) Waters Treaty of 1996 and the considerations that should inform its 2026 renewal. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: Water-sharing treaties are usually framed as zero-sum. Can you design a renewal formula for the Ganga treaty where both India and Bangladesh gain, rather than one where each side simply defends its existing share?

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of Jal Shakti, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: Beyond Renewal: Reimagining the Ganga Waters Treaty With Bangladesh — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Ganga Waters Treaty's 2026 expiry is an opportunity, not a formality; renewing its 1996 formula unchanged would lock in a thirty-year-old allocation logic that neither reflects today's flow variability nor today's strained bilateral politics.

✓ SUPPORTING

- The treaty's decadal renewal design was meant to allow periodic recalibration, and 2026 is the first renewal window since Bangladesh's 2024 political transition, making renegotiation both due and newly consequential.
- The original 10-day sharing formula assumes a stable lean-season flow at Farakka that upstream abstraction, siltation and climate variability have made less reliable, so the mechanics themselves need review, not only the headline shares.
- India's own water demand in its eastern states has grown since 1996, and treating the treaty as static ignores that both sides' baseline needs have shifted, not just one side's.

⚠ COUNTER

A strained bilateral relationship is the worst possible moment to reopen a settled allocation formula, since renegotiation could unravel into deadlock or a worse outcome for one side, given the trust deficit since 2024.

→ WAY FORWARD

Use a technical joint river commission track, insulated as far as possible from the political relationship, to renegotiate the flow-sharing mechanism on hydrological data, while keeping the political leadership track focused on the framework agreement.

MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

The 1996 Ganga Waters Treaty between India and Bangladesh expires in 2026. Examine the treaty's original design and discuss why a simple renewal, without renegotiation, may be inadequate to address current hydrological and political realities. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Ganga (Farakka) Waters Treaty of 1996 governs the dry-season sharing of Ganga waters at Farakka between India and Bangladesh and expires at the end of 2026, its first renewal window since Bangladesh's 2024 political transition and the most consequential bilateral water question the two governments currently face.

BODY

The treaty allocates flow at Farakka in ten-day blocks during the lean season, January to May, guaranteeing Bangladesh a minimum share even in low-flow years while reserving the balance for India, chiefly to maintain navigability at Kolkata port. Signed for 30 years with provision for review, it succeeded two shorter interim arrangements after decades of dispute following the Farakka Barrage's 1975 commissioning.

Since 1996, upstream demand growth in India's eastern states, sedimentation altering the river's discharge behaviour at Farakka, and increasing variability in Himalayan snowmelt and monsoon timing have all changed the hydrological assumptions the formula rests on, while Bangladesh's 2024 change of government has altered the political register in which any renegotiation will be conducted.

CONCLUSION

A renewed treaty that only refreshes the expiry date without revisiting the flow-sharing mechanics would be a missed opportunity dressed as continuity. India should treat 2026 as a chance to build a more resilient, data-driven allocation formula through technical channels, insulating the hydrological negotiation from the more volatile political relationship as far as institutionally possible.

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