India–Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC)

Mains: *GSII – International relations*

Why in News?

The Joint River Commission (JRC), established in 1972, is in focus ahead of the expiry of the India–Bangladesh Ganga Water Treaty on December 12, 2026.

How have India-Bangladesh diplomatic relations evolved?

- **Foundation of relations (1971–1975) –** India supported Bangladesh's liberation struggle in 1971 and recognised Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971.
  - The **Treaty of Friendship**, Cooperation and Peace, signed on March 19, 1972, established the foundation for bilateral cooperation.
  - Both countries initiated cooperation in reconstruction, trade, security and water-resource management.
- **Period of challenges (1975–1996) –** Political changes in Bangladesh and unresolved disputes over the Farakka Barrage, border issues and water sharing strained bilateral relations.
  - The 1977 Ganga water-sharing agreement and subsequent negotiations demonstrated efforts to manage disputes through dialogue.
- **Renewed cooperation and institutional development (1996 onwards) –** The 1996 Ganga Water Treaty established a long-term framework for sharing Ganga waters at Farakka.
  - The 2015 Land Boundary Agreement resolved longstanding boundary and enclave issues, strengthening bilateral trust.
  - Cooperation expanded into connectivity, trade, energy, security and regional development.

What is the India–Bangladesh Joint River Commission?

- **Background and establishment** – India and Bangladesh share approximately 54 rivers, including the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Teesta.
  - The JRC was established through a statute signed on November 24, 1972, following the two countries' agreement to cooperate in harnessing shared rivers for mutual benefit.
- **Structure of the Commission** – Each country appoints a Chairman and three members for a three-year term, including two engineers.
  - The Commission may appoint experts and advisers to address emerging challenges.

    - Meetings are held annually, alternately in India and Bangladesh.
- **Major functions –** Maintain bilateral coordination on river-related issues and maximise the benefits of shared water resources.
    - Coordinate flood control, cyclone warnings and irrigation projects.
    - Facilitate information exchange and discussions on water-sharing arrangements.

What are the major achievements of the JRC?

- **Feni River Water-Sharing Agreement, 2019** – India and Bangladesh agreed to allow India to withdraw 1.82 cusecs of water from the Feni River for drinking water requirements in Sabroom, Tripura.
    - The agreement resolved a longstanding dispute and marked progress in bilateral water cooperation.
- **Kushiyara River Agreement, 2022** – Both countries finalised an interim water-sharing agreement, strengthening cooperation on transboundary water management.
- **Cooperation on 6 transboundary rivers –** Both countries agreed to exchange data and develop interim water-sharing frameworks for the Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumra rivers.

What are the major challenges facing the JRC?

- **Unresolved Teesta water-sharing dispute** – The proposed Teesta water-sharing agreement remains unimplemented due to differences between the two countries and domestic political considerations.
- **Uncertainty over the Ganga Water Treaty** – The Ganga Water Treaty, signed in 1996, is due to expire on December 12, 2026.
    - Despite discussions through the JRC, the two countries have not completed negotiations for its renewal.
- **Limited political authority –** The JRC lacks independent political powers and depends on the governments of India and Bangladesh to implement its recommendations.
    - Its decisions require unanimity, limiting its ability to resolve disagreements.
- **Growing water-security concerns** – Climate change, floods, droughts and increasing agricultural demand intensify competition over shared water resources.

How can the JRC be strengthened?

- **Strengthening institutional cooperation** – Ensure regular meetings, timely information exchange and effective implementation of agreed decisions.
    - Strengthen technical cooperation and establish mechanisms for monitoring compliance with water-sharing arrangements.
- **Resolving outstanding disputes –** Prioritise the renewal of the Ganga Water Treaty and resolution of the Teesta dispute through sustained political dialogue.
    - Address domestic political concerns through consultations with relevant stakeholders.
- **Promoting sustainable water management –** Develop climate-resilient water-sharing arrangements based on scientific data, ecological requirements and equitable utilisation.

    - Encourage basin-wide cooperation on flood management, irrigation and river conservation.

What lies ahead?

- India–Bangladesh relations have evolved from the shared experience of Bangladesh's liberation to a multidimensional partnership.
- The JRC remains a vital institutional mechanism for managing transboundary water disputes.
- Strengthening its technical capacity and political support can transform shared rivers from sources of tension into instruments of sustainable development.

Reference

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