India–Bangladesh ties and the Ganga water treaty renewal

Mains: *GS II | Bilateral relations*

Why in News?

The 1996 India–Bangladesh ganga water sharing treaty nears its scheduled expiration on December 12, 2026, without a finalized renewal agreement.

What is the 1996 Ganga water treaty framework?

- Commissioned in 1975 in West Bengal's Murshidabad district about 18 km upstream of the Bangladesh border.
- The **Farakka Barrage** diverts Ganga water via a 38-km feeder canal into the Bhagirathi–Hooghly system to flush silt and keep the Kolkata Port navigable.
- **Dry-season scope -** Governs water sharing at Farakka during the lean season from **January 1 to May 31** in **10-day periods**.
- **Tiered sharing formula**
  - When flow at Farakka is **70,000 cusecs or less**, water is shared **50:50** between India and Bangladesh.
  - When flow is between **70,000 and 75,000 cusecs**, Bangladesh receives **35,000 cusecs** and India retains the balance.
  - When flow exceeds **75,000 cusecs**, India receives **40,000 cusecs** and Bangladesh receives the remaining flow.
- **Leanest-period guarantee -** Between **March 11 and May 10**, each country is guaranteed **35,000 cusecs** in alternate 10-day periods; if flow drops below **50,000 cusecs** in any 10-day period, both governments must hold immediate consultations.
- **Institutional oversight-** A Joint Committee monitors daily flows at Farakka (India) and Hardinge Bridge (Bangladesh), supported by the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), with provisions for five-yearly reviews and renewal by mutual consent.

Why negotiations are in Limbo?

Dimension	India's position and priorities	Bangladesh's position and priorities
Water Allocation Formula	Seeks greater flexibility and higher dry-season retention (reportedly an additional 30,000–35,000 cusecs during March 11–May 10) to meet rising domestic irrigation, urban, and port-navigability needs.	Seeks a stronger minimum-flow guarantee (reportedly 40,000 cusecs between February and May) so dry-season shortages do not disproportionately cut downstream supply.

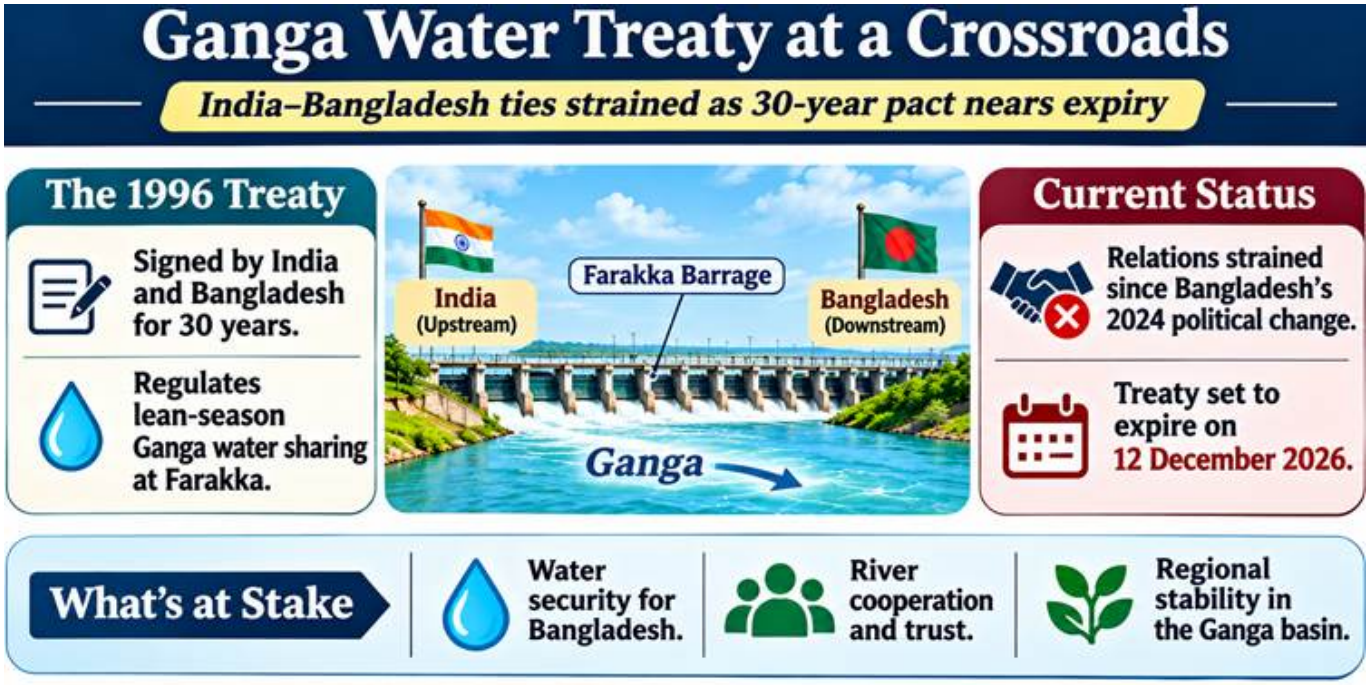
Treaty Duration	Favours a shorter renewal period (around 10 to 15 years) to allow periodic recalibration amid changing hydrology and climate patterns.	Prefers a longer-term agreement with firm legal protections to ensure predictability for agriculture and ecosystems.
Scope of Cooperation	Emphasizes reciprocity, technical flow verification, and balancing upstream state interests alongside bilateral commitments.	Pushes to expand the pact to cover basin-wide management, flood-data sharing, sediment dynamics, and climate resilience.

What are the key challenges in reaching a new agreement?

- **Diplomatic freeze and political transition-** Strained bilateral engagement and political shifts in Bangladesh have slowed high-level ministerial and JRC dialogue.
- **Risk of a post-december 2026 legal vacuum-** If the treaty expires on December 12, 2026, without either a renewed pact or a formal interim extension, dry-season sharing will revert to an ad hoc, non-binding arrangement similar to the 1988–1996 gap.
- **Shrinking lean-season supply vs. rising demand -** Dividing a stagnant or declining dry-season water pool between growing populations and economies on both sides creates a zero-sum perception.
- **Data trust deficit and institutional irregularity -** Occasional disputes over flow measurements and irregular ministerial meetings of the Joint Rivers Commission hinder technical consensus.

What is the way forward?

- If a comprehensive new treaty cannot be finalized before December 12, 2026, New Delhi and Dhaka should execute a time-bound interim extension of the 1996 framework while structured negotiations continue.
- Broaden the successor agreement to address climate adaptation, sediment management, groundwater recharge, ecological minimum flows, and real-time flood forecasting across the basin.
- Deploy automated, jointly monitored gauging stations and strengthen the Joint Rivers Commission so hydrological data builds mutual confidence rather than dispute.
- Maintain structured dialogue with West Bengal, Bihar, and other basin states so domestic water security, silt management, and bilateral diplomacy advance together.



Reference

[The Hindu | India-Bangladesh ties leaves Ganga Water Treaty]

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