

Hilsa Diplomacy in South Asia: Soft Power, Shared Waters, and Bilateral Relations between India and Bangladesh

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Abstract:

Shared transboundary resources are both the source of cooperation and conflicts in South Asia. This study examines the significance of ‘Hilsa diplomacy’ as a soft power strategy and its impact on India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. The Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) region is the habitat of the premium table fish named Hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*). In South Asia, Hilsa fish is highly valued in terms of culture, economy, and politics. Hilsa production has decreased due to overfishing, reduced river flow, and environmental degradation. The study also highlights the importance of Hilsa diplomacy in the context of transboundary rivers, economic interests, and cultural ties. By framing the fish as an instrument of *soft power* and symbolic diplomacy, this paper analyses how Bangladesh has utilised it as a diplomatic and strategic resource during the religious festivals and political affairs. The study finds that the limited supply of Hilsa fish and differences in transboundary river water sharing have weakened the bilateral relations between the two countries. The research implemented qualitative methods to analyse secondary data, government statements, and policy documents.

Keywords: Hilsa Diplomacy, Soft Power, India-Bangladesh Relations, Shared Rivers, Transboundary Governance, Foreign Policy, South Asia

Introduction:

Water diplomacy in South Asia originates from complex political dynamics, conflictual border relations, strategic negotiations, and riparian dependencies. Further, South Asia's shared colonial history, cultural ties, and diverse natural resources shape its geopolitical profile. The management of common natural resources frequently emerged as a significant area of convergence and conflict (Sheikh & Rashid, 2020). Khan et al. (2020) argue that ‘Hilsa diplomacy’, based on shared resources, has recently evolved into a distinctive aspect of the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. In this context, the Hilsa fish (*Tenualosa*

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ilisha)- a migratory fish, habitat to the GBM basin, highlighted as a means of promoting goodwill and cooperation in South Asia. Hilsa fish is a highly valued fish not only in India but also in the world. However, its cultural significance and culinary priority go beyond its economic demand, which makes its production and supply an emerging and conflictual topic (Mozumder et al., 2020). Transboundary river management between India and Bangladesh is linked to Hilsa's conservation and production in South Asia. (Ahsan et al., 2014; Sarker et al., 2018). Riparian interventions in transboundary rivers, ecological concerns, and disputed water-sharing mechanisms have transformed the Hilsa fish from a highly valued fish into an emerging diplomatic tool.

However, Hilsa diplomacy's dynamics and implications for the larger India-Bangladesh relationship require an extensive study due to its complex interplay of ecological considerations, economic interests, and socio-cultural values (Indraning, 2020). Bangladesh has used the export of Hilsa as a diplomatic gesture to express goodwill against the ecological and cultural backdrop, especially during religious festivals in India, like *Durga Puja*, Eid, and *Poila Boishakh*. In the context of the intricate dynamics characterising the India-Bangladesh relationship, Hilsa diplomacy emerged as a multifaceted phenomenon with the potential to improve cooperation and exacerbate existing tensions. Thus, implementing Hilsa diplomacy attempts to overcome these challenges and improve bilateral relations between the two countries (Ortolano et al., 2015).

This study examines the development of Hilsa diplomacy as a soft power strategy and its impact on the bilateral ties between Bangladesh and India. The study incorporates a qualitative research approach in its methodology and draws from secondary sources, including academic literature, government statements, policy documents, reports, and data from fisheries. It employs a conceptual framework influenced by environmental geopolitics (Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008), symbolic diplomacy (Cull, 2009), and soft power (Nye, 2004).

Theoretical Framework:

This study integrates three interrelated theoretical stances- Soft Power Theory, Symbolic Diplomacy, and Transboundary Water Governance- to examine the changing dynamics of India-Bangladesh relations using the perspective of Hilsa diplomacy. This study's primary theoretical framework is Joseph Nye's (2004) 'Soft Power theory'. It holds that countries can accomplish their foreign policy goals through charisma, values, and culture rather than just using financial inducement or coercion (hard power). Hilsa fish, which has high demand in

Bangladeshi and Indian culture, particularly in West Bengal, has become a non-coercive weapon to influence diplomatic actions. During festivals like *Durga Puja* and *Poila Boishakh*, Hilsa fish are often presented as gifts to promote cultural diplomacy, fostering goodwill and alleviating tensions, particularly amid ongoing water-sharing tensions over the Teesta.

The research additionally employs hydro-diplomacy frameworks (Mirumachi, 2015; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006), which examine how shared water resources can serve as a unifying and dividing factor among riparian states. Access to resources like Hilsa is shaped by upstream and downstream processes in the GBM river system, constituting a crucial geopolitical and ecological battleground within this framework. Hilsa's ecological reliance on freshwater flows for migration and spawning emphasises the close relationship between fish availability and river flow governance, connecting water-sharing conflicts to food security and cultural significance. The water politics between India and Bangladesh are further complicated by the scarcity of Hilsa, which is partially caused by decreased river discharge, damming, and pollution.

The study also incorporates ideas from symbolic interactionism (Alexander Wendt, 1999; Der Derian, 2009), highlighting the significance of meaning and performative acts in international relations to clarify Hilsa's function in bilateral ties. Hilsa is a diplomatic symbol in this context, signifying benevolence, intentions, or even political influence. Bangladesh's deliberate use of Hilsa exports and gifts exemplifies an intricate form of symbolic diplomacy in which tangible items have symbolic and emotional significance during negotiations. By integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualises Hilsa diplomacy as an intersection of soft power, ecological interdependence, and symbolic politics.

Hilsa Diplomacy: A Tool for Soft Power:

In South Asia, the Hilsa Diplomacy originated in 1996 as a gesture of goodwill and cooperation. Sheikh Hasina, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, delivered a shipment of Hilsa to West Bengal's Chief Minister Jyoti Basu as a calculated act of goodwill right before the historic Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 (Chakrabarti, 2024). In this instance, the fish represented shared resources, and both countries viewed the outcome of the accord as a diplomatic success. During her visits in 2010 and following West Bengal's election in 2016, Hasina sent Hilsa fish to Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, as a gesture of goodwill (The Business Standard, 2020). Further, Hilsa gained culinary importance in 2017, when the former prime minister of Bangladesh cooked fish for the Indian president during her visit to India (The Daily

Star, 2017). Joseph Nye (1990) defined soft power as a state's capacity to influence people without coercion or force to accomplish its objectives.

In contrast to hard power, soft power is based on culture, values, and diplomacy. In South Asia, 'Hilsa diplomacy'- the deliberate exporting or offering of the culturally valued Hilsa fish, as a sign of hospitality and respect between Bangladesh and India- is one of the most remarkable instances of soft power in action. Over time, this unofficial diplomatic gesture has developed into a regular, symbolic practice that is especially apparent around festivals like *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Durga Puja*. According to Khan et al. (2020), these diplomatic actions are often widely reported and cited as a sign of the two Bengali-speaking regions' notion "divided by borders and united by cultures"

Durga Puja

Durga Puja, the biggest annual festival of West Bengal, marks the homecoming of the revered Goddess *Durga*. During its ten-day celebrations, Hilsa is the most popular item in West Bengal. It is offered to Goddess *Durga* during *Durga Puja*. As a transboundary diplomatic strategy, Bangladesh often restricted the supply of Hilsa to India, citing its shortages during the festivals. Bangladesh banned Hilsa exports to India in 2012 following disputes over the Teesta water-sharing agreement (Al Jazeera, 2024). In 2019, Bangladesh declared that its restriction on exporting Hilsa to India would be temporarily lifted, permitting the shipment of 500 tons of Hilsa to West Bengal during *Durga Puja*. The decision was made when the Teesta water-sharing talks were still at a crossroads. This act's timing was widely viewed as an attempt by Bangladesh to balance diplomatic relations and maintain favourable public opinion in India (The Hindu, 2019). To deliver the demand for hilsa fish during the *Durga Puja* celebration, the interim government of Bangladesh allowed the export of 3,000 tonnes of Hilsa to India in 2024. Indian authorities welcomed these gestures as gifts of friendship amid significant political shifts. The media focus, diplomatic announcements, and cultural festivals accompanying the fish's delivery enhanced the fish's importance as a diplomatic tool in all cases. However, restricting the supply of Hilsa and selling it at a high price during the cultural festivals shows the applicability of soft power in practice.

Eid and Poila Boishakh

Hilsa diplomacy was also used by Bangladesh during *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Poila Boishakh*, especially in return for Indian gestures like exporting medical supplies or mangoes. The first day of the Hindu New Year is *Poila Boishakh*, the Bengali New Year. Celebrations for Bengalis

are rarely complete without food, which includes a range of cuisines and fish, particularly 'ilish'- Hilsa. During the Bangla New Year, Dhaka observes the tradition of eating swamp rice with Hilsa fish. As part of continuous informal efforts to maintain positive diplomatic engagement, reports from 2017 and 2018 indicate that Bangladesh sent huge Hilsa consignments to India during the *Poila Boishakh* celebrations (The Economic Times, 2018). These gestures are not ceremonial; they are soft power tools that help reduce political tension and improve people-to-people relations. For Bangladesh's Muslim community, *Eid-ul-Fitr*, which marks the conclusion of Ramadan, is one of the most important occasions. In the Indian continent, during Eid, there is a high demand for Hilsa, which also strategically benefits Dhaka. In July 2021, during Eid celebrations, Bangladesh approved the sale of a minimal quantity of Hilsa to India. This decision symbolised goodwill, especially following setbacks in bilateral engagement over the Teesta River conflict and border killings (Khan et al., 2020). Nye (2008) argues that the efficacy of soft power is in its ability to co-opt and attract rather than coerce. Hilsa diplomacy during *Poila Boishakh* is an excellent illustration of this, employing shared resources as a low-cost but highly effective diplomatic strategy.

However, Hilsa is not the only food used as a diplomatic tool in South Asia. Another well-known food diplomacy in the region was 'mango diplomacy', particularly between India and Pakistan. During heightened military tension in 2021, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan delivered mangoes to Indian leaders, bringing back warm recollections of past friendships across the border. Another example is India's use of Darjeeling tea exports to Bhutan, framed as a diplomatic overture during high-level visits. In times of political conflict, Hilsa diplomacy serves as a cultural bridge, in addition to South Asian food-based overtures such as mango diplomacy. It illustrates how food is frequently employed as a soft power instrument to impact bilateral ties between South Asian nations.

Hilsa: A Cultural and Economic Icon in India-Bangladesh

Hilsa Fish in Cuisine and Traditions

Bengalis have gained recognition worldwide for their cuisine and culture. West Bengal's cultural and economic landscape is uniquely located in the Hilsa fish (*Tenualosa ilisha*). It goes beyond its status as a simple seafood item to become what food anthropologists call a 'total social fact', a single component that influences and reflects several aspects of society (Appadurai, 1981). It is also known as the 'queen of fish' in Bengal and holds a special place in Bangladeshi and West Bengali cuisine and culture (Sen, 2004). There are multiple factors for

its culinary significance. First, the fish is particularly well-suited to Bengali cooking methods due to its unique flavour profile, which is defined by its rich, oily texture and stated umami taste (Banerjee, 2017). Bengali gastronomy is characterised by traditional dishes like *ilish paturi* (steamed on a banana leaf), *ilish bhapa* (steamed with yoghurt), and *shorshe ilish* (Hilsa in mustard sauce) (Ray, 2010).

However, the cultural significance of the fish is increased by its seasonality. The monsoon time (June-September), when Hilsa migrates upstream for spawning, develops into an annual culinary celebration. Mukhopadhyay (2015) reports that Bengali households arrange special events around Hilsa availability, and restaurant menus in Dhaka and Kolkata highlight seasonal Hilsa festivals. The Sundarban Hilsa Festival is an annual event held in West Bengal in August and September. Sutton (2001) refers to this periodicity as 'food nostalgia'- collective memories connected to seasonal intake patterns. In literature and language, Hilsa's culinary standing is also reflected: Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore often referred to Hilsa in letters about Bengali identity (Chakraborty, 2018), 19th-century Bengali gourmet Bipradas Mukhopadhyay dedicated an entire chapter to Hilsa in his groundbreaking work '*Pak Pranali*' (Cooking Methods), and modern Bengali cinema carries on this tradition by employing Hilsa meals as narrative devices that symbolise family bonding. Thus, Hilsa reflects many aspects of Bangladeshi and Indian food and culture. The cultural and culinary significance of Hilsa leads the people of West Bengal to depend on Bangladesh for its supply during peak seasons.

Hilsa as Economic Lifeline

In South Asia, Hilsa holds significant cultural value and serves as an economic lifeline for the people of the GBM region. The Hilsa fishery supports the Bay of Bengal region's vast commercial network. Around 2.5 million people, including 500,000 licensed fishermen in Bangladesh alone, depend directly or indirectly on Hilsa-related activities, according to the country's Department of Fisheries report, 2022. Faruque et al., (2014) refers to the economic chain from catchers to processors, transporters, and retailers as a 'Hilsa ecosystem'. According to the Department of Fisheries, Bangladesh, Hilsa contributes nearly 1.1 per cent to the national GDP and accounts for about 12 per cent of total fish production (Department of Fisheries, 2021). The fish demonstrates remarkable resilience with an economic value of INR 16 billion annually (Thapa et al., 2025). Hilsa prices have risen 400% in real terms over the same period (World Bank, 2022), despite reduced catches (down 30% since 2000, according to FAO 2021 statistics), making it both a luxury food and a necessary economic item.

However, international trade adds another economic dimension. The leading producers of Hilsa worldwide are Bangladesh (76%), Myanmar (15%), and India (4%), which together account for 95% of global Hilsa catches (Hossain et al., 2020). India is the biggest importer of Hilsa from Bangladesh, with West Bengal consuming the majority, but producing only five per cent of the catch (Mahmud, 2020). Due to the high demand for Hilsa, its price has risen in recent years. Data says the production of hilsa has increased, nearly doubling in the last 25 years. Prices, however, have ranged between Tk800 and Tk1,000 per kg (Hasan, 2024). In 2024, the interim government of Bangladesh quashed the ban on exporting Hilsa to India, which was imposed in 2012. The government allowed 3,000 tons of these highly prized fish to cross the border. The high economic value of Hilsa allowed Bangladesh to use it as a soft power strategy to restrict its supply. However, in recent years, the sustainability of the Hilsa fishery is in jeopardy because of overfishing, habitat damage, and migratory route disruptions brought on by dams and barrages. The Farakka Barrage has been commonly cited as a barrier to Hilsa migration into India's upstream areas (Rahman, 2010). Bangladesh has recently established Hilsa sanctuaries, restricted gear types, seasonal fishing restrictions, and other conservation efforts. These developments impacted the bilateral relations of the two neighbours.

Role of Hilsa in India-Bangladesh Bi-lateral Relations:

India established its relationship with Bangladesh during its involvement in the country's liberation from Pakistan. The long-shared history, linguistic, cultural, and social links have established a solid foundation for their bilateral relations. The relationship has gone through phases of cooperation and conflict during the last 50 years, influenced by shifting regional dynamics and political issues. Bangladesh is strategically significant to India, mainly because of its proximity to India's northeastern states and its contribution to regional connectivity. Moreover, broader geopolitical elements also impact the relationship, such as China's expanding relations with Bangladesh, which have challenged India's foreign policy decisions (Khara et al., 2025). Both nations have significantly advanced border management, counterterrorism, and security cooperation. One of India's largest trading partners in South Asia is Bangladesh (MEA, 2024). Despite these developments, conflicts over security, illegal immigration, water sharing, border control, and shared resources remain highly sensitive.

In the bilateral relations of India and Bangladesh, the Hilsa fish (*Tenualosa ilisha*), a shared resource, has evolved into an emerging area of cooperation and conflict. Hilsa is not only Bangladesh's national fish but has significant cultural and economic significance in West

Bengal, India. Hilsa has a \$1.74 billion market value, accounting for around 10% of Bangladesh's fish production. It makes up 12.5% of the catch in West Bengal, highlighting its significance for the regional economy and diets (Hossain et al., 2019). This illustrates the fish's dual identity as an economic and cultural asset in the region.

However, Hilsa's symbolic role in regional politics distinguishes it from other commodities. 'Hilsa Diplomacy'- the practice of Bangladesh allowing restricted Hilsa exports to India, particularly during culturally significant events like *Durga Puja* or *Poila Boishakh* (Bengali New Year)- has developed into a deliberate use of soft power, as Khan et al. (2020) point out. These actions are not just business dealings; they are part of a strategic framework of cultural diplomacy, which aims to reduce bilateral tensions and influence important Indian political stakeholders, especially the West Bengal government, whose position often determines India's national stand on water-sharing treaties like the pending Teesta River Agreement (Chakrabarti, 2024; Sultana & Thompson, 2022). Bangladesh's decision to permit Hilsa exports to India, particularly West Bengal, is frequently seen as a soft concession intended to influence public opinion and the politicians in Indian federal politics, especially the West Bengal government, which is key in impeding water talks, even though the Teesta River water-sharing agreement has remained subject to controversy (Chakrabarti, 2024). Consequently, cultural diplomacy often becomes intertwined with formal negotiations, creating opportunities and constraints in diplomatic engagement. During her visit to India, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina frequently gave Hilsa to her Indian counterparts as a cultural gesture. Such a symbolic act of gifting Hilsa in different political meetings and religious festivals demonstrates its strategic use and significantly impacts bilateral developments. The limited supply of Hilsa to India strained the people-to-people relations between the neighbours. The ban and restricted supply of *Ilish* during Hindu festivals in India casts doubt on Bangladesh's commitment to protecting Hindu minorities. India is the largest importer of Bangladeshi *Ilish*, and because of its restricted supply, the price of fish has increased drastically in the Indian market.

Although there has not been much institutional consistency, India has periodically backed Hilsa conservation initiatives and technical assistance in fisheries management. Hilsa fisheries serve as an intersection for ecological cooperation and symbolic diplomacy. Furthermore, Hilsa's migratory nature depends on free-flowing rivers and healthy estuarine environments, which are in danger because of pollution, climate change, dam development, and reduced river flows. Thus, river obstructions upstream in India directly impact spawning and juvenile development

zones downstream in Bangladesh, demonstrating the transboundary nature of these ecological disruptions (Ahsan et al., 2014).

Hilsa has emerged as an ecological asset and a culturally embedded soft power tool in India-Bangladesh relations. Its symbolic and economic significance has allowed it to serve as a diplomatic gesture, particularly during politically sensitive negotiations such as the Teesta River water-sharing agreement. Moreover, its ecological dependence on unhindered transboundary river flows reinforces the critical intersection between environmental sustainability and regional diplomacy. Institutionalising Hilsa-related cooperation within a broader integrated river basin management framework may foster deeper bilateral trust and contribute to long-term regional stability.

Shared Waters and Transboundary Challenges:

Since Hilsa is an anadromous fish, it migrates from the sea to freshwater for spawning. According to Rahman et al. (2020), there are three species of Hilsa, with *Tenualosa ilisha* being the largest and accounting for 99 per cent of the total Hilsa catches in the Bay of Bengal region. This species' central producing zone is the Bay of Bengal, from where it migrates to the Padma and Meghna rivers and their tributaries for spawning and breeding. Before Farakka, it was the most common species in the Ganges River system until the middle of the 1970s. The global Hilsa catch is reported out of the total catching of mature Hilsa fish, 75% from Bangladesh, 15% from Myanmar, 5% from India and the rest from other countries (Islam et al., 2020). The transboundary character of Hilsa fisheries requires cooperation between Bangladesh and India, and to some extent, Myanmar. For example, it has been extensively reported that the Farakka Barrage, built by India on the Ganga River, hampers Hilsa's upstream migration, affecting fish supply in Indian territory and changing its natural cycle (Rahman, 2010). The Teesta River, also a significant tributary of the Brahmaputra, plays a crucial hydrological and biological role in the northern riverine networks of Bangladesh, which ultimately enters the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) Delta- the main breeding and spawning ground for Hilsa. Hilsa fisheries are impacted by the unresolved Teesta Water Sharing Agreement, which has been pending since 2011. There is a symbolic intersection between Teesta water-sharing politics and Hilsa diplomacy. These disputed transboundary water sharing arrangements impact bilateral relations. “You (India) aren’t giving us enough water, so I can’t give you Hilsa fish right now”, Bangladesh PM said (Haider, 2022). As a soft power gesture, Bangladesh exports Hilsa fish to

India; however, India's control over the Teesta water frequently exacerbates asymmetric ecological vulnerability, which has drawn criticism inside Bangladesh.

According to Islam et al. (2019), the species' long-term future is in jeopardy due to overfishing, climate change, and competing fishing rights, which have exacerbated conflicts over shared waters. India's Hilsa catches have decreased over the last 20 years, while Bangladesh, the world's largest producer, has had inconsistent yields. Due to its habitat and migration's transboundary nature, Hilsa conservation is a regional ecological challenge. Hilsa's vulnerabilities have been further aggravated by climate change. How fish reproduce and feed has changed due to monsoon patterns, rising sea surface temperatures, and saline incursion into estuary zones. Implementing ecosystem-based fisheries management is hampered by fragmented national policies, a lack of basin-wide agreements, and inadequate data exchange between Bangladesh and India (FAO, 2020; Ortolano et al., 2015). The Bay of Bengal's maritime borders and territorial disputes are intimately related to the geopolitical aspect of Hilsa fishing. Due to fish stock migrations or unintentional crossings, local fishermen from both countries routinely cross invisible marine boundaries. Frequent arrests, boat seizures, and diplomatic difficulties have resulted from such incursions, which hurt livelihoods and worsen perceptions across borders. Enforcement has become capricious and frequently politically sensitive without a coordinated monitoring agreement or shared fishing protocol. Fishermen do not have the same flexibility to travel across national borders as Hilsa, which causes socioeconomic losses and diplomatic conflicts. According to Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008), the disconnect between political borders and ecological reality is a classic tragedy of transboundary resource management. For this reason, Hilsa diplomacy often encounters challenges in managing shared rivers.

Conclusion:

Hilsa diplomacy is an intriguing example of how a culturally valued natural resource is a soft power in the relations between two nations. This paper has shown that the hilsa fish is not just a traded item or an ecological resource. However, it is a symbolically powerful mediative tool for Indian and Bangladeshi diplomatic encounters. Using carefully timed quality Hilsa exports, as sacrificial gifts, and seasonal trade goodwill gestures, Bangladesh has used Hilsa to create goodwill, reduce tension and softly coerce India towards its domestic political calculus, most notably of the Teesta River water-sharing arrangements.

The changing significance of Hilsa illustrates the broader dynamics of transboundary water politics in South Asia, where ecological interdependence converges with cultural diplomacy and regional disparities. The environmental aspects of hydro-diplomacy are further highlighted by Hilsa's migratory nature, which necessitates the health of riverine and estuary ecosystems. The ecological vulnerability underlying these diplomatic efforts is demonstrated by declining Hilsa populations brought on by upstream manipulations, overfishing, and climatic stress. The conflictual water relations and pending Teesta deal impact the supply of Hilsa to India. However, the limited supply of the fish and its use only as a soft power tool impacted the people-to-people relations of both countries. Therefore, more general concerns about river governance, flow management, and regional collaboration are closely related to the sustainability of Hilsa populations.

In conclusion, Hilsa diplomacy is an excellent illustration of how common natural resources can be a source of conflict and a tool for cooperation. Institutionalising this approach inside a larger, multi-level governance framework could achieve resilient regional relationships, sustainable growth, and increased mutual trust. Future research should continue exploring the role of ecological symbols in international relations, evaluating their long-term effects on the environment and diplomacy.

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