INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed mounting pressure on river water resources in the Continental South Asia with increasing demand from agriculture, domestic and industrial sectors. Use of water is increasing rapidly due to explosion of populations, the expansion of irrigated agriculture and industrial growth. Although Continental South Asia region seems to have ample river water resources to meet the rising demand, adequate quantities of water are not sometimes readily available in the places where it is direly needed and is found in abundance when it is not required. Therefore, the steadily growing need of management of the river is an issue of particular concern.

River waters has been considered, till recently inexhaustible in the region and their management has not attracted proper attention. The countries of this region need to draw lessons from the history of other regional cooperation arrangements and recognize that region can elevate itself through self-help and shared endeavour. The region has unfortunately remained bogged down in numerous, avoidable inter-state conflicts while the world at large has made a decisive shift away from conflict to cause of cooperation. The countries of the region at the lowest level of Physical Quality of Life Index have to succumb to the insurmountable pressure to evolve a mechanism for proper management of their natural resources — the water being one of them. Moreover a region like this cannot afford to insulate itself from the ongoing process of radical changes in international arena.

Efforts by the countries have generally focused on expanding water supplies to the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. Hitherto unserved rural sector and fast expanding urban populaces are supplied water usually through the development of new water resources and construction/expansion of structural works. Evidence of water scarcity in many parts of the Continental South Asia is now clearly being felt. Numerous conflicts have been arising between different water users — hydroelectric
multipurpose power generation competing with — flood control and inland navigation, urban versus irrigation, etc. Therefore, as the cost of developing new sources of supply surmounts beyond the reach of these poor and developing countries, conservation and utilization of existing resources through efficient management becomes an imperative.

Although water, is considered being a renewable resource, its relentless use can cause irreversible damage. Poor river water resources management has resulted in depletion of water resources due to their overexploitation of river water and increasing pollution of rivers. This is gradually reflected in the suitability of water for use — impacting adversely on environment.

The countries of Continental South Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, though heavily depended on rivers seem to be rather slow in realizing the importance of proper utilization and management of the life giving water. As the new political boundaries were created as an outcome of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, within this geographical reality it also divided the river systems of the region artificially. This gave rise to upstream — low stream conflicts, claims and counter claims over river waters, resulting in water disputes. Indo-Pak differences over Indus River system, India-Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) dispute over Ganga and Brahmaputra River systems are such glaring examples. Rising consciousness about the river waters as a potentially important natural resource has eventually made the water a bone of contention. These countries began to assert their claims forcefully to get maximum benefit from utilization of their river water resources. Cautious approach followed by them to address this problem has hampered the process of bilateral cooperation.

It is common knowledge that the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river systems are such that no single country is in a position to fully utilize them. These rivers flow from one country to another — making their optimum utilization possible only through mutual cooperation. Flood control,
maintenance of ecology etc., thus requires a concerted common effort. Various individual efforts of these countries to control the ebb and flow of the rivers have not been adequately fruitful.

These states are quite conscious about the necessity for the development and management of river waters in so far their specific needs are concerned. For instance if Nepal develops its vast potential fully it cannot only feed its impoverished economy but also tremendously earn from its export. Bhutan wants to make optimum use of their mighty hydro potential. Some of its efforts have helped this tiny Kingdom to improve its economy. Bangladesh can improve its economy in many ways if the problem of shortage of waters during the lean period and management of ever flooding abundant water during monsoon is solved. Pakistan too wants to increase the capabilities of its canals and solve the problem of water logging and salinity. Similarly, India can also benefit tremendously from the cooperation with neighbouring countries. India’s stake and responsibilities are much more than its counterparts, being the largest user and biggest country. In fact no efforts to cooperation in this regard succeed without India, which is uniquely shares its borders with all the others while rest of these countries don’t shares their boundaries among themselves. However these countries especially Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh lack the capital and technical know-how resources, which could enable them to take individual steps in the direction of the management of their rivers.

Moreover the divergent and contradictory approaches regarding the sharing and development of water resources are reflected in the conflicting priorities between the cobasin countries. Lack of commitment and political will has allowed this problem to linger on. As it comes out that the domestic compulsions and antagonistic national interests have complicated the process of river water management in Continental South Asia.

The focus of present study is that the Indo-Centric feature characterizing Continental South Asia is often taken as a stumbling block in
the development and management of rivers waters of the region. Accounting for over three quarters of the region’s population, land mass and gross domestic product (GDP), India stands out as a major player. The success of management of water resources in Continental South Asia will rest on the role and initiative that India can take in fostering closer ties with its neighbours.

The present work confines itself to the three major basins viz. Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra, which involve more than one country. The rivers, which are individuals to a country, have not been focused, as it is their individual concern. The countries like Sri Lanka and Maldives, though part of South Asia, have also been left out of its purview. The Continental South Asia or South Asia has at places been used interchangeably for the sake of the flow and continuation of an argument. It may also be appropriate to point that the creation of new states in India – Uttranchal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh – have not been mentioned separately and their data remains clubbed with their parent states.

The data used in this study flows essentially from the political-geographic facts and features with a geopolitical approach. Prospects of cooperation and conflict in the management of Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river basin has been examined in specific geopolitical context and geopolitics has been used as relation of international political power to geographical setting.