

India - Bangladesh Relations: Enduring Challenges

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The year 2021 is significant for India and Bangladesh in many ways. Both countries are celebrating the fiftieth year of establishment of diplomatic relations. This is also the 50th year of Bangladesh's liberation, bringing with it memories of 1971 when the people of Bangladesh lived through a genocidal war. More than 2,000 Indian soldiers laid down their lives. Ten million refugees from East Pakistan were hosted by India. In fact, in a state like Tripura, the refugee population surpassed the population of the state. West Bengal was another state that hosted a large number of refugees. 2021 is also the birth centenary year of the founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

The creation of the new country not only brought hope to the 75 million people of erstwhile East Pakistan but also resulted in the creation of a friendly eastern neighbour in the new state of Bangladesh. Not surprisingly the war, that also had Bengali identity at the core, motivated the Bangladesh government in exile to adopt Rabindranath Tagore's '*amar sonar bangla*' - which had become a battle-cry during the liberation war - as the national anthem of the new nation.

The foundation of India-Bangladesh relationship was firmly established when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, after landing at Palam airport on 10 January 1972, on his way to Dhaka for the first time after the country's liberation, said that the two countries had "fought together in defence of human liberty".¹ He said he had come "to pay personal tribute to the best friends of my people, the people of India ... You all have worked so untiringly and sacrificed so gallantly in making this journey possible - this journey from darkness to light; from captivity to freedom; from desolation to hope".²

In a press conference on 14 January 1971, after taking oath as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he referred to the newly independent Bangladesh's relations with India, and said, "We have a very special relationship. The

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relationship is the friendliest. Our treaty of 'friendship' is in our hearts."³ Thereafter, during his first formal visit to India, as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he emphasised that the "geography of the region provided a natural basis for co-operation".⁴ It is unfortunate that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not live to translate this vision into reality.

It is essential to recount the progression of the relationship between India and Bangladesh which is based on sacrifice, empathy, and admiration. Soon after the liberation, the two countries took several steps to provide a framework to the bilateral relationship, drawing from the liberation struggle. In spite of the country being hemmed in by India on three sides, and taking into account the experience of Bengalis under the Pakistani regime, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not want to look at India through the security prism constructed by Pakistan's ruling elite. He did not perceive any security threat from India - a country that had extended unflinching support to Bangladesh's liberation. Perhaps, the 1972 Treaty of Peace and Friendship attested to the mood of that time.

However, the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, and the emergence of military governments - that ruled Bangladesh with the help of right wing political parties and the detractors of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime - brought back to the fore, domestic politics and narratives on several issues that had earlier dominated India- (East) Pakistan relations.

India in Internal Bangladeshi Politics

The new President, General Zia ur Rahman, without naming India, often alluded to the threat posed by the "*Baksalites*"⁵, and the need to "wipe out foreignism from the soil"⁶. The military regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad, that followed General Zia's regime, adopted a similar path. It needs to be noted that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was in power for too short time to adopt any major initiatives in addressing the issues that were left-over and, were earlier, a mere subset of India-Pakistan relations.

Most of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's detractors comprised the radical Left, Islamists, and supporters of the Pakistan regime as well as those from the Army who had lost privileges they had enjoyed earlier. They spread narratives on some real and mostly imaginary consequences of the 1972 treaty that included, debates on actual contribution of India to Bangladesh's liberation and the perceived 'real' Indian intentions towards Bangladesh. These dominated the Bangladeshi narrative, nurtured by forces opposed to India for various political and ideological reasons. The conflict over Ganges water sharing,

migration, and border fencing dominated the discourse - and some continue to do so even now. Bangladeshi nationalism, and later Islam as the state religion, has only fuelled this widening gap.

The bilateral relationship was not able to get out of this historical and ideological narrative for decades. Democratic contestation made the barrier even more pronounced. It was evident from the fact that for long, the two countries could not even restart the transport connectivity that existed prior to 1965. Only the inland waterways were operational and, during President Zia's term, this was renewed year to year. The Farraka agreement also followed the same trajectory, with only short-term agreements.

The restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 generated hopes of rebuilding bilateral relations with India. However, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) followed the party's founding father, General Zia's vision of foreign policy. Its ideological base was in centre-right ideologies, and electoral politics was based on anti-India sentiments and stances. Begum Zia, the BNP leader, even described insurgency in India's North-East as a freedom movement. The Farraka Issue - that was internationalised during General Zia's regime - continued to be raised by Begum Zia in the UN. It continued to oppose the Awami League's (AL) close relationship with India, and questioned various understandings the AL had reached with India during Sheikh Hasina's 2010 state visit. She accused the government of selling the sovereignty of the country by agreeing to the 51-point MoU, and reaching a secret agreement with India.

Yet, when Begum Zia visited India in 2012, she wanted to take a fresh look at the relations. For example: she said BNP cannot look at India 'in a rear view mirror' and advocated a forward looking approach. However, the anti-India lobby within the party felt that the Party's electoral base could suffer if it changed its approach to India. The Party soon went back to its old politics, and this was evident when, in 2013, Begum Zia decided not to meet the Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee, who was visiting Dhaka, by citing the *hartal* called by its ally, the Jamaat Islami. It was therefore not surprising that, in 2016, Begum Zia once again raised the Farraka issue, and was critical of the Ramphal coal power plant, a joint venture of India and Bangladesh. BNP's reluctance to give up its anti-India posture, and the memory of BNP's support to Indian insurgent groups who were sheltered by the establishment in Bangladesh, continued to reinforce the mistrust of the BNP in India. Some senior leaders of the BNP did try to reach out to India in 2018, but the lack of any clear indication from Begum Zia, and her son and successor in the party,

Tariq Rahman, continued to plague the relations.

The return of the AL government in 2008 restored the bilateral ties to earlier levels, and have shown a constant improvement thereafter.

Current Scenarios

Despite many challenges over the years, India-Bangladesh relations have moved forward. Both the countries have implemented the Land Boundary Agreement. The demarcation of the maritime boundary has also been resolved after international arbitration. The two countries are trying to restore the connectivity network that existed prior to 1965. India has extended a credit line and grant in aid worth US\$ 10 billion. The two countries have connected their grid for electricity trade. Bangladesh has offered a transit fee of 192 taka, though transit is yet to see commercial success since this will require other service sectors to make it more worthwhile.

Several institutional mechanisms have been put in place to move each aspect of the relations forward. While the two countries have introduced joint patrols by their border forces to implement the resolve to ensure zero killing at the border, much needs to be done to translate this policy into action. Firing incidents by the BSF at the border create adverse public opinion in Bangladesh, and lead to critics questioning the nature of the friendship between the two countries. Unfortunately, the failure of BGB to prevent its nationals from reaching the border especially in the wee hours is ignored by the critics.

Questioning the depth of friendship is, however, not new in the bilateral relations. Whether it is water sharing, India's trade surplus, transit, smuggling, NRC or CAA - each and every issue is evaluated in detail, and a judgment is passed on the nature of the bilateral ties. This is also used as pressure tactics on the Awami League government headed by Prime Minister Hasina. Many also use these issues to accuse her of selling out Bangladesh's interests and 'undermining Bangladesh's sovereignty'. Therefore, it is important that India needs to be extra cautious in its approach, and identify areas where it can build blocks to strengthen relations, and move the relationship forward. Broadly, the two countries have good bilateral relations, but firings at the border need to be addressed realistically, as the blame game does not help either side.

In the fiftieth year of their bilateral relations, the two countries have, to a very large extent, institutionalised their relationship. For example, within bilateral frameworks, there are annual talks between the Home Ministers/Secretaries,

Foreign Ministers/Secretaries; between the Border Guard of Bangladesh, and the Border Security Force of India; and between the District Magistrates and Superintendent of Police of the border districts on both sides of the border. There is Joint River Commission (JRC) whose mandate is to look at the common rivers; there are Joint exercises between the two militaries; and joint patrols between the coast guards of the two countries. Such institutionalisation is a step forward, and is an attempt to move the relations despite domestic political constraints, and away from individual regime interests. However, institutional frameworks have not always succeeded. For example, sometimes the JRC does not meet regularly. As such, if there are no meeting of minds on important issues, the agendas threaten to drag on with unending discussions.

Both the countries are moving forward with connectivity networks. Tripura opened the first waterway with Bangladesh - the 90-km long Sonamura-Daudkandi route - apart from other waterways that facilitate trade. 2020, witnessed the first container train that reached Bangladesh from India. There was also the first parcel train carrying chillies from Andhra Pradesh to Dhaka. In June, a record number of 100 freight trains ran between the two countries, carrying essential items like sugar, maize, spices, and finished products. The restoration of the Chilahati-Haldibari railway and the Agartala-Akhaura rail project which is under construction, have been supported with the Indian credit line.

Bangladesh is the biggest development partner of India today. According to news reports, 28 percent of India's development budget goes to Bangladesh - total outlay of India-backed projects in Bangladesh is close to \$ 10 billion⁷. Road and bus connectivity has opened up to facilitate travel between the two countries. Dhaka-Kolkata, Dhaka-Khulna, Agartala-Dhaka are a few bus services that run regularly. Restarting the Maitree Express, that runs between Dhaka and Kolkata, was a landmark decision. Rail travel is the cheapest mode of travel, and the two countries have also tried to ease the immigration process by completing it on-board, thus saving time at the border. The officials of the two countries meet twice every year to review the projects that are being implemented under the Indian LoCs. There are also regular border *haats* where the local products are sold.

Overcoming the Challenges

India issues the largest number of visas to Bangladeshis. It has established integrated check posts on the border, and has introduced separate windows for granting visas to those who travel to India for medical treatment as well

as separate queue for them at the immigration check on the land border check post. In spite of large numbers of Bangladeshis travelling to India, anti-Indian sentiment is spurred by suspicion and mistrust, and mostly coloured by pre-partition and post-partition narratives of the Muslim League. There is also the daily experience of border crossings and interactions which colour the opinion of India. Among prominent issues, firings at the border, cattle smuggling, etc. contribute to anti-India sentiments.

There is also a strong perception that Bangladesh has fulfilled all of India's security needs. While it allowed India to withdraw 1.82 cusec of water from the Feni river in 2019, India has not been able to deliver on Teesta, support Bangladesh on the Rohingyas, or completely stop casualties at the border. Though some of these expectations are natural, there is an under-appreciation of India's stand on various issues. Moreover, it needs to be mentioned here that during 15 years of military rule in Bangladesh, the rulers fed misinformation to a generation of people regarding India's role in the Liberation War of the country by attributing negative motives behind India's intervention.

The zero killing orders at the border will go a long way in strengthening the bilateral relationship. It will certainly help the Bangladeshi government in addressing the anxiety over its relations with New Delhi. However, the question that arises is: how can zero killings at the border be implemented? It is essential that the vigil on the border needs to be increased on the Bangladesh side to prevent its nationals from reaching the border even as the BSF needs to take action against the smuggling syndicates operating on the Indian side of the border. This would require local intelligence and cooperation with the state police. There is a need for cooperation between the centre and the Indian states to address the issue of cattle smuggling, fake currency, and the smuggling of Phensedyl. Observing night curfews on both the sides of the border, could be a good start to lower casualties. The government of Bangladesh also needs to review the practice of putting taxes on smuggled cattle. The introduction of non-lethal weapons has only emboldened the smugglers, and the BSF often complains of attacks by the smugglers who are well-armed. It is important that the two countries take appropriate steps and assume the responsibility to implement the zero killings initiative.

While India shares flood forecasting data on major rivers like the Ganga, Teesta, Brahmaputra, and Barak during the monsoon season, water sharing has remained one of the most controversial issues in the relationship between India and Bangladesh, often creating huge misunderstandings. Though the Ganges Water Treaty was signed in 1996, various disagreements, short term agreements, and the unilateral withdrawal by India earlier often revives bad

memories and creates acrimony over water. The politics of water also brings the Farakka treaty into question quite often. In fact, this treaty has its critics on both the sides of the border. The Teesta issue, which is an issue of difference between the Centre and the state of West Bengal in India, has not allowed a bilateral agreement to be achieved with Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh are now discussing the six trans-boundary rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar - to move away from the debate on the sharing of the Teesta river waters. Teesta will remain a political albatross that seemingly refuses to fade away.

Bangladesh has looked to India for support on the Rohingya issue, and expects a positive Indian reaction. However, being extremely cautious of not alienating Myanmar, Indian reaction has been muted. Myanmar's cooperation is an essential input for preservation of peace in the North East. However, India has extended humanitarian aid to the Rohingya refugees as well as to the locals living in Cox's Bazar. It has built 50,000 houses in Rakhaine state for the Rohingyas. The Rohingyas are not willing to go back without the domestic legislation in Myanmar being repealed, and until there is an international guarantee for their safety. The return of the refugees appears to be in a limbo, providing ammunition to those opposed to Sheikh Hasina.

India has also supplied 2 million doses of Corona virus vaccine to Bangladesh as first responder, and in keeping with its "neighbourhood first" policy.

Conclusion

How does the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh look after fifty years? It needs to be mentioned that both countries have crossed many hurdles, and have made significant progress in some areas that were unthinkable in the past. A good example is the issue of connectivity and transit which are now not seen from the perspective of sovereignty but from the perspective of economics. The two countries are trying to restore the connectivity network as well and go beyond it. Bangladesh is interested in participating in the building of the trilateral highway being constructed by India, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Bilateral trade has increased to ten billion dollars. The two countries have taken steps to address non-tariff barriers by establishing quality testing centres near to the border so that perishable goods are cleared faster. Border infrastructure has improved, and the two countries are cooperating to strengthen the Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute (BSTI) so as to address

issues of quality in export. Moreover, the two countries are now looking at reaching beyond bilateral relations and forging sub-regional and regional cooperation. Whether it is grid connectivity or transport connectivity in the eastern sub region of South Asia, the two countries are keen to take their relationship forward. They are not willing to see their bilateral interaction as a zero sum game. Rather than getting stuck with deliverable, the two countries are trying to explore new areas of cooperation. A relationship that has been built over fifty years is grounded on socio-cultural-linguistic-historical foundations, and provides the necessary grounding for further development of mutually beneficial relations. There are of course several challenges to overcome, but there are many achievements and progress that have been made which should not be lost in the clutter of items that are yet to find solution.

Notes :

- ¹ See the joint communiqué issued at the end of Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman’s visit to Calcutta, at https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi_doc/3.doc, accessed 9 February 2021.
- ² Avtar Singh Bhasin, “India Bangladesh Relations Documents 1971–2002”, Vol. 1, Geetika Publisher, 2003, p. 25.
- ³ Shakawat Liton, “From History’s Golden Chapter”, *The Daily Star*, 19 June 2015, at <https://www.thedailystar.net/wide-angle/historys-golden-chapter-99550>
- ⁴ See the joint communique issued at the end of Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman’s visit to Calcutta, at https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi_doc/3.doc, accessed 9 February 2021.
- ⁵ Refers to ‘BaKSAL’ (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League), a political front, created on 24 February 1975 by Sheik Mujibur Rahman and declared as the sole Political party by the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, on 25 January 1975. BaKSAL was dissolved in August 1975, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
- ⁶ Marcus Franda, “Ziaur Rahman and Bangladeshi Nationalism”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16, no. 10/12 (March 1981).
- ⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-bangladesh-explore-expansion-of-development-eco-partnership-as-hasina-meets-foreign-secy/articleshow/77618800.cms>

