

Impact of Political Factors on India- Bangladesh Relationship

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Introduction

Historical, civilizational, and cultural links are shared by India and Bangladesh; Bengali, spoken in both nations, is a close link. Bilateral ties, especially when the *Awami* League was in power in Bangladesh, have generally been warm. One that spans almost half a century is the official Indo-Bangladesh friendship, starting with India becoming one of the first countries to officially accept Bangladesh. Nevertheless, leaving aside technological scrutiny, these two countries share a much deeper connection, rooted in common culture, language, and sentimentality, which flows between the two neighbours' porous boundaries to this day. Such close relations, both geographically and culturally, have significant repercussions for the two nations' economic ties and geopolitical interests, as well as for preserving the Indian Subcontinent's stability.¹

The present condition, however, points towards trouble. Different factors hamper constructive bilateral relations between these two neighbors, ranging from issues of migration, insurgency, border and trade tensions, and the war for water, the most fundamental resource. Subsequently, the historical relations that had formed between Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the years preceding the Liberation War of Bangladesh deepened, culminating in the Friendship, Peace, and Collaboration Treaty of Indo-Bangladesh². The murder of Sheikh Mujib, however, has significantly altered not only the domestic situation in Bangladesh but also the bilateral relations with its largest neighbour.

The proximity that occurred between the two states ceased to exist immediately. Bilateral relations were intentionally diluted by successive military leaders in Bangladesh (1975-1990). There was an effort by both sides to close the divide that had widened with the return of

parliamentary representation in 1991. But with Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujib, taking office in 1996, true change in the bilateral equation began.

The two key irritants that had troubled Indo-Bangladeshi relations for years were eliminated by the signing of the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty and the 1997 Chakma Agreement. While there were some unresolved problems between the two neighbours during this time, they were firmly on a friendly course. This momentum was sadly lost when the BNP alliance's next elected government took power in 2001. Without much exaggeration, between 2001 and 2006, bilateral relations hit their lowest stage³. India and Bangladesh practically differed on all bilateral issues during the BNP coalition time. There was no meaningful effort to fix many of the unresolved issues, characterized by the absence of high-level communications. Security risks arising from Bangladesh were his primary worry for India, while the widening trade deficit with India was his most important concern for Bangladesh. After the success of the BNP alliance in the 2001 election, the violent outburst against Hindus, who are largely supporters of the Awami League, represented not only the fundamental conflict existing between the two major political parties in Bangladesh, but also with India. It was possible to recognize seven large areas of tension that dominated Indo-Bangladesh relations during this time, apart from the influx of refugees into India in the aftermath of election violence that India tended to downplay, namely trade disputes, boundary disputes, water sharing in the Ganges River, migration, insurgency, anti-Hindu violence, and controversies surrounding gas exports. During this time, anti-Hindu violence gradually escalated following the sudden upsurge in October 2001 and, unlike previous times, it was not linked to any particular development affecting India. However, the violence eventually took on a different tone and could be put within the framework of Bangladesh's increasing religious extremism and intolerance⁴.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed questions about the Talibanization of Bangladesh during her first term. During the elections of Jatiya Sangsad in October 2001, this issue gained traction and India agreed to join the growing controversy. It was generally known that several transnational Islamic militant organizations, including Al-Qaeda, had formed a presence in Bangladesh. For eg, Indian inquiries into the attack on the US Consulate in Kolkata on January 22, 2002, revealed foreign ties between the Pakistani and Bangladeshi branches of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Harkat-ul-Jihadi-Islami (HUJI)⁵.

In Indo-Bangladesh ties, these five years could be described as the worst period. Not only were high-level communications and exchanges very small, each side often freely levelled charges against the other and Bangladesh also took an overtly hostile posture at times. Ironically, there were no raging problems between them and no new issues have been introduced since 2001, except for the uproar over the existence of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh. The Indian boundary demarcation plan that had been with Bangladesh since 1999 saw little change. There was very little convergence, even though the topic appeared prominently or even frequently in all bilateral talks⁶.

The final nail was India's way of coping with its non-participation in the February 2005 Dhaka SAARC Summit. New Delhi and Dhaka left aside aggressive posturing during the Caretaker Government period of the Post BNP coalition phase and worked together to stabilize bilateral relations. With Dhaka displaying keenness to join, India also completely reciprocated. The emphasis was on improving trade and economic relations, but there were apparent obstacles to completely realizing bilateral opportunities on both sides, considering the non-elected role of the government.

India and Bangladesh started to work in earnest to resolve each other's concerns after the *Awami* League government came to power. From the outset, Dhaka's political will to resolve India's security issues was clear. New Delhi has found ways and means to resolve some of the long-running demands of Bangladesh. An attitudinal change reflects its willingness to dilute trade barriers, its willingness to consider Bangladesh's reservations regarding the Tipaimukh dam and border disputes, as well as acknowledging Bangladesh's demand for transit to Nepal and Bhutan.⁷ Now, Many of the issues have been resolved between both the nations after Sheikh Hasina came back to power. In the strategic domain, the two countries' resolve for zero-tolerance towards terrorism and violent extremism has been significant for regional peace, security, and stability.

Political Factors

Establishment of Bangladesh and Role of India

One important political factor which had a great impact on India-Bangladesh Relation is India's role in the independence and establishment of Bangladesh. It has been a coherent and vital principle for India's foreign policy to refrain from any interference in the internal affairs of other countries and, more particularly, in the internal affairs of its neighbours. But the dirty power struggle that emerged in Pakistan after the first general elections of March 1970, created a highly tributary and dangerous situation in East Pakistan, which forced India to support, for humanitarian reasons, the rights of Bengalis living in East Pakistan. India played a leading role in the liberation of Bangladesh. Its people made bold sacrifices for securing to the people of Bangladesh, their freedom and rights. These historic and unparalleled sacrifices made by the people of India and the material and moral support that they gave to the people of Bangladesh combined together to provide a solid foundation for the development of warm and highly friendly and cooperative relations between India and Bangladesh.⁸

From 1947 to 1971, Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan. It is composed of British India's partitioned regions of Bengal and Assam. The inhabitants of this area were resentful of Western Pakistan's dominance and the adoption of the Urdu language. Soon after the split, demonstrations against the unequal treatment of the culture and language of Bengal began. For the eastern region, they requested autonomy. But their demand was rejected by the government led by the West Pakistan leadership. The Pakistan army managed to suppress the Bengali people's mass uprising by killing thousands. This culminated in a large-scale migration to India, that led to a big refugee crisis for India. The government of India backed the appeal for freedom from the people of East Pakistan and helped them financially and militarily.⁹ In December 1971, this led to a war between India and Pakistan, which resulted in the surrender of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent republic. It was in India's strategic advantage to cut strength in half, and it was appropriate to face just one front instead of relying on two fronts in battle.

India got the chance when the people of former East Pakistan revolted against their government and army due to Pakistan's massacres and aspired to become an independent country. By supporting the *Mukti Vahini* militant arm of Bangladesh's rebellion to accomplish four goals simultaneously, India got a chance at that time.

- To break Pakistan and making its eastern border safe forever.
- To gain the friendship and trust of Bangladesh by helping them.
- To cut the economy and military force of Pakistan in two.
- And the most important, to resolve immigration issue, that is, sending millions of displaced Bangladeshi citizens back to their country and thus reducing the economic strain generated in India by their influx.
- India's active assistance in the freedom struggle of Bangladesh contributed to the start of warm and friendly relations between India and Bangladesh. India proved to be the strongest and closest ally of Bangladesh during the entire war; India sheltered some 10 million refugees from Bangladesh, received the Bangladesh government in exile and eventually participated in the 1971 war. India, thus, gained the friendship of Bangladesh.

Political Regime and Its Impact

Since the emergence of Bangladesh, the Prime Ministers of the two countries have made regular contacts and signed a number of agreements from time to time, particularly the 25-year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace, on March 19, 1972. But after the assassination of Mujib during the bloody Military coup, Zia captured power and become the President of Bangladesh. Relations become worse with India during the Military rule. Gen Zia was also known for his anti-Indian, pro-West and pro-Islamic attitude. This anti-Indian posture attracted China very much and it became a close friend of Bangladesh. All of a sudden, Bangladesh's foreign policy became 'outward looking' and was based on a new pragmatism. At the domestic front Zia dropped secularism from the Constitution in favour of Islam. The new provision that was incorporated, placed full faith in *Almighty Allah*.¹⁰

Although in the last years of his regime, Zia tried to develop cooperation among all South-Asian nations, but his assassination in 1981 derailed this process. After Zia's assassination, the second military regime under Gen H.M. Ershad came to power. However, the foreign policy under Ershad did not significantly deviate from what it was under Ziaur Rahman's dispensation and the anti-India and anti-Soviet plank was maintained. In his regime, Ershad declared Islam as a state religion.¹¹ The restoration of democracy by overthrowing Gen. H.M. Ershad was a result of a mass movement launched by Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of Gen. Ziaur Rahman.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the BNP, founded by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, came to power on the anti-India

plank, under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia. She always followed the footsteps of her husband Zia and adopted the same foreign policy principles as during his regime. She, during her tenure, wanted to develop close ties with Muslim Nations instead of India. In the wave of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. Bangladesh also moved towards enhancing trade and investment for the economic development of the country. These developments added extensive economic content to the foreign policy of Bangladesh. More importance was given to trade, and a roving trade representative of the country was appointed. The relations between India and Bangladesh become worse when BNP came to power as she always took an anti-Indian stance. Anti-India or in Favour of India become two agendas forgetting votes in Bangladesh for both main political parties of Bangladesh such as BNP and AL.

The BNP always used the anti-India stand as a major election plank and Begum Khaleda Zia proved to be a failure in her foreign policy towards India. In spite of this anti-India posture, one positive step was taken when Bangladesh recognised the sovereignty of India over Tin Bigha; at the same time India handed over the Tin Bigha on a lease and opened it for use by Bangladeshi passengers and vehicular traffic on June 26, 1992. In the next general elections held in 1996, the *Awami League* led by Sheikh Hasina came to power. The relationship between the two countries seemed to be improving during her premiership.¹²

Close and regular interaction with the new government began with the visit of Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan to New Delhi in August 1996, and it signified the revival of meaningful contacts between India and Bangladesh after a gap of nearly four years. Sheikh Hasina during her premier ship, made frequent visits to India to improve bilateral ties among both nations and follow the footsteps of her father. Recent developments have been, like the resolution to New Moore island issue which India welcomed and accepted the decision given by United Nations Tribunal court and the signing of Land Boundary Agreement.¹³ Besides, it is the only country in the South Asian region that has consistently demonstrated progressive GDP growth, which is remarkable by the standards of Bangladesh. As a result of this, in recent years, the businessman has begun to play an active role in Bangladeshi politics. It was argued that India-friendly policies was not easy for any government in Bangladesh.

It noted that people in Bangladesh believed that if you tried to ruin your political future in the politics of Bangladesh, then you would be branded as pro-India. The moment Sheikh Hasina comes to power, the chorus against India gets shriller. Parties are described in Bangladesh based on their approach to India. By being anti-India,

the BNP is seeking to build its nationalist credentials. In either case, Jamaat is anti-India and follows Islamic law in Bangladesh. These two parties have represented the *Awami* League as pro-India, while the party could at best be represented as India-friendly. It has also been alleged that India has not adequately reciprocated her peaceful and cooperative gesture by not signing the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement, two major ticket issues that have long tarnished the bilateral relationship¹⁴. In the January 2014 polls, it was also observed that a greater response from the Indian side would have supported Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh elections.

It is desirable to settle big problems between India and Bangladesh in their own right, but this does not translate into Hasina's electoral goodwill. It is in favour of both the nations if they amicably and bilaterally solve all the issues between them and stop the third party interference. The aggressive segment in Bangladesh will never hesitate to give it a different hue and say how India has swindled Bangladesh and Hasina has sold the country even if India were to make big sacrifices and get these problems solved. The example of Sri Lanka can be seen, where Kachatiwu Island was given away by India, but relations between India and Sri Lanka are far from pleasant at the moment.

West Bengal Dynamics in India & Bangladesh Relationship

In September 2011, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka was supposed to change relations between India and Bangladesh. This did not happen, however, as the Teesta water-sharing deal, the largest deliverable of the visit, could not be signed by India. It also branded West Bengal (Paschim Banga) Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as a spoiler by some individuals. But West Bengal prevented the central government from making historic diplomatic breakthroughs for narrow political purposes, or its representatives were simply defending the interests of their state, which the central government could not have fully realized to be far from the country. The position played by states would also add value to the development of foreign policy and may in effect deter the center from jeopardizing local interests and thus defending national interests.¹⁵ If treaties are negotiated in such a manner that they become win-win for both parties, the India-Bangladesh relationship will strengthen. This would happen if, taking into account all parties, the treaties are concluded without due diligence, and if they are executed honestly.

In Bangladesh, several observers have assessed that the outcome of the polls in West Bengal and Assam is not positive news for Bangladesh. The new Assam Chief Minister vowed to fully seal the boundary between Bangladesh and Assam and expel the allegedly illegal

Bangladeshis from India. New Delhi has already extended its support, as disclosed in the media, to the Assam state government to enforce the BJP-led coalition government's electoral agenda in the state. People speculate that there will be a new degree of friction between Bangladesh and India over the actions of the newly inducted BJP-led Assamese administration. The same group of individuals also firmly suspect that the return to power by a landslide triumph of Mamata Banerjee's TMC would further stall the process of signing the Teesta Water Contract in the immediate future.

With a huge public mandate for Mamata's leadership in West Bengal, her government could continue this time with more confidence, with the same stubbornness toward the Teesta agreement. These are troubling developments for Bangladeshi citizens, particularly those who oppose close and friendly relations with India. A good viewpoint, on the other hand, is that there is a space for hope regarding the Teesta water agreement with the government of Mamata Banerjee playing a constructive role¹⁶. Over the past few years, there has been a view held by many analysts that Mamata could change her stance following the crucial West Bengal assembly elections due in 2016. In her state, she had a high stake in political assessment concerning the powers of the Left and Congress. She would not have taken any chances with the Teesta problem before the polls. Now, as it is a historical fact that West Bengal has always advocated a peaceful and just sharing of waters between Bangladesh and India, Mamata should reassess her stance.

To sign the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Agreement, the cooperation of the West Bengal government was essential. People in Bangladesh are more positive about the partnership between Mamata and the Teesta contract. The improved relations between Mamata and the Modi government, Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sushma Swaraj's constructive position and Mamata's devotion to the citizens of Bangladesh may speed up the Teesta deal process. Sheikh Hasina, having deepened ties with the Narendra Modi government, looks upon the relations as those which will survive any change in power, whether in Dhaka or Delhi¹⁷. The BNP and the JP know that the old misgiving they entertained about India in the past, no longer holds any water and that a reconfiguring in diplomacy with Delhi is in Order.

Domestic Politics of Bangladesh and India-Bangladesh Relations:

The effect of domestic politics of Bangladesh on India-Bangladesh Relations has been discussed in this section. It delved into some of the historical processes that resulted in the formation of community-consciousness among the

Bengali Muslims whose interests were often at variance not only with the Hindus but also members of their own religion living elsewhere in the country. It was also noted that the Bengal Renaissance further strengthened the community consciousness of Muslims because they perceived it as an upper caste Hindu phenomenon.

It is noted that for a brief period, immediately after liberation of Bangladesh, India-friendly policies were pursued. India and Bangladesh signed a twenty — a five-year Treaty of Peace and friendship in 1972 and even decided to sort out border disputes under Indira-Mujib Accord. But this bonhomie proved to be short-lived and after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, Bangladesh politics moved on a completely different path. It was alleged that India was selectively aiding groups close to the *Awami* League, serving its political interests. From 1975 to 1990 Bangladesh was first ruled by Gen Ziaur Rahman and subsequently by Gen Ershad. The latter declared Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. With this step Ershad hoped to get greater support of the Islamist forces like Jamaat. But actually, this angered Jamaat, as he had only declared Islam as state religion, but did not declare Bangladesh to be an Islamic state.¹⁸

The army played an important role in the politics of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Army has had closer links with Pakistan and China, despite the fact that the country was liberated with India's help and China had refused to recognize Bangladesh in the initial years. The nature of Bangladeshi external trade had also changed in the recent time. The country, which was perennially facing trade deficit, has managed to considerably narrow it down. Moreover, it is the only country in the South Asian region which has consistently shown progressive GDP growth, which is impressive by Bangladesh's standards. As a result of which the businessmen have started playing an active role in Bangladeshi politics in recent years. The trade imbalance of Bangladesh with important trading partners like China, which has replaced India as the largest trading partner, is also one of the impacts of domestic politics of Bangladesh on India.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that both India and China have similar kind of export basket and Chinese exports are now seen replacing Indian exports. There is also an anti-India section which found problems about everything India did. In comparison, China has been able to create considerable goodwill by constructing six friendship bridges and a conference centre earlier named as Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre. But when India gave \$1 billion credit line to Bangladesh for infrastructural development there was great difficulty in finalising the projects.

India-Bangladesh agreed to construct a power plant at Rampal. But the anti-India lobby has created an impression that this project is not in Bangladeshi interests and say that this project would damage the environment of Bangladesh as it is close to Sunderbans. However, what is to be remembered is that Sunderban is a shared heritage of India and Bangladesh.

The domestic politics was also affecting connectivity in the region. The Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor, which has been in the back burner due to India's concerns, figured in the joint statement when Chinese Prime Minister visited India. Bangladesh wants China to develop its Chittagong port and build even a deep-sea port at Sonadia. Moreover, BCIM wants to link Kolkata with Kunming through Bangladesh and Myanmar.²⁰ It was also noted that Bangladesh analysts, some of whom are hostile to India, often try to remind us that if Bangladesh is surrounded on three sides with India, then India's northeast is also Bangladesh locked. They want to use it as leverage. They think that if they keep northeast this way then it is not only in the strategic but also economic interests of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, parties are defined on the basis of their approach towards India. BNP tries to establish its nationalist credentials by being anti-India. Jamaat in any case is anti-India and it espouses Islamic rule in Bangladesh. These two parties have painted *Awami* League as being pro-India, while in reality the party at best could be described as being India-friendly. After Sheikh Hasina's visit to India, it has often been alleged that India has not sufficiently reciprocated her friendly and cooperative gesture, by not signing the land boundary agreement (LBA) and Teesta Water Sharing agreement, two big ticket issues which have devilled the bilateral relation for a long time. Greater response from Indian side would have helped Hasina in the January 2014 elections. The signing of LBA between India and Bangladesh had placed things in favour of Sheikh Hasina.

The solution of major issues between India and Bangladesh is desirable in their own right, but this may not necessarily translate into electoral goodwill for Hasina. Even if India were to make major concessions and get other issues resolved, the hostile section in Bangladesh would never fail to give it a different colour and talk about how India has swindled Bangladesh and Hasina has sold-off the country. The delegitimization of anti-Liberation forces can change the flavour of domestic politics in Bangladesh, because it might be easier for India then to get acceptability of both the major political parties.

Conclusion:

Future relation between Bangladesh and India will depend on how India resolves outstanding issues with Bangladesh. Narendra Modi has expressed his desire to maintain strong and stable relations with Bangladesh on all levels whether its political or economic or of joint interest. The Bangladesh Prime Minister and Indian Prime Ministers' visits have great significance because the leadership could develop the trust and confidence. To be fair, the expectations of a historic breakthrough could not fully materialize but Bangladesh is optimistic that India will reciprocate the vision and boldness by signing the Teesta Treaty.

Bangladesh's perception and approach for India has varied over time under different governments. India could maintain good and favourable relations during the periods of *Awami* League government while other governments have considered India as a threat to Bangladesh's security and independence. BNP and other military governments maintained distanced relations with India but friendly and congenial military and economic ties with China and Pakistan. The quality of relationships between Bangladesh and India has varied greatly depending on the respective governments in power.

The India-Bangladesh relationships started improving significantly with the visit of the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 and the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011. These visits have shifted the perceptions of relations between the two countries. Both countries must compromise their political issues and value national interest. Sheikh Hasina government has shown considerable courage and conviction to free its soil from anti-India activity. Bangladesh hopes for suitable reciprocal gestures to strengthen the polity. Progress was stalled from 1975 to 1996 because political leaders of both the countries considered each other as competitors. However, their bilateral relations started improving from 1996-2001 and significant change took place from 2009 till date.

For a prosperous South Asia, both Bangladesh and India must continue to develop peaceful, cooperative and institutional means of solving disputes while integrating into the regional economy. The interests of both the countries dictate that no matter what combination of ruling coalitions are in power, Bangladesh and India have great incentives to continue the forward progress they have made. However, these relationships between the two countries have been amplified with the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in June 2015.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina talked with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and raised concerns over the National Register of Citizens (NRC), India's attempt to identify 'illegal immigrants' in the northeastern state of Assam that borders Bangladesh. He in turn assured her that it is totally a domestic issue of India and will not affect Bangladesh. India has to be careful in the matter of NRC because it could derail its relationship with Bangladesh, squandering years of economic and strategic goodwill it has built. As Bangladesh is an emerging 'hub of connectivity,' it is a significant ally for India's connectivity drive towards the East. Enshrined in its Act East Policy, India has been adapting its economic and foreign policies in its near and extended neighborhood to counter growing Chinese presence in the region. If India wishes to counter China's presence in South Asia and to spread its influence into Southeast Asia, then India will need to ensure that its relations with Bangladesh do not sour over the NRC issue and strengthen relations at the political as well as economic levels. Even Bangladesh can gain much if relations remain strong and friendly with India at both political as well as economic levels. India must modify its attitude and be more cooperative towards Bangladesh to settle all the unresolved issues, otherwise China will not miss the chance to establish economic ties with Bangladesh. Bangladesh must also assist India to make new beginning and vice-versa.

Notes

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