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## India – Bangladesh Relations: Evolution, Issues and Trends

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### Abstract

Bangladesh and India both are celebrating the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence, alongwith the birth centenary of 'Banghabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the year 2021. Only a few people of current generation would remember that 1971 was a signal year for India. It was in 1971 that India had extended all out support to the Government in Sri Lanka to defeat the group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in that country. And, 1971 was again the year in which India contributed to the establishment of a new nation, Bangladesh, which was carved out of East Pakistan following a genocidal campaign launched by the military rulers in Islamabad that was unmatched in modern times. Bangladesh has been hailed as a success story for a young nation born out of strife and turbulence. Although it has also struggled with famine, poverty, population growth, military coups, religious fundamentalism and political violence, it has also made remarkable progress in uplifting the lives of its young population. In February 2021, the United Nation's Committee for Development Policy recommended that Bangladesh be promoted to a developing country, from least-developed.

**Key Words** – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Z.A.Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi, Farakka, Tin Bigha, Pyrduwah, Hefazat-e-Islam.

### Introduction

The friendship between India and Bangladesh is historic, evolving over the last fifty years. India's political, diplomatic, military and humanitarian support during Bangladesh's Liberation War played an important role towards Bangladesh's independence. India has been extremely important factor in Bangladesh's political discourse, first in the context of state formation based on the two-nation theory in 1947 and later in the emergence of a secular Bangladesh in 1971.

The breakup of Pakistan was the result of the autocratic policies of its state managers rather than the inherent difficulties involved in welding together linguistically and culturally diverse constituent units {i.e. West Pakistan and East Pakistan}. Islam proved to be dubious cement not because it was unimportant to people in the different regions. Pakistan's regional cultures have absorbed Islam without losing affinity to local languages and customs. With some justification, non Punjabi provinces come to perceive the use of Islam as a wily attempt by the Punjabi – led military – bureaucratic combine to deprive them of a fair share of political and economic power.<sup>1</sup>

An overarching reason for the Pakistani state's faltering steps in the quest for social support and legitimacy was that the federal center came to represent the interests of the dominant non – elected institutions more effectively than those of the regional socio economic groups to which at different stages it was loosely tied.<sup>2</sup>

### **Evolution of Bangladesh**

The differences in language, political and economic inequities between West Pakistan and East Pakistan laid the groundwork for Bangladesh's independence struggle. A watershed moment occurred in 1970 amid strikes and rising hostilities, when East Pakistan's Awami League led by Bengali politician Sheikh Mujibur Rahman swept the polls in the national elections. Sheikh Mujib's Awami League secured absolute majority in the National Assembly {160 out of 300 seats}, receiving all but two of the 162 seats in East Pakistan. In the provincial assembly Awami League secured 288 out of 300 seats. Next to Awami League was Z.A.Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, which emerged as the majority party in West Pakistan. Bhutto's PPP emerged as the second largest party in the National Assembly capturing 81 seats.<sup>3</sup>

The election results gave a severe blow to the west Pakistani ruling elite. Z.A.Bhutto instead of accepting Sheikh Mujib's victory aligned with the military ruler Yahya Khan and suggested for the continuance of martial law. Z.A.Bhutto's speech on March 14,1971 at Karachi's Nishtar Park declaring 'Udhar tum, Idhar hum' {power to be transferred to AL in East and to PPP in West} clarified his stand. On March 26,1971, the people of East Pakistan formally proclaimed 'Sovereign Republic of Bangladesh'. Following the declaration of Bangladesh as an independent sovereign state, the military rulers launched an open war in East Pakistan and perpetrated mass genocide for nine months. After a bloody war, which involved India also, Pakistani forces were defeated and Pakistan was dismembered. Bangladesh as a sovereign nation become a reality on December 16,1971. The military stepped down and Z.A.Bhutto, the leader of the PPP assumed power on December 20,1971 of the residual {West} Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

While India was busy scripting a new destiny for the people of East Pakistan, millions of refugees from East Pakistan were streaming into India.<sup>5</sup> Despite such calamitous situation and the strain on its resources the government of India acted with extreme circumspection and did not give into the rising clamour for any kind of premature military intervention in East Pakistan. It was to adhere to this position till Pakistan declared war on India in December 1971.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been arrested and sent to West Pakistan. Tajuddin Ahmad had been secretly sworn in as the Prime Minister of an independent Bangladesh and installed in Mujibnagar from where the new government in-exile operated till the liberation of East Pakistan. India well aware that before India could legitimately intervene in East Pakistan, the new government in-exile had to acquire legitimacy, both within East Pakistan and also internationally.

At the diplomatic level, India did not act entirely alone. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's carefully crafted diplomatic dialogues with world leaders had helped create a sound support for the persecuted Bengalis of East Pakistan. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty in August 1971 came as a shot-in the arm for India. Russia's action was in marked contrast to the stand of western nations such as the United States which displayed hostility to India's efforts, viewing it as an encouragement to the forces seeking to dismember the state of Pakistan. Indira Gandhi's regular meetings and the constant dialogue with opposition leaders ensured that India acted in a united manner, notwithstanding the public clamour for immediate action.

India sought to intervene in East Pakistan, only after Pakistan attacked India on December 3, 1971. Three days later on December 6, India made the formal announcement of recognizing the new state of Bangladesh, almost nine months after the people's Republic of Bangladesh had been proclaimed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

### **India – Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship of 1972**

Though Bangladesh was liberated on the surrender of Pakistani forces at Dhaka on December 16, 1971, some Pakistani forces had escaped to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar and were continuing anti-Bangladesh military operations from there. Almost till the end, Bangladesh faced hostility from Pakistan, China and the United States.<sup>6</sup> This hostility against Bangladesh was intense during the first half of 1972. The capture of 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war and the uncertainty about the course that political events would take due to Bangladesh's original intention of holding war crimes trials against Pakistani officers compounded the tension. Considering his country vulnerable Sheikh Mujib made suggestions to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as early in January, 1972 that the Indian armed forces should continue to remain in Bangladesh upto the end of 1972 to neutralize anti-Bangladesh forces which remained operative. Mrs. Gandhi's response was that Indian forces will have no moral or political justification to remain in Bangladesh after his release and his assuming charge as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. All Indian troops were withdrawn back into Indian territory by March 15. On Sheikh Mujib's invitation to Mrs. Gandhi for an official invitation to visit Bangladesh, Mrs. Gandhi reached Dhaka on March 17 and on Mujib's suggestion India – Bangladesh Treaty of Peace, friendship and cooperation was signed between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Mrs. Gandhi on March 19, 1972 for a period of 25 years.<sup>7</sup>

### **Issues between India and Bangladesh under Different Regimes**

After getting independence, the India – Bangladesh relationship has oscillated as Bangladesh passed through different regimes. The relations in the initial phase were shaped by historical episode of the liberation war when India shared excellent relations with the Bangladesh government in-exile. The relationship that started with shared memories of sacrifices made for the birth of the new nation also shaped the outlook of the two countries. An example of this was the signing of Treaty of Peace and Friendship that encompassed the shared vision of peace and security. The treaty has generated controversies in the domestic politics of Bangladesh till it lapsed in 1996 after 25 years of its existence. Even when it was in existence the Awami League which was the chief architect of the treaty refused to acknowledge it and allowed the treaty to die its natural death.<sup>8</sup> India also did not want any extension of this treaty. The treaty had its existence and relevance during the cold war period when many countries were hostile to the creation of Bangladesh and some including Pakistan even refused to recognize it. The treaty did play a limited role in providing a security umbrella in the formative stage of the state. The two countries also shared similar values based on democracy and secularism and followed the common path of nation-building.

The India – Bangladesh relationship remained cordial until the assassination of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, followed by a period of military rule and the rise of General Ziaur Rahman as President of Bangladesh between 1977-1981. The rise of rightist political parties during the period of General Zia led to the projection of India as the main enemy and termed Bangladesh relationship with India as a surrender of sovereignty .

Moreover, in the post 1975 period Bangladesh focused greater emphasis on its relations with Muslim countries, both for political and economic reasons. As the secularists were politically marginalised, due to General Zia's political programme of promoting "Bangladeshi nationalism" rehabilitating the religious political parties, the entrenched bureaucracy and political class were inherently anti-India. The personal relationship between the leaders of the two countries was also not good.<sup>9</sup>

However, India after 1975 did not pay much attention to its relations with Bangladesh. It was critical of the military takeover in Dhaka. Some of the pro-Mujib groups took shelter in India and carried out cross border raids. This strengthened the belief in Bangladesh that India would not support any government other than that of the Awami League. Both the countries resorted to rhetoric, followed by skirmishes on the border over contested claims and were even prepared for military action which indicated the rising tension between India and Bangladesh. In the words of Kathryn Jacques, "Zia made an effective scapegoat of the Indian government by combining accusations of territorial aggression with the cry of 'Islam in danger.'"<sup>10</sup>

With the change of government in New Delhi, the Janta Party for the first time came to power. Prime Minister Morarji Desai was keen on developing good relations with India's neighbours to effect a change in the policy followed by his predecessors. Ziaur Rahman and

Morarji Desai met on the sidelines of the Non-Alignment Summit and agreed to have an interim agreement on Farakka in 1977. This agreement was possible as the decision was taken at the highest level to concede to Bangladesh's demand for 63 per cent of water from river Ganga. Prime Minister Morarji Desai also accepted Bangladesh's demand for market access for some products and the economic relations continued even after Mrs. Gandhi returned to power. However, road and rail transit remain closed even though the agreement has the provision for such facilities to be extended to India. After assassination of General Ziaur Rahman in 1981, another military led government by General Hussain Muhammad Ershad {1982-1991} ruled the country. General Ershad's tenure did not see any significant change in Bangladesh's approach. Due to the domestic compulsions and the lack of legitimacy to his military takeover the atmosphere was not conducive for any breakthrough in bilateral relations even though both the countries signed a MoU on water sharing at Farakka in 1982 and 1985.

With the dawn of democracy and Bangladesh's return to parliamentary democracy in 1991, the relationship began to appear more hopeful and it has gone through many highs and lows. During the first Bangladesh Nationalist Party government, Bangladesh's relations with India , were often marked by a confrontational attitude. Prime Minister Begum Khalida Ziaur Rahman went to the extent of describing insurgents from Northeast India as being the sun of freedom {mukti surya} thus vitiating the bilateral atmosphere. Even though she visited India in 1992, bilateral tension continued. Although the Tin Bigha Corridor was finally leased to Bangladesh and opened for use by Bangladeshi passengers and vehicular traffic on June 26,1992. In 1996, the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina assumed power and the two countries signed the much needed treaty at Farakka.

During the second tenure of BNP government, the fragile coalition politics prevented any breakthrough in India's relations with Bangladesh. The BNP government was also not keen on improving relations with India. The BJP led NDA government tried to develop good relations with Bangladesh. Kolkota – Dhaka and Dhaka – Agartala bus services were introduced during the NDA period. The two countries also revived the Dhaka – Kolkota train service – the “Moitree Express” that runs between the two cities.<sup>11</sup>

### **Issues Escalating Tension Between India And Bangladesh: Border Conflict**

The military confrontation between the Border Security Force of India and the Bangladesh Army and Bangladesh Rifles between April 15-19,2001 gave a critical twist to India – Bangladesh relations. 16 BSF personnel were killed by Bangladesh in Pyrduwah. The Bangladeshi military operation was preplanned and carefully implemented. Nearly five battalions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division of the Bangladesh Army with additional personnel from the Bangladesh Rifles launched an attack against the Indian position beyond midnight at 1.00 A.M. on April 16,2001. This act of Bangladeshi forces reminded of a remark by Major General Farman Ali, the politico-military advisor to General Niazi during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. Farman Ali while being escorted along other senior prisoners of war to the Indian

Air Force Plane turned to his escorting officer and said, “These chaps whom you have liberated, will turn against you. Don’t be sure of any long term friendship with Bengalis. Their antagonism towards you will revive again. Remember they were the greater advocates of the creation of Pakistan.”<sup>12</sup> However, India acted with utmost restraint and was back in possession of the areas taken over by Bangladesh by April 20 without any military action.

India and Bangladesh share a 4096 km. long border. Of this, 180 kms lie along the river line. While demarcating the boundaries between India and Pakistan dominions, the boundary of East Bengal {later East Pakistan} on the one hand and West Bengal and Assam on the other, Sir Radcliff delineated in a manner where some pockets of territories were allocated to East Pakistan or to the Indian states but with populations which had economic and religious affinities in contradiction of the territorial allocations. India came into possession of border areas with Muslim populations with linkages with East Pakistan and East Pakistan came into possession of areas where Hindus lived with linkages with Indian states. The whole phenomenon being described as territories in adverse possession or enclaved, the future status of which was to be resolved by discussions between India and Pakistan. India and Bangladesh inherited this problem. There was total 162 enclaves {51 in India and 111 in Bangladesh}.

The issue of illegal immigration is also an explosive reason of conflict between India and Bangladesh. The steady flow of Bangladeshis into India in search of livelihood had resulted in demographic changes in the bordering states of West Bengal and the Northeastern states of Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. Out of 64 districts 32 poorest districts of Bangladesh shares a border with India.<sup>13</sup> Smuggling of cattle and killings due to firing on the border has emerged as a new challenge for both the countries. The cattle smuggling has a criminal – political nexus and has given rise to bribe and other mode of inducement to the Indian security forces. The government needs to tackle cattle smuggling seriously. The year 2020 saw the highest number of border shootings by the Border Security Force. The shots are fired at civilians, usually cattle traders, who tries to cross the border illegally. The statement by the Indian External Affairs minister, S. Jaishankar during his recent visit to Dhaka that, “our shared objective should be a no crime – no death border,”<sup>14</sup> raises some hope for the future.

### **The Second Power Phase Of Sheikh Hasina**

On January 6,2009 Sheikh Hasina returned to power for the second time as Prime Minister of Bangladesh after a lapse of seven years and is still continues to rule the country by winning three elections continuously. In the last 12 years, India – Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy and defence.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Bangladesh on September 6-7,2011, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 12 years aiming to further consolidate the bilateral process set in motion by Sheikh Hasina in January 2010, by visiting India. The two countries signed a number

of agreements on cultural exchanges during the Prime Minister's visit. Earlier both the countries had celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore who has written the national anthem of both the countries.

### **Trends in India – Bangladesh Relations : Narendra Modi – Sheikh Hasina Mutual Visits**

The two Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina visited each other's country twice in a period of seven years. After coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a successful two day visit to Bangladesh on June 6-7, 2015, followed by Bangladesh Prime Minister's visit of India from April 7-10, 2017. India and Bangladesh have now achieved the rare feat of solving their border disputes peacefully by ratifying the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, where enclaves were swapped allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government led by Sheikh Hasina has uprooted anti-India insurgency elements from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful border.

Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in Financial Year 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion. It also makes up a large portion of tourists in India, one in every five tourists is a Bangladeshi. Bangladesh accounts for more than 35 per cent of India's international medical patients and contributes more than 50 per cent of India's revenue from medical tourism.<sup>15</sup>

In the elections held in Bangladesh in 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Awami League won a third term consecutively and a fourth term over all by winning 266 out of 300 seats in Parliament. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India from October 3-6, 2019. The visit followed just within few months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi formed his government for the second consecutive time. Since India and Bangladesh share a friendly relationship, the visit emphasized the special bond between the two countries. To promote people to people and cultural cooperation both the countries decided to hold celebration of Mahatma Gandhi's 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary {2019}, birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman {2020} and 50 years of Bangladesh War of Liberation. Sheikh Hasina's visit reasserted trust and friendship between the two countries.

India's relationship with Bangladesh got a major boost with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh from March 26-27, 2021. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina invited PM Modi to participate in the gala celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. To commemorate shared history, Bangladesh is constructing a memorial in honour of the martyrs of the Indian Armed Forces who sacrificed their lives in the 1971 Liberation War. India also included 122 member tri services contingent of Bangladesh Armed Forces in 2021 Republic Day celebrations as a mark of special bond between the two countries.

Further, connectivity between the two countries has greatly improved. A direct bus service between Kolkata and Agartala runs a route distance of 500 kms, as compared to the 1650 kms if it ran through the Chicken's Neck to remain within India. There are three passenger and freight railway services running between the two countries. A new Mitali express passenger train service on Dhaka-New Jalpaiguri-Dhaka route was also inaugurated during PM's recent visit. Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram seaports carried by road, rail and water ways to Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam states of India.

## **Conclusion**

India – Bangladesh relations have been gaining positive momentum in the tenure of Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina. As Bangladesh celebrates its 50 years of its independence, India continues to be one of its most important neighbor and strategic partner. Today, Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina is a shining example of human endeavour and a wise leadership. It has not allowed itself to be drawn into the vortex of foreign influences and maintains an independent foreign policy. Relations with India are excellent today. Currently, Bangladesh's annual GDP growth exceeds that of its erstwhile parent, Pakistan. Women empowerment has been a major catalyst in Bangladesh's progress and this is largely responsible for transforming the country from least developed to a developing country as recommended by United Nations Committee for Development Policy in February 2021.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Hasina, nicknamed as 'mother of humanity' by a UK based news channel for her work of giving shelter to 7,50,000 Rohingyas, has set ambitious targets for Bangladesh. To achieve the target of developed nation upto 2041, Bangladesh has to act firmly against the rise of Islamist clerics groups like Hefazat-e-Islam because the protests they carried out against the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, at a time when relations between the two countries are excellent, pose a new challenge to both Bangladesh and India. To conclude, the relations between India and Bangladesh would be dependent on how New Delhi manages its ties with states in India specially West Bengal and the Awami League's ability to manage its domestic political imperatives.

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