

## ***Bangladesh-India Relations: History and the Way Forward***

Shamsher M. Chowdhury, BB\*

As Bangladesh-India relations step into their fiftieth year following the emergence of Bangladesh as an Independent and a Sovereign state in 1971, it is fitting to take stock of the journey of these critically important and historic ties. It is equally important to look to the future with the shared goal of ensuring that this relationship grows in depth and dimension in the days ahead, and become a relationship that benefits the people on both sides of the border in equal measure.

The denial of the outcome of the elections of 1970, in which the Awami League (under the dynamic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) won a clear mandate to govern Pakistan, led to a situation that changed the political landscape of South Asia forever. War preparations were put in place by Pakistan's military leadership. It culminated with the Pakistan military launching a brutal and genocidal military campaign on the Bangali population just after midnight of March 25, 1971. The people of Bangladesh rose up in arms against the action of the Pakistani military that led to the breakup of Pakistan, and the eventual birth of independent Bangladesh nine months later, aided in very large measure by the government and the armed forces of India.

### **Bangladesh's Journey as an Independent State**

Bangladesh's early days were exceedingly difficult. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had taken the reins of government with overwhelming public support, but had inherited a country in shambles. It was dysfunctional economically; and the infrastructure and transport system were badly damaged. At the end of the war, the country lacked almost every resource it needed for recovery.

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\***The Author**, Ambassador Shamsher M. Chowdhury, BB, is a decorated war hero, and a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

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For Bangabandhu and his government, there were major challenges on the international front as well. This was the Cold War era, and the major global players saw things through the prism of the bi-polar rivalry that existed then. The major Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, refused to accept the breakup of Pakistan, and refrained from recognising Bangladesh as an independent country. The same was the case with the People's Republic of China. It was not until 1974 that China withdrew its objection at the UN Security Council to Bangladesh becoming a full member of the United Nations. But it stopped short of formal diplomatic recognition. Bangladesh joined the Commonwealth in early 1972, and the Non-Aligned Movement in the following year. In 1974, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in a dramatic diplomatic move laced with political undertones, took Bangladesh to the centre of the Islamic world when he accepted the invitation to attend the OIC Summit in Lahore.

Reports indicated that Bangabandhu's Lahore trip and joining the Islamic fold was apparently not seen favourably in Delhi, especially so soon after the traumatic events of the Liberation War. The decision of Bangladesh to join the OIC, and to do so by going to Pakistan, was seen by analysts at home and abroad as a calculated move on three counts: first, that formal recognition of Bangladesh as an independent state by Pakistan was a political necessity; second, as Prime Minister of a sovereign country, Sheikh Mujib was keen to demonstrate a measure of autonomy in making the country's foreign policy choices; and, third, it was a recognition that with the demographic makeup of Bangladesh as a Muslim majority country, it had a rightful place in this group. Whatever might have been the rationale, the move resonated well at home.

### **Bangladesh-India Relations: a Look at History**

Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India are rooted in irreversible history and conditioned by the permanence of geography. India's direct role in Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971 has shaped the relationship between the two South Asian neighbours. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assumed the office of Prime Minister of Bangladesh on the backdrop of this remarkable piece of history. This relationship was more like a natural bonding between two peoples. The feeling of mutual goodwill was as real as it was pervasive.

On the bilateral front, three major events happened in this atmosphere of bonhomie between India and the new born country.

First, at the request of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, herself riding on a wave of popularity in India and goodwill in Bangladesh, agreed to withdraw Indian military personnel from the territory of Bangladesh. The event, loaded with political symbolism, happened as early as March 1972 during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's official visit to Dhaka. It was a manifestation of the wisdom and vision of the political masters at that time.

The second was the signing of the 25-year treaty titled "The India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace", in Dhaka on 19 March 1972 by Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on behalf of their respective governments. This treaty, however, did become a subject of controversy in Bangladesh, especially provisions (ix) and (x), which people saw as unequal, and as an imposition of excessive Indian influence. Dhaka felt that these undermined the sovereignty of Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, therefore, the treaty was not renewed after its expiry in 1997 even though Bangabandhu's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, was Prime Minister then.

The third event of significance was the signing of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 1974 by Prime Ministers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi. The agreement was aimed at resolving, once and for all, the bizarre anomalies in the land boundaries between the two neighbours, which included the demarcation of sections of the boundary between the two countries, the exchange of enclaves and lands in adverse possession in each other's territories, legacies left behind by the departing British colonial rulers. However, the delay in full implementation of the LBA was one of the two major issues that stood out as sore points. The other was the sharing of the waters of the Ganges River.

### **The Land Boundary Agreement**

To any sensible mind, the very existence of such "enclaves" and "lands in adverse possession" between two neighbouring countries would sound bizarre. But, in the case of Bangladesh and India, this was one of the many territorial absurdities which was resulting in painful and uncertain consequences for many.

The signing of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between Prime Ministers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi (hence the coinage 'Indira-Mujib pact') for their respective countries was aimed at setting things right. For its part, Bangladesh delivered on its side of the deal

without any delay. This meant ratification of the LBA by the Parliament and the transfer of South Berubari to India. However, the delivery from the Indian side stagnated, and got caught up in a haze of legal, technical and, at times, political issues.

In 2009, the Awami League government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina brought this issue back to top of the agenda, and steps were taken for its resolution as a matter of priority. This was a major development. With the coming of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in office in Delhi, and his “Neighbours First” policy, concrete steps were taken in India for the implementation of something that has been long overdue. His deft handling of the political stakeholders in India and his careful manoeuvring of the issue in the Centre and in the States finally made this a reality. The euphoric jubilation that followed at midnight of July 31, 2015 was only to be expected.

### **Water Sharing**

The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty between Bangladesh and India was signed in Delhi between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Deve Gowda on behalf of their respective countries on 12 December 1996. This was a major step forward. The Treaty is initially valid for a period of 30 years. This removed a major irritant. The failure to sign the Teesta water-sharing agreement despite having agreed on a draft in 2011, and despite several efforts from Bangladesh at the highest political level continues to cause resentment in Bangladesh. Notwithstanding the lack of progress on sharing of the waters of the Teesta River, both countries have moved forward to address the sharing of the waters of some other common rivers. Accordingly, Dhaka and Delhi have agreed to share data on water use or withdrawal from six common rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar - as both countries are working on a water sharing deal. Feni river water sharing is also under discussion. One hopes the process will gather momentum in the days ahead.

### **Border Killings**

The killing of Bangladeshi nationals at the border by Indian Border Security Force personnel has been a major source of disquiet in Bangladesh. The figures have gone down somewhat, although it is yet to reach the zero figure promised by successive Indian governments. Some incidents of late have raised concerns again, and the problem needs to be addressed in earnest.

### **Challenges and the Way Forward**

In a big-neighbour-small-neighbour-scenario, as is the case with India and Bangladesh, it is not unusual for the smaller neighbour to look for balance. This is an acceptable practice in diplomacy. India also recognizes that the smaller countries of South Asia (like Bangladesh) are today in a position to demonstrate a good measure of autonomy in pursuing their foreign policy goals which protect their political, economic, and security interests while balancing strategic friendships. However, given the special nature of the Bangladesh-India relationship, it is imperative for both countries to nurture it as such. It is also important for both to foster this relationship with a positive mindset, and ensure that it can be further diversified and strengthened in the future for mutual benefit. Dhaka and Delhi also must recognise the need to be sensitive to each other's political and security concerns and interests, and look for pragmatic ways to address issues, even on issues with divergent views.

In order for Bangladesh and India to maintain the momentum of positive relations, it is perhaps necessary to focus on a number of areas. These can be, but not limited to, the following:

1. Diplomatic interaction between the two countries should focus on addressing issues that remain unresolved, and fortifying those that have been resolved satisfactorily. Bilateral diplomacy should, therefore, encompass addressing all aspects of the relationship. Hence, there is need for consistent interactions between all the relevant government agencies, and not just be confined to the two foreign ministries.
2. In addition to more regular political contacts at all levels, the visible increase of people to people contact between the two countries must be a sustained exercise. The strength of the relationship between neighbouring states depends to a very large measure on the nature of relations between the people of the states. Strong people to people contact gives the relationship greater visibility, and enriches its substance. Similarly, regular, frequent, and broad based interactions between civil society groups of the two countries as part of public diplomacy should be encouraged to complement efforts at the government levels. This will give the ties greater breadth and clarity, and make the whole process more participatory. The Dhaka Global Dialogue of 2019 at the think tank levels - which was also endorsed by the political leadership of both countries - was an innovative construct. Such exercises should be a continuous process.

3. Increased and extensive cooperation in the health sector has become a priority in the wake of the Corona virus pandemic. No country, large or small, has been immune from the scourge of this deadly virus. Bangladesh and India are perfectly placed to develop new areas of cooperation for research and development in this sector, both bilaterally and regionally. This was emphasised by Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in the course of the virtual meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India on 17 December last year. The gesture of the Government of India to gift Bangladesh 2 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca CoviShield, Covid 19 vaccine was a perfect starting point. It was a reaffirmation of the closeness of ties between the two countries and their potentials for the future. This consignment was in addition to the 5 million doses that Bangladesh would source from India in the coming days. This gesture of India has been deeply appreciated all across Bangladesh. Cooperation in the health sector should now form an important element of our diplomacy.

4. Multi-modal and seamless connectivity between Bangladesh and India should go beyond the bilateral arena, and extend to the greater South and South East Asian region. Connectivity benefits the people the most. The socio-economic development of the people has always centred on the quality of connectivity and communication between countries.

5. Enhanced Defence and Security cooperation and interaction is another important area that needs attention. Unlike conventional defence cooperation arrangements that Bangladesh has built up over the years with other countries, the one with India is fundamentally different. This one was crafted in the battlefield, and is written in blood. During a visit to Bangladesh in 2019, the former Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, made a poignant reference to that part of our shared history. As it is, the exchange of visits at the highest levels of the Armed Forces of the two countries has helped strengthen ties. The Bangladesh-India joint military exercise “Sampriti” is a continuing process. This is an annual exercise, with the focus on counter-terrorism cooperation and boosting interoperability between the two militaries. India has also been holding direct Army-to-Army staff talks with Bangladesh since 2009. The Indian Defence Minister’s visit has created the potential for enhanced military and security cooperation between Bangladesh and India. The participation of a contingent from the Bangladesh Armed Forces at the Indian Republic Day Parade in Delhi this year (2021) will be a visible manifestation of the history of military cooperation between the two countries that can only be strengthened in the future.

6. Bangladesh and India need to work together beyond the bilateral context, and explore cooperation in the broader regional geo-political theatre. This has become all the more relevant in a multi-polar Asia. Geographically, Bangladesh sits on the top of the Bay of Bengal, and shares its maritime and land boundaries with India and Myanmar. It is the coupling in the chain that connects South and South East Asia, and is linked through the Bay of Bengal to the Indian, and by extension, the Pacific Oceans. It is this very location that gives Bangladesh its geo-political and strategic relevance. On its part, Bangladesh has much to offer, beginning with the fact that it is on the verge of graduating to a middle-income country. The country has recorded enviable and consistent economic growth in recent times. Bangladesh can rightfully boast of having a secular society, with a positive track record of the education of girls and women empowerment. In the area of foreign policy, Bangladesh believes in the principle of using diplomacy as the primary tool for protecting its national interests, and for resolution of disputes. It has been a strong advocate of mutually beneficial bilateral, regional, and trans-regional relationships. Its commitment to combating the threats posed by climate change and global warming has been consistent. Bangladesh's policy of zero tolerance on extremism and terrorism has been amply demonstrated. More recently, Bangladesh has earned universal accolades for providing shelter to more than a million Rohingya refugees fleeing extreme persecution in Myanmar.

### **Conclusion**

The present state of relations between Bangladesh and India is one that is marked by positive intentions and actions, and has the promise of a brighter future. The resolution of contentious issues - like the land and maritime boundaries and the signing of a long term water sharing agreement on the Ganges - have played an important part in moving these relations in the right direction. People to people contact and cultural exchanges have seen an exponential rise. This is the right way to nurture these relations for sustainability and healthy growth. While Dhaka must remain sensitive to India's concerns, Delhi, on its part, should be able to recognise that many of those concerns are common to both, and need to be addressed as such. Of late, for instance, India's perceived ambiguity on the on-going Rohingya crisis has raised questions in Bangladesh. Here, Bangladesh would expect her closest neighbour and friend to recognise that the Rohingya refugee crisis is not just a bilateral humanitarian issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is one that can have broader ramifications, potentially threatening security and stability in the region.

It is the expectation in Bangladesh that India would use its leverage, and play a more proactive role in finding a solution acceptable to all sides. India's geopolitical goals in the region must take the interest and concerns of Bangladesh into consideration, and not be followed at its cost.

Addressing the critical needs of a proven friendly neighbour, and not to subject them to domestic political interests is vitally important to sustaining trust. The issue of sharing the waters of the common rivers is a strong case in point here. Similarly, political leaders on all sides of the spectrum in Bangladesh must accept the reality that broadening connectivity in every sector has to be seen as an area of common interest. Connectivity is about connecting people and nations that goes beyond governments and politics. The element of interdependence and the spirit of mutual compromise must remain an integral part of the narrative.

Resorting to political rhetoric on both sides may serve narrow political gains in the short term; but in the long term, they will not create a climate of mutual trust and confidence. This is the path to building a relationship that has both history and geography on its side. It is happening now, and it needs to be sustained. The success of foreign policy lies in finding acceptable resolutions to outstanding problems, and not in just keeping them alive. There will always be distracters on the way that would find the glass half empty, no matter what. Overcoming such forces, and the readiness to look at the larger picture is the true test of political leadership.

The present augurs well for building a relationship between the two countries, both bilaterally and as part of an effort to establish a multi-polar Asia in an unpredictable world. Bangladesh has earned recognition as a responsible neighbour and an important regional player. Bringing a true friend and a trusted neighbour into a broader frame is in the interest of India as much as it is for Bangladesh, especially to find a rightful place in the greater Asian region.

Bangladesh and India can work as allies and partners in the emerging dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. Given the unique history of their relationship, and the economic potentials of its content, Dhaka and New Delhi should forge a robust partnership. In his very well written book, *The India Way*, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar has rightly described India's role in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a major success story in India's foreign policy, both in diplomatic and military terms. With that partnership forming a solid foundation, there is every reason to build on it and further strengthen it in the future.

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