

Celebrating 50 years of India-Bangladesh Relations

Joyeeta Bhattacharjee*

Bangladesh holds an important place in India's neighbourhood policy. India shares its longest border with the country, passing through five states, including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Also, Bangladesh is a key partner in India's Act East Policy, and is pivotal in enhancing connectivity with the landlocked north-eastern region (NER), home of the seven sister states. The NER is linked with the rest of the country via the heavily congested Siliguri corridor, which is just 25 kilometres wide in the eastern state of West Bengal. Connectivity is considered a reason behind the slow pace of development in the region. Given these realities, a friendly relationship between the two countries is important for India.

In the past 50 years, the India-Bangladesh relationship was more or less friendly. In half a century of bilateral ties, there were a few moments when the relationship faced strain, particularly during the military regime and during the rule of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, the two countries did not allow the feeling of antagonism to linger for a long time, and worked on improving the bilateral relationship. Today, India recognises Bangladesh as a close friend in the neighbourhood. The golden jubilee year of the bilateral relationship (2021) is a moment to review the journey of this bilateral relationship, and to introspect its strengths and the challenges faced by it to ascertain a productive road map for the future.

A Brief Overview of the Relationship

Initially, the India and Bangladesh relationship was exceptionally warm and friendly, and was marked with the spirit of friendship and trust. The root of the bonhomie between the two countries was India's unprecedented support of the freedom movement of Bangladesh. In the 1971 War, India gave shelter

***The Author**, Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. Opinions expressed are author's personal views

(This article was received from the author on March 8, 2021)

to more than 10 million refugees from Bangladesh who fled their homes to escape inhumane torture by the Pakistani forces across the border. India had provided military assistance to the freedom struggle of Bangladesh, and had its boots on the ground also. Notably, India was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh's independence. Another important determinant for the blossoming of this relationship was the political will of the top leadership of the two countries which was in complete support of boosting the bilateral relationship. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's first Prime Minister and the leader of the liberation struggle, had taken a break in New Delhi on his way to Bangladesh after his release from the Pakistani prison in 1972.¹ This gesture of Mujibur Rahman indicated the importance he gave to his country's relationship with India. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, visited Bangladesh in March 1972 as a mark of solidarity with her counterpart.

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Peace in 1972 was the landmark of this period. The treaty, however, was criticised by the opposition, and abandoned in later years. Also, the period marked the signing of some key agreements that laid the foundation for future cooperation. These include the Joint River Commission between India and Bangladesh that helped resolve issues like the sharing of the waters of common rivers. This is the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's tenure. The water-sharing agreement of the Ganges river of 1996 is a major contribution of JRC. Additionally, the Inland Water Trade and Transit Agreement between India and Bangladesh is also a contribution of Mujibur Rahman's rule. The treaty has been functional since the 1970s and is renewed periodically; it is responsible for facilitating one of the longest surviving modes of connectivity between the two countries.

The bilateral relationship faced a major blow following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. During the military regime that followed, outwardly the relationship was friendly; but there was an inherent feeling of suspicion and mistrust which ruled the bilateral ties. The military regime's initiative to enhance Bangladesh's relationship with China, India's competitor in the region, was believed to be an indicator of the shift in Bangladesh's foreign policy orientation, and resulted in distancing the country's ties with India. The military rule ended following a mass protest that led to the ouster of the military dictator, H. M. Ershad, in 1990.

In 1991, democracy was re-established in Bangladesh. The establishment of democracy did not make much difference to the relationship. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that formed the government after winning the 1991 election, maintained an antagonistic attitude towards India. The victory of the Awami League in 1996 opened new prospects for bilateral relations. In

that year, India and Bangladesh signed the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty that was an important breakthrough in solving disputes over sharing of river waters between the two countries and was a sign of the improved relationship. Another landmark of the era was Bangladesh agreeing to provide transit for the movement of goods from one part of India to its Northeastern region, using the country's territory. Notably, the transit could not be implemented due to opposition inside the country.

India-Bangladesh relations deteriorated after the BNP defeated the Awami League in the 2001 election, and formed the government. The bilateral relationship touched rock bottom during the BNP's term (2001–06). The BNP government's reluctance to address India's security concerns was a major point of contention between the two countries. India repeatedly requested Bangladesh to act against the insurgent groups who were running their subversive activities in India from across the border. India's plea fell on deaf ears, with the BNP declining to recognise the presence of such groups in the country.

India-Bangladesh relations got a major boost after the Awami League won the parliamentary election in 2009. Soon after forming the government, Awami League leader and Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, declared that improving her country's relationship with India was a priority for her government. To mend the relationship, the Awami League acted against the NER insurgent groups who were operating in her country. This gesture by Bangladesh contributed to bolstering confidence between the two countries, and paved the way for cooperation in a plethora of areas. Since then, more than 50 institutional mechanisms have been established to oversee cooperation in different areas, including security, defence, trade, the economy, science and technology, etc. Besides, many long pending issues - like the delimitation of the land boundary between the two countries - have been resolved peacefully.

Despite the warmth and friendship between the two countries, scepticism still persists about the future of the relationship. An analysis of the major strength and challenges will be pertinent to formulate policy to ensure the future stability of this relationship.

Key Strengths

People to People Connectivity

Before the partition of colonial India in 1947, India and Bangladesh were part of one composite political entity. The Partition could not separate linkages

between the two countries that had lasted for centuries. India and Bangladesh have always shared a common history, culture, and language. Besides, there are familial ties amongst the people of the two countries. These commonalities have resulted in the formation of unique linkages between the two countries which are independent of government initiatives. Indeed, India has also taken some steps to strengthen these linkages by taking measures like rolling out scholarships to students of Bangladesh as well as providing training to Bangladesh officers of the Civil Service, the police, and judicial services. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations provides 200 scholarships annually to students from Bangladesh for pursuing under-graduation, post-graduation, and M. Phil/Ph.D courses in various educational institutions in India. Besides, beginning 2019, Bangladesh Civil Service officials are receiving training at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), Mussoorie. Bangladeshi judicial officials are receiving training at the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal as well as in other Judicial Academies in different states across India.

Recognising the close bond that exists between the people of the two countries, India has been working on improving the visa regime to encourage larger interactions among the people across society. These measures have resulted in enhancing the cross border movement of people for purposes like education, medical treatment, leisure, and meeting members of families, etc. India issues more than 15 lakh visas annually in Bangladesh, the highest number of visas issued by any Indian diplomatic mission abroad.² The issuance of a large number of visas only highlights the depth of the linkages.

Trade and Economic Relations

Trade and economic relations between the two countries are important areas in the bilateral relationship. Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade surpassing US\$ 10 billion.³ India is the second-largest source of Bangladeshi imports. The trade has a wider potential for increasing, considering the impressive growth that Bangladesh has registered in the past few years. Bangladesh was once referred to as 'basket case'; it is now one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Bangladesh's growth is likely to open new opportunities for Indian businesses, as the country is likely to emerge not only as a market but also become a major manufacturing base for Indian companies.

Already, Indian companies have started setting up businesses in Bangladesh, and are likely to invest around US\$ 9 billion in that country.⁴ The country has offered to establish a special economic zone for Indian companies. Additionally, initiatives have been taken to improve the facilities at border crossings, and

Integrated Check Posts have been established with state of the art facilities, including testing labs and quarantine facilities.

Given the close linkages between India and Bangladesh, trade issues need special handling because there are many facets of trade that involve border communities who are not conversant with formal processes. This has resulted in the flourishing of informal trade which is estimated to be double the volume of formal trade. Border-haats are being established to encourage trade involving border communities on both sides of the border. Presently, 4 border-haats are functioning as pilot projects, and more are being proposed in the region.⁵ Close economic ties have resulted in the creation of interdependence between the two countries, which needs careful nurturing for deepening the relationship.

Development Cooperation

Development cooperation has been a key element in India's relations with Bangladesh. India's development assistance to Bangladesh started soon after the independence of Bangladesh for the post-war reconstruction of the country. Over the years, Bangladesh has emerged as the largest recipient of India's overseas development assistance. Since 2011, India has extended 3 lines of credit worth US\$ 8 billion for the development of infrastructure in a variety of sectors, including roads, railways, shipping, and ports.⁶ Further, India has been providing grants assistance to various projects, like the maintenance of inland waterways and the construction of energy pipelines, etc. Besides, India has been offering assistance in funding small projects, like the construction of school buildings, skill training centres, and health clinics, all of which have a wider impact on the socio-economic upliftment of the community in Bangladesh. India's assistance has helped in boosting its image as an important development partner in Bangladesh. Besides, this enhances the motto of "shared growth and partnership" which is often highlighted as the principle on which India anchor's relationships with its neighbours.

Major Challenges

The Migration Debate

The non-resolution of illegal migration from Bangladesh is considered a major weakness in the bilateral relationship. It is popularly believed that people from Bangladesh are migrating to India illegally for reasons like employment, religious persecution, education, health, etc. Migration from Bangladesh is perceived to have cause a major demographic shift in the border states, and has been a cause of ethnic and social tension in states like Assam. India is repeatedly

urging Bangladesh to take steps in controlling cross border migration but Bangladesh has consistently declined India's claims of unchecked migration from that country. A major lacuna here has been India's failure to provide authentic data. The non-resolution of this issue has become a major irritant in the bilateral relationship.

Water Sharing of Common Rivers

India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. The sharing of the waters of these common rivers forms a crucial part of the bilateral relationship. Presently, water-sharing agreements for two rivers have been signed. These are the Ganges Water agreement of 1996, and the agreement on the Feni river in 2019. The discussion on the water sharing agreement of the Teesta river has progressed substantially, and the two countries had agreed to a draft agreement that was scheduled to be signed during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011. The signing of the agreement was postponed after the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamta Bannerjee, objected to the formula agreed upon in the draft agreement at the last moment. The Teesta agreement has been pending since then. This delay in the signing of the agreement of Teesta river water sharing has emerged as a major irritant between the two countries. The issue of water is repeatedly exploited by various vested groups to ignite anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh.

Border Killings

The reported deaths of Bangladeshi nationals due to firing by the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) has been a point of discord between India and Bangladesh. Notably, people who are killed at the border are primarily cattle smugglers who are referred to as traders in Bangladesh. The death of Bangladeshis leads to feelings of antagonism in Bangladesh, and the country has been urging India to eliminate incidents of death at the border. India has been sympathetic to Bangladesh's concern, and has introduced non-lethal weapons for use by the BSF on the India-Bangladesh border as a measure to control the of deaths. BSF measures have substantially helped in reducing the number, but Bangladesh wants the number to come to zero - a target difficult to achieve unless cross border crimes are controlled completely.

The border is notorious for cross-border crimes like the smuggling of arms, narcotics, and the trafficking of women and children. BSF has claimed that they have to open fire in self-defence as they are often attacked by criminals. The number of incidents attacking the BSF has increased significantly after the introduction of non-lethal weapons.⁷ Moreover, there have been incidents of some Bangladeshi nationals also opening fire on India citizens. In

December 2020, an Indian citizen was killed in Meghalaya by the Border Guard's Bangladesh.⁸ Such incidents add to tensions among the border communities, and give rise to anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh.

The Growth of Radicalism

The growth of religious radicalism in Bangladesh adds another challenge to the India-Bangladesh relationship. Since the early 2000s, Bangladesh has been witnessing a rise in religious radicalism and militancy in the country. The radicals and militants have been critical of the liberal values of the country, and attacked symbols of secularism in Bangladesh - like the judiciary, poets, festivals, and other celebrations like of the Bengali new year. In August 2005, the banned militant organisation, Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, detonated 500 bombs across the country in a single day. Bangladesh has been successful in containing militancy due to the strict counter-terror measures adopted by the ruling Awami League.

Nevertheless, containing the spread of religious radicalism in the country remains a challenge. The rising influence of the radicals can be ascertained from the rally carried out by the Hafaat-at-e Islami in 2013, who were demanding the death penalty for blasphemy 2013.⁹ Recently, the radical group agitated against the establishment of statues, which they feel is against the rules of Islam. They even defaced the statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation.¹⁰ The radicals have been critical of Bangladesh's relationship with India. In 2020, the radical groups staged a protest across the country ahead of the proposed visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The latter was to visit Bangladesh as a guest in the gala celebrations of the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.¹¹ The visit was postponed following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Internal Politicking

The lack of consensus amongst the political parties in Bangladesh concerning the country's relationship with India is a major shortcoming in the bilateral relationship. It impacts the sustainability of the relationship quite seriously. The play of politics about the bilateral relationship impedes the growth of the bilateral ties. The different political parties in Bangladesh have always remained conscious of the domestic implications of taking any steps on issues related to India, which is not a concern while dealing with other countries. This major problem has favoured the growth of the influence of China, India's competitor in South Asia.

Recognising this shortcoming, India has tried to work on its relationship with the BNP, the opposition of the Awami League. In 2012, BNP chief,

Begum Khaleda Zia, was invited to India. However, such measures have hardly yielded results as she declined to meet Indian President, Pranab Mukharjee, during his visit in 2013. The party also continued with its criticism of the Awami league policy towards India.

The Way out

Being neighbours, India and Bangladesh should maintain a friendly relationship, especially at a time when the two countries are growing economically. A good relationship with neighbours is considered a necessity for the peace and prosperity of a nation. Like with any neighbours across the globe, there will be issues between the two countries. However, the relationship should be nurtured in such a way that differences over these issues do not lead to conflicts and rather help to find ways to deepen cooperation. In this regard, emphasis should be given to resolving all long-standing issues. Moreover, the steps required to widen the discourse on water or resource management should also be undertaken. Border management cooperation needs to be further strengthened. The progress of any relationship requires the active participation of both the countries. This will be defined by the importance shown by the future leaderships of the two countries. Political will can be generated only through the sustained engagement and nurturing of this relationship.

Notes :

- ¹ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, “Bangabandhu inspiring India-Bangladesh relations”, orfonline.org, 17 August 2020, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bangabandhu-inspiring-india-bangladesh-relations/>
- ² “Brief on Bilateral Relations”, High Commission of India, Dhaka, December 2019, at <https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in>
- ³ “India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations”, Bilateral Brief, Ministry of External Affairs, January 2020, at https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/bilateral_brief-_Jan_2020.pdf
- ⁴ Archis Mohan & Indivjal Dhasmana, “India, Bangladesh to sign investment pacts worth \$9 billion”, *Business Standard*, 10 April 2017.
- ⁵ Tanmoy Chakraborty, “Currently, four border haats are operational along the India-Bangladesh border. Among these, two are located at Kalaichar and Balat in Meghalaya; the others at Srinagar of South district and Kamalasagar of Sepahijala district in Tripura”, in “Land for new border haat between India and Bangladesh”, *The Telegraph*, 28 February 2020.
- ⁶ http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/bilateral_brief-_Jan_2020.pdf

- ⁷ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, “Migration, River Management, Radicalisation: What Does the Future Hold for India-Bangladesh Relations?”, Occasional Paper, Observer Research Foundation, May 2020.
- ⁸ “Innocent Garo village headman gunned down by trigger-happy Border Guard Bangladesh personnel”, NE Now, 1 January 2021, at <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/meghalaya/innocent-garo-village-headman-gunned-down-by-trigger-happy-border-guard-bangladesh-personnel.html>
- ⁹ Haroon Habib, “At least 15 killed; Islamists driven out of Dhaka”, *The Hindu*, 6 May 2013.
- ¹⁰ “Bangabandhu statue vandalised in Kushtia amid anti-sculpture movement by Islamist groups”, Bdnews24.com, 5 December 2020 in <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/12/05/bangabandhu-statue-vandalised-in-kushtia-amid-anti-sculpture-movement-by-islamist-groups>
- ¹¹ Shubhajit Roy, “Ahead of Modi’s Dhaka trip, protests held against CAA”, *The Indian Express*, 7 March 2020.

