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India–Bangladesh Relations: An Indian Perspective

Harsh Vardhan Shringla

The people of India and Bangladesh share close and multi-faceted socio-cultural, religious and linguistic ties spanning centuries. The two countries share the same values of secularism, pluralism and democracy, and the distinct honour of having their national anthem written by the same person—Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore. Bangladesh Jatiyo Kabi Nazrul, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Lalon Fakir, etc., are revered on both sides of the border. Their influence transcends political boundaries and inspires people in both countries. Given their geographical proximity as neighbours, the two countries are bound by a common destiny. In a globally connected world, interdependency has become key. The enormous challenges they face also require close cooperation. Bangladesh remains India’s key partner in the region, and is crucial both for stability in the north-eastern region and as a bridge to South-East Asia. It is also a lynchpin of India’s ‘Look East’ policy.

In the past few years, the two countries have synergized their efforts to restore the connectivity network that bound the economies of the two countries up to 1965. The interdependent economies started looking inward after partition, and more so after the 1965 India–Pakistan war, stagnating the hinterland, which had to depend on the ‘chicken’s neck’ for its trade and travel. As a result, the waterways that were the lifeline of this region and provided a cheaper mode of transportation remained unused. As Bangladesh moves towards realising its goal to emerge as the ‘connectivity hub’ of the region, India has joined it to develop the connectivity network to facilitate sub-regional integration that includes Nepal and Bhutan. The two countries also face the challenge of terrorism. Given the porous border that the two countries share, cooperation is imperative, not optional. The transnational nature of crime syndicates, terror and other criminal networks requires effective cooperation of both countries. Bangladesh is also significant for the economic development of the north-eastern region.

Bangladesh is one of the most important neighbours of India, and India deeply values its relationship. Over the last 10 years, India and Bangladesh have made unprecedented progress in furthering bilateral ties and towards building a multi-faceted relationship, which today covers cooperation in a wide range of areas, including security and border management; trade, commerce and investment; connectivity; energy and power; space; developmental projects; culture; and greater people-to-people exchange. Most importantly, several high-level visits have taken place between the two countries, which reflects the value the two countries place on their bilateral relations. The ties can be defined as transformative, and potentially benefit the entire region.

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The visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, to India in April 2017 added a new chapter to the relations, which India's Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi described as heralding a 'Sonali Adhyay', or 'Golden Era', in our ties. The Joint Statement adopted by the two Prime Ministers during Sheikh Hasina's visit affirmed that the '*relations between India and Bangladesh are based on fraternal ties and reflective of an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust and understanding that goes far beyond a strategic partnership*'.

During Sheikh Hasina's visit the two countries concluded 36 agreements, including 13 business agreements. Together with the 22 agreements signed during the visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in June 2015 and subsequent high-level visits, over 60 bilateral documents have been signed in a span of three years. Later, Sheikh Hasina was invited as a special guest to attend the convocation at Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, on May 25–26, 2018, and the two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated the Bangladesh Bhavan at Visva Bharati—a centre that is dedicated to promoting language, culture, art, economy and history and will have a permanent gallery on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Santiniketan has a special place in the bilateral relationship of the two countries.

The trade and commercial ties between the two countries have expanded rapidly, with total bilateral trade surpassing US\$9 billion in the period April 2017–March 2018. India has granted full market access to Bangladesh, which has resulted in a sustained increase in Bangladeshi exports to India, particularly the export of ready-made garments. Bangladesh's garment exports to India increased to US\$278.68 million during July 2017–June 2018 from just US\$55 million during July 2011–June 2012. India has agreed to accept test certificates issued by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution for food products exported to India from Bangladesh. Indian and Bangladeshi companies also signed agreements worth nearly US\$10 billion of Indian investments, mainly in the power and energy sectors, in Bangladesh during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. Three Indian economic zones, in Mirsarai, Bheramara and Mongla, are also in the pipeline, and will further facilitate Indian investments in Bangladesh.

Facilitating trade, investment and people-to-people ties will also require upgrading the connectivity network between the two countries, and connecting it to nearby ports and commercial centres. This has been an important area of focus for both Governments, and is a game changer in developing the region. Last year, the two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated two major connectivity projects in Bangladesh—the second Bhairab railway bridge and the second railway bridge over the Titas River—completed under the first Line of Credit from India to Bangladesh, which is likely to improve rail connectivity. In a move to take forward the people-to-people contact, the two Prime Ministers also jointly flagged off a new passenger train service between Khulna and Kolkata—the Bandhan Express—and announced end-to-end immigration and customs facilities for passengers of the Maitree Express on the Kolkata–Dhaka route, which was previously one of the major stumbling blocks in popularising train travel between the two countries. The rail link between Radhikapur (India) and Birol (Bangladesh) was also restored, and with this India has now revived four of the six rail links that existed between the two countries before 1965. Two more previously established rail links (between West Bengal/Assam and Bangladesh) are under consideration for revival. Work has also started on establishing a new rail link between Agartala (India) and Akhaura (Bangladesh). In addition to the existing bus services on Dhaka–Kolkata, Dhaka–Agartala, Dhaka–Shillong–Guwahati and Kolkata–Dhaka–Agartala

routes, a new bus service on the Kolkata–Khulna–Dhaka route commenced operations in 2017. This bus and rail connectivity will further trade and people-to-people contact. Bangladesh has projected that it will become a hub of regional connectivity, and a gateway to East Asia. Sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) has the potential to transform the region and convert it into a land of economic opportunity.

Improvement of border infrastructure is also important for ensuring seamless movement of goods and people. The Government of India is working on upgrading seven Land Customs Stations to Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at the India–Bangladesh border. This will be in addition to Petrapole (West Bengal) and Agartala (Tripura), where the ICPs are already operational, and Dawki (Meghalaya), where work on setting up the new ICP is underway. India and Bangladesh are also setting up more Border Haats, which have had a positive impact on the livelihoods of people living in areas adjacent thereto. It needs to be mentioned that before partition the region was economically integrated through markets, rail and road connectivity, and ports. After partition the state-imposed suspension at the border affected the two countries and had an adverse impact on people living in the border region, as access to nearby markets was no longer possible. Border Haats encourage trade in locally produced goods to re-establish the traditional relationship that existed between the people living in this region.

There is also a strong emphasis on promoting the use of inland waterways for the movement of goods and people. Waterways were a most useful economic lifeline and provided the cheapest mode of transportation between the two countries up to 1965. As a result of closure of the waterways in 1965, the flourishing economic activity generated through the waterways—mainly the Brahmaputra and Barak Rivers (National Waterway 2 and National Waterway 16)—came to an end. The National Waterways Act 2016 is prioritising the waterways as a major mode of transportation. Trans-shipment of goods under the India–Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Waterways Transit and Trade (PIWTT) remains significant. India is also partnering with Bangladesh to dredge two important stretches of waterways in Bangladesh—the Sirajganj–Daikhowa stretch of the Jamuna River and the Ashuganj–Zakiganj stretch of the Kushiara River—which will facilitate year-round navigation on these routes and help strengthen the link between National Waterway 1 and National Waterway 2 in India and the waterways of Bangladesh. This will help the North-East region to use the waterways for trade and transportation. The operationalisation of Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) on the movement of passenger and cruise vessels on PIWTT and coastal routes, and on cooperation regarding aids to navigation, will also help boost river traffic between the two countries. Apart from this, India and Bangladesh have operationalised container services between Kolkata and Pangaon under the Coastal Shipping Agreement.

India–Bangladesh cooperation in the power and energy sector has advanced substantially in the last few years. India is committed to supporting Bangladesh in its vision of ‘Power to All’ by 2021. At present, 660 MW of power is already flowing from India to Bangladesh, and to this an additional 500 MW is expected to be added shortly. India and Bangladesh are also examining the possibility of supplying close to 5,000 MW of power to Bangladesh through various kinds of cooperation in both the public and private sector. This includes two major private-sector investments worth a total of US\$3.2 billion with Adani Power Ltd. and Reliance Power Ltd, which will bring an additional 2,350 MW of power to Bangladesh. In addition, supply of

Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to demand centres in the Jessore–Khulna region is also being looked at; the possibility of gas grid interconnectivity between India and the Jhenaidah–Khulna pipeline in Bangladesh is being examined; the setting up of an LPG import terminal by IOCL at Kutubdia is being explored; and an LPG pipeline is being built. During the visit of India’s foreign secretary to Bangladesh in April 2018, the two countries signed an MoU for the supply of high-speed diesel from Siliguri to Parbatipur for the construction of the India–Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, which will be constructed utilising Indian grant-in-aid. Options in terms of clean and renewable energy are also being explored. India is sharing its experience and expertise in the field of nuclear energy with Bangladesh, especially as the first nuclear power plant is being constructed at Rooppur, and three agreements have been concluded for cooperation in civil nuclear energy. India has also initiated discussions for joint investment in hydro-electricity and tripartite cooperation with Bhutan. India will provide transit for transmitting electricity to Bangladesh.

Development cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of the bilateral relationship. From modest beginnings in the years after Bangladesh’s liberation, India’s development cooperation with Bangladesh has grown in size and coverage. With the extension of a third Line of Credit of US\$5 billion during Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India in April 2017, Bangladesh became India’s largest development partner. The total amount extended by India under lines of credit to Bangladesh stands at US\$8 billion, which is the largest extended by India to any country. The lines of credit are focused on various infrastructure development projects in sectors such as road, rail, port, airport, power, information and communication technology, and health and technical education. In addition to lines of credit, India is undertaking several grant projects in Bangladesh in diverse sectors including education, health, water, culture, urban development, disaster management, etc. The two countries have also been cooperating in the area of capacity building in Bangladesh, including training of police, administrative, customs, narcotics, railway and judicial officers; training under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme; and scholarships for meritorious students through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

India and Bangladesh share a historical legacy of jointly fighting and winning the war of liberation of 1971. Cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries is vital as the non-traditional security challenges are enormous. The two countries have ongoing and robust security cooperation, which has gained momentum with several high-level visits from the defence establishments of the two countries. These visits include the first ever visit of the defence minister of India to Bangladesh in 2016. Several visits by the service chiefs only reiterate how mutually committed they are to meeting the emerging security challenges. The two countries have held nine rounds of joint exercises codenamed ‘Sampriti’. Both countries have strengthened cooperation in this area with the signing of defence-related agreements, including an MoU for extending a defence Line of Credit worth US\$500 million to Bangladesh. Defence cooperation envisages capacity building, exchanges between the National Defence Colleges in the field of national security, and strategic studies and cooperation in the field of education and research in science and technology between the armed forces of the two countries. Bangladesh’s decision to hand over Indian insurgents who sought shelter in Bangladesh has contributed significantly to India’s security.

Managing the more than 4,000 kilometre porous border has often been a challenging task. It has emerged as a major transit point for drug peddlers, smugglers of

contraband goods, human traffickers and terrorist and insurgent groups who use the socio-cultural and linguistic affinity to find support and shelter through criminal elements living near the border. Therefore, border management has remained a significant area of cooperation. Implementation of the Coordinated Border Management Plan has enabled the border-guarding forces of the two countries to identify vulnerable sectors and jointly patrol the border. The two countries have set up a dialogue at the Home Minister level, and the sixth round of Home Minister-level dialogue was recently held in Dhaka. Both countries have signed an extradition treaty to prevent criminal elements taking advantage of the porous border. Border security cannot be separated from the administration of border areas. The district magistrate and district commissioners responsible for administration of the border areas meet regularly in efforts to resolve various law and order issues that arise. The two countries have established an India–Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission at the level of the foreign ministries. Bangladesh’s commitment to ‘zero tolerance’ of terrorism has been appreciated by India as contributing to regional security.

In the last two years, the two countries have also been able to institutionalise cooperation in areas of high technology such as information technology, space, civil nuclear energy, cybersecurity and earth sciences. The two Prime Ministers, along with the leaders of Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, also jointly launched the South Asia Satellite in May 2017, which will offer multi-dimensional facilities including services in telecommunications and tele-medicine, and better co-ordination in disaster management to participating nations including Bangladesh.

The two countries have also made tremendous progress in strengthening people-to-people contact, which is the cornerstone of the relationship. A liberalised visa policy and a number of measures to ease access to Indian visas for Bangladesh nationals have boosted the movement of Bangladesh nationals to India.

The enduring friendship between India and Bangladesh is based on a shared history and belief in a shared destiny. The signing of the land boundary agreement was accomplished without political acrimony and in a peaceful manner, and set an example of how borders can be settled with political understanding and will. The two countries also demarcated their maritime boundary through international arbitration and are now looking forward to cooperating on the blue economy to harness marine resources. Significantly, the two countries are committed to cooperating on emerging security challenges posed by terrorism. As the region is growing, it is poised to emerge as a major economic hub. The future of the region lies in increased trade and commerce as sub-regional cooperation and integration takes root. The convergence between the two countries is possible given the strong political will the leaders of the two countries have exhibited. This has contributed to a robust, non-reversible bilateral relationship that can be a model for South Asia.