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India-Bangladesh Relation: The Development Of Multi-Dimensional Partnership; Beyond The Border

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Abstract:

The history of India-Bangladesh relation is characterized by a rich legacy with mutual dependencies. The two Nations share deep economic, political and social interactions, as well as cultural and geographical proximity. India and Bangladesh share profound ties, grounded in a common history. Before the 1947 in the undivided India, Bangladesh was a part of the undivided Bengal Province. The partition split Bengal into India and Pakistan, forming West Pakistan, i.e now Pakistan and East Pakistan, i.e now Bangladesh. The India-Bangladesh relationship was defined mostly by the liberation war of 1971. India was front and Center in the Bangladesh independence movement against Pakistan. The war led to the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent country and strengthened bilateral relations. India went a step further when it not only recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign state but also provided military and humanitarian support and good will that has endured since. After the Independence, India and Bangladesh formed strong diplomatic relations which saw several landmark agreements. These harmonies have played an important role in sustaining cooperative relations, notably with respect to economic, cultural and security co-operation. However, the fragile relationship is jeopardized by the recent political upheaval in Bangladesh, which bears risks and complication for India. Bangladesh is engulfed in grave political, economic and social crisis which is also affecting its bilateral ties with India.

Keywords:

Geographical proximity, Liberation war of 1971, Teesta water Dispute, July Revolution 2024, illegal migration, South Asian neighbours, Farraka Barrage, Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.

Introduction:

India-Bangladesh relations are bilateral relations between the people's Republic of Bangladesh and the Republic of India, both of which are South Asian neighbours. Three sides the land border of Bangladesh's are shared with India, and one side runs along the Bay of Bengal. India and Bangladesh share 4096.7 km of border which is the longest land boundary that India shares with any of its neighbors. India and Bangladesh are not just neighbours, but are bound by an umbilical connection of ethnicity and kinship. India offers highest importance to bilateral relations with Bangladesh because of our history, heritage, culture, language, physical proximity and passion for music, literature and arts. Also Rabindranath Tagore created the National Anthems of both India and Bangladesh. The two Nations can together play a significant role for the development and prosperity of the entire subcontinent and beyond. The edifice of this unique relationship between the two neighboring nations is based on the

unwavering faith in democratic values, principles of liberalism, egalitarianism, secularism and respect for each other's sovereignty and integrity. The Cordial relation is reflected through multi-dimensional and expanding relations between the two countries, in the last four decades, the two countries have continued to consolidate their relations and have built a comprehensive institutional framework to promote bilateral co-operation in all areas. India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh as a separate and independent state. India established diplomatic relations with Bangladesh immediately after its independence in December 1971. Bangladesh and India are common members of SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA and the Commonwealth. The relations between the two countries have been characterised as a special relationship although some dispute remain unresolved. The historic land boundary agreement was signed on 6th June, 2015, which settled decades old border disputes, while negotiations are still going on over the distribution of water of the transboundary rivers. In recent years, Bangladesh has been rising anti-India sentiments among its citizens due to the Indian government's anti-muslim attitude and anti-Bangladesh activities like India's interference in Bangladeshi politics, killings of Bangladeshis by the Indian BSF, citizenship Amendment act, rise of Hindutva in India, as well as India's reluctance to solve the water dispute in common rivers with Bangladesh.

Evaluation of India-Bangladesh Relations:

The relations between India and Bangladesh evolved in different phases. The nature of the relations was mainly shaped by the developments within Bangladesh. The broad phases of these relations can be said to be: 1) The Mujib era 2) The period of military rule till 1990 3) End of military rule and establishment of multi-party democracy 1991-2009 4) Phase of one party dominance.

1) The Liberation of Bangladesh and Mujibur Rahaman's Era (1971-1975): While Bangladesh was declared an independent nation on 26th March 1971, it took more than 9 months for Bangladesh Liberation War. India was the first Nation to recognize Bangladesh as an independent Nation and established diplomatic ties with it. India played a significant role in Bangladesh war and in 1972, India and Bangladesh signed the treaty of friendship and co-operation.

The leader of new Nation, Mujibur Rahaman upheld the ideals of socialism and secularism and emphasised on Bengali identity. He advocated for good relations with India. Thus, there was optimism regarding India-Bangladesh relations. India supported Bangladesh in its liberation war and thus it expected that the new Nation would never cause Indian strategic concern in the east.

2) Era of Military Rule (1975-1990):

In 1975 Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in a coup. His daughters Sheikh Hasina and Rihana along with their family members took shelter in India till 1981. The coup was engineered by elements in the army and civil society, supported by US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and China. General Zia-ur-Rehman came to power who emphasized on the Muslim identity of Bangladesh. Thus, Islam was declared the state religion and the official policy of Dhaka changed with respect to India. Now, the policy was to keep a distance from India. Meanwhile, the relations with Islamic forces like Pakistan and big powers like the U.S. and the China gained more importance for Dhaka. India, thus got relegated from its position of an ally.

Several factors led to this shift. Firstly, the devastation of war along with the effects of deadly Cyclone of 1970, internal displacement, famine etc. made Bangladesh heavily dependent on foreign support. By 1990, foreign aid had become a defining feature of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Although India supplied various kinds of aid, it was completely absent in the index of leading donors to Bangladesh. Further, having separated from Pakistan, Bengali nationalism began to lose attraction and the focus turned to religion. Islam became the primary national identity and a mobilizing force for the post Mujib leaders. Thus Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan and OIC (Organisation of Islamic co-operation)

revived while it deteriorated with India. Indra Gandhi's efforts to revive the relations did not prove to be much fruitful.

Impact of Farakka Barrage:

Farakka Barrage is a dam on the river Ganga in Farakka in West Bengal, about 11 miles from Bangladesh's Border. India began constructing this dam in 1976-77 without a formal arrangement with Bangladesh.

The river Ganga flows into the Bay of Bengal after passing through India and Bangladesh. In West Bengal the river diverges into two streams: Hoogly that flows through West Bengal and Padma that enters into Bangladesh. India maintains that it needs the barrage for the purpose of flushing the Hoogly river to make it free from silt and therefore keep the port operational. On the other hand, Bangladesh raised an objection this project citing that as a lower riparian in country its demand for a fair share in the Ganga water should be fulfilled by India which is vital for its South-Western district. In light of this issue, Zia-ur-Rehman proposed the idea of SAARC. The idea was to unite the smaller Nation of South Asia to balance India. However the idea could not incarnate then as in 1981 another coup took place in which Zia-ur-Rehman was assassinated. After Zia-ur-Rehman's assassination, Bangladesh started transforming itself from a largely agricultural society to manufacturing hub. Meanwhile, in India, accumulation of foreign debt was leading to an impending balance of payment crisis. In this scenario, SAARC turned out to be beneficial to both the countries. Thus, In 1985, SAARC came into existence with eight member Nations.

3) Era of Multiparty Democracy (1991-2009):

In 1991, Bangladesh returned to a multi-party democracy. Relations began to improve to some extent. However, the nature of relations depended upon the party that was in power. There were two major parties in Bangladesh; Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). BNP was headed by Begum Khaleda Zia (the Widow of Zia-ur-Rehman) who emphasized on Bengali nationalism and Islamic identity. It is not favorably inclined towards India. On the other hand, Awami League was headed by Sheikh Hasina (the daughter of Mujibur Rehman). Awami League professes the ideology of Liberation War, mainly Bengali nationalism, secularism and socialism. The relations between India and Bangladesh often witness improvement when Awami League is in the government. In 1991 BNP came to power. While Bangladesh and India were prospering economically and expanding their markets and economy, Pakistan on the other hand was dealing with unrest, military overthrow of government, bomb blasts in Islamabad, poverty, shattering economy, unemployment and negative growth. In 1996-2001 the Awami League came to power under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. In this period, the water distribution agreement on Ganga was settled after 30 yrs. Meanwhile, India gave tariff concession to Bangladesh to help the nation economically. From 2001-2006, a coalition government was formed in Bangladesh. The BNP-JL led government provided refugee to outfits like ULFA (United Liberation Front Association) and sponsored several anti-India forces in and from Bangladesh.

4) Phase of One party Dominance (2009-2024):

The fourth phase of India Bangladesh relations began with the return of Awami League in 2009, and its successive victories in 2014 and 2019. Since then, there has been consistent improvement in Indo-Bangladesh relations. In this phase both the countries have shifted from being neighbours to Partners in growth and economic development. During UPA -II government in India both the countries agreed to land boundary agreement and Teesta Water sharing agreement. However, the agreement remained unsuccessful due to objection from West Bengal's chief Minister Mamta Banerjee. Bangladesh coordinated with India in dealing with security issue and tackling terrorist groups and Militancy. In 2013, an extradition treaty was signed and Bangladesh deported a number of militants to India. In 2015, a land boundary agreement was signed between the two countries that further cemented the relation. This agreement resolved the contentious issue of land boundary demarcation between the two countries which was impending from years. According to Radcliffe Commission, India owned 111 enclaves in Bangladesh.

(15000 hectare) side while Bangladesh owned 55 on Indian side (7000 hectares).The issue were settled by 100th constitutional Amendment(2015).Conclaves on either side were exchanged.Citizens were given choice to retain their nationality or acquire new one.

August 2024:

The political landscape in Bangladesh went significant upheaval in August 2024,following the ousting of prime minister Sheikh Hasina.There were massive students led protests,initially sparked by opposition to a reinstated quota system favouring descendants of 1971 war veterans.These further escalated into widespread demonstration against perceived authoritarianism and corruption within administration.The situation became worse when Hasina fled from the country, leading to the establishment of an interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus.

Importance of Bangladesh for India:

From the current geopolitical point of view Bangladesh is extremely important for India in many ways.Negligence in bilateral relations with Bangladesh will prove harmful to India's national interests. Bangladesh has the longest land border with India extending, for approximately 4096 km.Additionally,Bangladesh shares of Assam, Mizoram,Meghalaya,Tripura and West Bengal.There is also a maritime border located between these two countries.Bangladesh is also working on many important projects with India.Bangladesh's geographical location also plays an essential role in the Indian Ocean Region(IOR).The Bangladesh Navy plays a vital role in ensuring that maritime channels of communication remain free from pirates and other threats to maritime trade. Banglades is also the Gateway (entry point) to the north- eastern states of India. Such important initiatives will help in the socio economic development of the North Eastern regions of India.Bangladesh is important for India for many reasons.

Geopolitical Importance:

Bangladesh adjoins india and shares a long land,river and maritime border.This makes it important for India's security and foreign policy. For example,India needs cooperation from Bangladesh to counter the Chinese 'String Pearls'.

Economical Importance:

India& Bangladesh have close economic relations.India is one of the largest trading partners of Bangladesh.

Cultural Importance:

India and Bangladesh contain history,culture and heritage.The people of the two countries are linked by strong cultural and household bonds and Bangladesh has a large population of people of Indian origin.

Strategic Importance :

Bangladesh is located at the intersection of South Asia and South- East Asia and is important for India's act east policy, which aims to build closer bonds with countries in Southeast Asia.

Environmental concerns:

Bangladesh and India share cross border rivers and ecosystem,making it important for both countries to cooperate on issues such as water management and flood control.For example,conservation of the Sundarban requires coordinate efforts.

Areas of cooperation between India and Bangladesh:

Banglades holds huge significance for India.It can be measured by the fact that Bangladesh is not merely central for India's neighbourhood First policy,But also crucial for new Delhi's "Act East policy " which aims to adjoin unity between India and Southeast Asia.

Geopolitically,Bangladesh is an important partner of India for the following reasons.

- a) Security of North East
- b) Bridge to Southeast Asia

- c) Securing sea lines of communication.
- d) Fighting terrorism and deradicalization.
- e) Balancing against assertive China.

However, India-Bangladesh relation is multi-dimensional and transcends mere geopolitical consideration. There are several other arenas as well where Bangladesh and India work in synergy.

Economic Engagement:

Bangladesh is India's biggest partner in South Asia, While India is the second largest trading partner of Bangladesh. In FY 23, the total trade between the two countries touched USD 14.22 bn. India has provided duty free access to Bangladesh on all goods except tobacco and alcohol under South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) since 2011. Six border markets have been approved by India and Bangladesh government.

Connectivity:

Connectivity is vital for India and Bangladesh for a smooth flow of goods across the border. Better trade infrastructure benefits the bordering States of both the Nations raising the level of income. Besides, Bangladesh is India's gateway to its North-Eastern States as well as Southeast Asia. Apart from that, the Kolkata - Dhaka bus (1999) and Dhaka - Agartala Bus (2001) are the primary road link between the two countries.

Energy:

India and Bangladesh cooperate in energy sector as well currently, Bangladesh imports 116 Mw of energy from India. Joint working Group (JWG) & Joint steering committee (JSC) have been established to provide institutional Framework to provide bilateral cooperation in cross border trade of electricity.

Tourism:

Tourism is a big aspect of India- Bangladesh relations, especially medical tourism. A large number of people from Bangladesh visit India for getting medical treatment. More than 35 percent India's International medical patients are from Bangladesh. That alone contributes to more than 50 percent of India's revenue for medical tourism.

Cooperation at multilateral platforms:

India and Bangladesh are partners in several regional multilateral organisations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC and IORA. During Covid, both the countries showed solidarity in setting up of SAARC emergency response fund to counter effects of global pandemic in South Asian region. On global platforms, India and Bangladesh show solidarity on various issues. For example, Bangladesh supports India's demand for a permanent seat in UNSC.

Defence Cooperation:

Various joint exercises of Army and Navy take place between the two countries. Unfortunately, India's defense engagement with Bangladesh is much lower than that of China. China is the only country which has formal defence agreement with the Indian neighbour, while India's effort in the direction are always damaged.

Other areas of Cooperation:

India and Bangladesh also cooperate in promoting cultural unity between the two nations politically, India supports the democratic institution and values in Bangladesh.

Major issues between India Bangladesh relations:

India and Bangladesh both suffer from a "perception problem". In Bangladesh, India is observed with suspicion because of its Geo-strategic interest, over-whelming economic and military strength, and the distribution of Teesta water.

However, there are some major conflicts which need to be resolved in order to strengthen unity which shall be beneficial to both the countries.

Teesta water issue:

The Teesta river originates in the Himalayas and flows through Sikkim and West Bengal to merge with the Brahmaputra in Assam and the Jamuna in Bangladesh, the distribution of waters of this river has been a major nuisance between the two Nations. Bangladesh has sought an equitable distribution of Teesta water from India, on the lines of the Ganga water Treaty of 1996, but the objection of West Bengal CM is that it will obstruct the flow for North Bengal, and as water is a state subject, the central Government cannot overrule the concern of the state of West Bengal. Bangladesh complains that it does not get a fair share of the water. Since water is a state subject in India, there is little agreement between the state government of Bengal and central government. Meanwhile, no treaty has been signed yet to resolve the Teesta water distribution dispute between the two Nations.

China's influence:

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is also an important part of China's "One belt and one road". China played an important role in developing Bangladesh's Port at Chittagong even before the OBOR initiative came along, much to India's dismay. India believes Bangladesh is a part of the "string of pearls" which China is building across the Indian Ocean. New Delhi has been vigilant of Bangladesh's growing military proximity with China, particularly the maritime component. Bangladesh has bought two diesel-electric submarines from China, which will enforce the construction of a submarine base in Bangladesh, a port that might play host to Chinese submarines in future, as Sri Lanka's Hambantota port.

Illegal Migration and insurgency issue:

The porous border and lack of proper fencing along the country's longest international border are of the main reasons for the huge amount of illegal migration, which includes both refugees and migrant workers, continuing unabated. Also, the porous border and cattle market along the border have led to cattle smuggling on a large scale. Large influx of such migrants across the boundary has posed serious socio-economic & political problems for the people of Indian states bordering Bangladesh, with serious implications for its resources and National Security. The issue was further complicated when the Rohingya refugees originally from Myanmar started infiltrating into India through Bangladesh. Also the national register of citizens (NRC) which is expected to deter future migrants from Bangladesh from entering India illegally, has also triggered a major concern in Bangladesh.

Rohingya Crisis:

Considering India's dignity in the region, expectations were high that the country would take a proactive role in resolving the Rohingya crisis. But India's dilly-dallying was a disappointment for Bangladesh. Later India categorically conveyed that it wants the "safe, secure and sustainable" return of the Rohingya refugees. However it was an opportunity for India when it could have played a leadership role and brought key stakeholders to the negotiation table.

Terrorism:

The borders are susceptible to terrorist infiltration. A number of groups are trying to spread their tentacles across India, such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). JMB is listed as a terror group by Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and the United Kingdom. Recently, the national investigation agency had filed a charge sheet against six members of the JMB in a special court in Bhopal.

Drug smuggling and Trafficking:

There have been many incidents of cross border drug smuggling and trafficking. Human (especially children and women) are trafficked and various animal and bird species are poached through these borders.

Border dispute:

The non-demarcation of 6.5 Km land border along the Comilla-Tripura makes the border question unresolved. India's reluctance to resolve this issue is attributed to the concerns of the Hindus living in the lands likely to go to Bangladesh after demarcation.

How can the relationship between India and Bangladesh be strengthened ?

The relationship can be strengthened by focusing on mutual benefits and long-term resolutions:

i) Giving priority on Teesta resolution: India needs to find a political consensus to finalize a fair and equitable Teesta water distribution agreement that respects the needs of both West Bengal and Bangladesh, removing the biggest irritant.

ii) Implement Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement(CEPA):

Finalizing and implementing CEPA would unlock the full potential of trade, investment and supply chain Integration, benefiting both economies significantly.

iii) Increase defense Ties:

India should enhance its defense cooperation by extending more lines of credit and focusing on capacity building and training to reduce Bangladesh's dependence on other Global suppliers.

iv) Focus on people centric diplomacy:

Improve border management by adopting non-lethal measures (as repeatedly demanded by Bangladesh) to prevent border fatalities and ease tensions. India should also actively address and communicate transparently regarding domestic policies like NRC/CAA to reduce anxiety in Dhaka.

v) Enhance border management protocols:

Adhere strictly to the commitment to use non-lethal Weapons on the border to minimize fatalities, thereby directly addressing the biggest human rights and public opinion challenge.

vi) Concentration on sub-regional cooperation:

Focus on the BBIN(Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) motor vehicles agreement to boost sub-regional connectivity and economic activity, benefiting the entire eastern subcontinent.

Key impacts of the July Revolution on India:Bangladesh relations:

The July 2024 revolution in Bangladesh, which led to the eradication of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has created a significant shift in India- Bangladesh relation, moving from a period of close strategic partnership to one of ambiguity and tension. The students led uprising challenged Perceived "Pro India" alignment of the former regime, resulting in resurgence of anti-india sentiment and security concerns for New Delhi, particularly regarding its North East.

a) Shift in power and diplomacy:

The fall of Hasina's Awami League, a close ally of India, ended a 15yrs period of deep co-operation, leaving India to navigate a relationship with a new, interim administration led by Dr Muhammad Yunus.

b) Rising anti-India sentiment:

Protests in July were partly fueled by perceptions that the previous government prioritized Indian strategic interests over national sovereignty. This has led to a rise in anti-India attitude and a desire for more independent foreign policy in Dhaka.

c) Security concerns:

The post revolution environment has raised concerns in India regarding the safety of its north eastern borders and the Potential Weakening of security cooperation that previously kept insurgent groups in check.

d) Ideological challenges:

The Revolution has triggered a struggle over the national identity of Bangladesh with some elements questioning the pro- liberation India aligned historical narrative, potentially favoring closer ties with Pakistan and China.

d) Economic and Trade uncertainty:

The bilateral relationship has faced disruption, with reports of restricted trade and transshipment of facilities, signaling a move away from the high cooperation model. The Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) led by Tarique Rahman, has secured a victory in the general elections held in February 2026. This marks a significant paradigm shift in Bangladesh's politics, ending the interim Period that followed the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina regime(Awami League)in August 2024. The BNP's victory signals a structural teste for India's Neighbourhood First policy, raising security concerns. India must adopt a pragmatic interest based approach that thrives economic and geographic

advantages to safeguard its security. A stable, neutral and prosperous Bangladesh remains vital for India's Act East policy and the security of its North East.

Conclusion:

Keeping in view the study of above relations and problems it can be concluded that India had an important contribution in the Independence of Bangladesh. There is a lot of room for India and Bangladesh to improve their bilateral relations. Cooperation, collaboration and consolidation should be the foundation of the connection. peace is the most important condition for progress. As a result, Competent border management is required to provide a peaceful, Secure and crime free border. A pro active involvement to increase cooperation and resolve impending issue will not only be beneficial for the two neighbours but for the whole region.

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