

Post-independence India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations: A Socio-Economic and Political Perspective

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Abstract

India-Bangladesh bilateral relations are largely governed by the reciprocal perceptions of and expectations from each other. Indian government stood firmly behind the government of newly born Bangladesh. India-Bangladesh's relations have deteriorated in recent years as the goodwill generated from India's support for Bangladesh in its war of independence.

The nature of political leadership had also played an important role in determining the relations between India and Bangladesh ever since the beginning of two nations. Except a brief spell of Mujib era (1971-75), Indo-Bangladesh relation has been one of distrust and suspicion. In addition to communal perspective, the psychology of being small also haunts the Bangladeshi entity. Bangladesh shares more than 90 per cent of its international border with India alone. She is surrounded by West Bengal in the West, Assam and Meghalaya in the North and Tripura and Mizoram in the East. It is this physical geography, which makes the Bangladeshis feel 'India Locked' that in turn acts as a major determinant in economic relationship. Bangladesh also had to place high priority on disputes with India concerning territorial boundaries, utilization of Ganges water etc. Illegal immigration, exchange of enclaves, border demarcation and the border fencing issues between the two countries has not made satisfactory progress. The support of cross border terrorism and insurgency is another bone of contention. Since the partition, another controversial issue is the sociological components of the two neighbours. Among other south Asian nations Bangladesh owns the maximum socio-cultural similarity with India, like a significant number of Hindus in the plains and a good number of tribal's in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) come under this category, these people were recognized as anti-Bangladeshi or pro-Indian in their homeland, that becomes an important irritant for fair development of Indo-Bangladesh relations.

It is natural for close neighbors to have problems. Intimacy is not always easy. Yet, there are many opportunities that could be exploited for the greater benefit of both countries. Both the governments need to recognize the opportunities to improve bilateral relations by initiating proper policy measures, mutual cooperation and above all political will. The governments and the private sector of both countries must work together to bring these measures into reality. There should be an environment for people-to-people contact between India and Bangladesh.

Keywords: bilateral relations; security perception; liberation movement; border demarcation; char lands; chitmahals; illegal immigration; trade deficit.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is Bangladesh's most important neighbor. The Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations are largely governed by the reciprocal perceptions of and expectations from each other. The perceptions and expectations are formed from the past associations and interactions. India has been closely associated with the political evolution of Bangladesh. In fact, it was India who scripted the final chapters of the history of Bangladesh's liberation that had unfolded before us in the early 1970s. It is, thus, pertinent to examine the predicaments of India in intervening in the liberation war of Bangladesh and guiding it to the logical conclusion.

One of the abiding reasons for India to intervene into the liberation war of Bangladesh was to get rid of the Pakistan from her eastern border. Pakistan, a front runner state for USA in its cold war stratagem against USSR, used the soil of her eastern wing, to destabilize India's north eastern region. Pakistan had twofold strategy: bleeding Indian military machine and dismembering the north eastern region from mainland India by inculcating the grievances of the ethnic minorities of the region. Pakistan also had territorial interest in India's sparsely populated north east which is viewed to be a natural lebensraum for the overpopulated Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan. The anti-India subversive activities got a new momentum following the Sino-India border conflict in 1962. The USA-China-Pakistan axis had encircled India and coordinated their efforts from East Pakistan to train the ethnic guerillas and to provide them logistic supports

across the border in order to intensify their so called struggle for “freedom”. The Naga, Mizo and Meitei insurgents were motivated, trained and armed to fan up ethnic wars against the Indian state (Bindra, 1982; Dixit, 1999; Datta, 2004; Pattanaik, 2005; Entregue, 2006; Hussain, 2006; Bradnock, 2006; Bhardwaj, 2006; Gopal, 2007).

At one point in time, India’s security perception about her eastern border had become so fragile that her intelligence wings were at doubt as to whether India would be able to hold on the region in case of a simultaneous thrust from the East Pakistan and China which would invariably cut off the chicken’s neck. India found an opportunity to come out of this suffocating security encirclement in the liberation war in East Pakistan and quickly took advantage of the same to get rid of Pakistan from her eastern border (Hussain, 2006).

India took up the diplomatic initiative to convince the international community about the viability of Bangladesh as an independent country. Indian foreign minister and prime minister toured the globe and brought the liberation movement into the limelight to garner the support of the global powers in favour of independent Bangladesh. As the final stroke, Mrs. Gandhi, the charismatic Indian prime minister, signed a treaty with USSR to create a shield against possible security threat from USA, and mobilized the Indian army to liberate East Pakistan (Bindra, 1982; Dixit, 1999; Sridharan, not dated) Indeed, the decision to intervene into the liberation war was a masterpiece in the annals of political decision making in India. India took huge risk and had a large stake in the success of the liberation war.

As in spite of Awami League (AL) under Sheik Mujibur Rahman won the majority parliamentary seats in the general election of 1971, he was denied the political power in Pakistan. The call for the liberation was, thus, rooted in strong ethical and moral grounds. Moreover, the military onslaught that was unleashed on the ordinary civilians of East Pakistan by the armed forces of West Pakistan had created a global commotion. For more than nine long months, from March 25 to December 16, 1971, the west Pakistani forces unleashed terror with all forms of brutality which can only be compared with the Hitlerite genocide. Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight on 25th March, to curb the Bengali nationalist movement by eliminating all opposition, political or military. Just to give for five out of the eighteen districts, the Pakistani army killed 100,000 Bengalis in Dacca, 150,000 in Khulna, 75,000 in Jessore, 95,000 in Comilla, and 100,000 in Chittagong. For eighteen districts the total is 1,247,000 killed. This was an incomplete toll, and to this day no one really knows the final toll. Some estimates of the democide (death by government) are much lower -- one is of 300,000 dead -- but most range from 1 million to 3 million.

Within a month of the West Pakistani crackdown, nearly a million refugees had entered into India. By the end of May, the average daily influx into India was estimated at over 100,000. By July, the total number of infiltration of Bangladeshi refugees into India had reached the figure of 8 million. By the end of 1971, figures provided by the Indian government to the United Nations indicated that this total had reached to 10 million (Dixit, 1999; <http://www.gendersude.com>). India shouldered the responsibility to feed and look after this huge politically displaced people in spite of the fact that this involved huge financial burden.

It was this human plight of the conflict which also played a compelling role in India’s intervention in the liberation war of Bangladesh. Besides providing shelter and logistics to the exile AL government, India began the military campaign against Pakistan on December 4, 1971. The Indian Army with support from Mukti Bahini, far superior in numbers and equipment to that of Pakistan, launched a 3-pronged pincer attack on Dhaka from West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, taking only 12 days to defeat the Pakistani defenders. Realizing the possibility of total annihilation, the Pakistan army surrendered en masse to the joint command of Bangladesh and Indian forces on December 16, 1971, with the largest number of prisoners of war, i.e., 93, 000 in the history (Mamoon and Ray, 2000). With the unconditional surrender of the Pakistani army, Bangladesh was finally liberated.

2. Challenges before India-Bangladesh Relations

The hangover of Indo-Pakistan inimical relation continued to loom large in Indo-Bangladesh relation as well. Except a brief spell of Mujib era (1971-75), Indo-Bangladesh relation has been one of distrust and suspicion. At the root of this hostile relation lies the orthodox theological perception of Hindu-Muslim divide. The doings of a neighbor is often interpreted and analyzed from religious prejudice in both the countries. The religious fundamentalist perspective that rules out the co-existence and complementarity of these two faiths often considers each other as competitor. This competitive perspective leads to the formulation of political doctrine of conflict rather than cooperation. In addition to this communal perspective, the psychology of being small also haunts the Bangladeshi entity. Being a small neighbor, Bangladesh fears the Indian domination. She deliberately maintains a distance from India so that she is not lost for India. The issues that stand on the way of harmonizing the national interests of India and Bangladesh are many (Hussain, 2006).

Firstly, Bangladesh shares more than 90 per cent of her international border with India alone which runs about 4,096 km land border and 180 km maritime border. It also has a 200 km common border with Myanmar in the South-East (Bhardwaj, 2003) Bangladesh is surrounded by the Indian state of West Bengal in the West, Assam and Meghalaya in the North and Tripura and Mizoram in the East. Thus, Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian states. It is this physical geography, which makes the Bangladeshis feel that they are 'India Locked' (Bhardwaj, 2003). There are some stretches along the border which have not yet been demarcated. This is particularly true in case of riverain border. The international boundary in Berubari sector of West Bengal at Mouza Daikhata-56 Khudipara- Singhpara, about 1.5 km (56 acres), has not been yet demarcated due to differences of opinion between the governments of India and Bangladesh (Jamwell,2004; Bhardwaj, 2006, Chakraborti,2007). Another small stretch of land of about 6.5 k.m. along the Comilla-Tripura border has not yet been demarcated (Datta, 2004; Bhardwaj, 2006). It appears that it is mainly due to Indian disinclination as 'the concerns of the Hindus living in the lands likely to go to the Bangladesh after demarcation' (Datta, 2004). Another stretch along Lathitilla/Dumabari area of Assam involving of about 2.5 km length (approximately 135 acres of land) is still under dispute. Another border conflicting area is the village of Padua (known as Pyrdiwah in India), adjoining Meghalaya state of north eastern region of India and Timbil area of Sylhet district in Bangladesh due to its adverse possession. Half the Pyrdiwah village called Pyrdiwah I is in Bangladesh and another half called Pyrdiwah II is in India (Chaudhury, 2001; Bhardwaj, 2006).

Secondly, problems of demarcation of border exist in case of char lands. Char lands are the areas that emerge in riverain as well as coastal border areas either due to changes in the course of rivers or due to the natural process of delta formation. People, whoever comes first, occupies these char lands leading to claims and counter-claims. For example, during 1979 controversies began over New Moore Islands also known as Purbasha in India and Talpatty in Bangladesh, an island of about 24 by 12 km formed in the mouth of river Hariya Bhangra that flows through Sundarban and forms the border between India and Bangladesh. Both India and Bangladesh claimed the island to have emerged in their own territorial waters. As India occupied it, Bangladesh felt deprived. Anti-Indian criticism and political slogan mongering filled the air of Bangladesh (Bindra, 1982; Ahmed, 1984; Hossain, 1984; Dixit, 1999; Singh, 2000; Sobhan, 2002; Datta, 2004; Baruah, 2004; Bhardwaj, 2006; Haque, 2006).

Riverain borders are not easy to manage like the fixed land borders. Landmarks based on which demarcation has been agreed upon keep on changing due to the activities of the rivers per se. One such problem is associated with the Muhuri River of Tripura (Belonia sector)-Comilla Sector of the India-Bangladesh border. The dispute in this area could not be solved due to the change in the course of Muhuri River and formation of a char (around 46 acres) due to the shifting nature of the river in spite of bilateral agreement (para-5 and 6 of Article-I of the 1974 Agreement) (Ahmed,1984; Singh, 2000; Sobhan ,2002; Jamwal,2004; Bhardwaj, 2006).

Thirdly, the emergence of enclaves known as 'Chitmahals', due to the faulty demarcation of the borders, following partition, continues to remain as an irritant in Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations. Enclaves are the villages or pockets of land physically located in one country, but occupied by the citizens of other country. Obviously, a large number of Indian citizens are residing in the 'Chitmahals', surrounded by the Bangladesh land and Bangladesh citizens and vice-versa. The social, economic and political conditions of these dry islands on both sides are rather brutal due to the lack of proper administrative arrangement and the concentration of anti-social activists the cross-border illegal actors take refuge in them. There are 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh involving 17,258.24 acres of land and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India involving 7083.72 acres. Due to the riverine nature of the border at some areas that leaves chars after the floods causes' adverse possession of that land. The ownership of 65 enclaves in West Bengal-Bangladesh border is disputed: out of them 35 are in adverse possession and 31 are in reverse possession (Datta, 2004; Bhardwaj, 2006; Haque, 2006). There are 2,853.50 acres of Indian land under the adverse possession of Bangladesh, whereas, around 2,154.50 acres of Bangladeshi land is under the adverse possession of India (Bhardwaj, 2006; Jamwal, 2004). The enclaves in the Assam-Meghalaya -Bangladesh borders covering an area of 755 acres of remain unresolved; out of these 520 acres is with India and the remaining with Bangladesh (Datta, 2004; Bhardwaj, 2006).

Fourthly, the support of cross border terrorism and insurgency is another bone of contention. India's security concern about her north eastern states has already been mentioned while the ethnic guerillas were being provided the safe sanctuary in East Pakistan. Except a brief period during the Mujib regime, the game of terror export across the border had been the major source of bilateral irritation. While Bangladesh accused India of sponsoring the Shanti Bahini (Hazarika, 1989; Dixit, 1999, Datta, 2004), a militant outfit of Chakmas of Chittagong Hills fighting against the Government of Bangladesh for their rights, India accused of sheltering and patronizing the ethnic militant groups of the north eastern region (Baruah,2004; Choudhury, 2004; Masud, 2004; Rashid, 2004; Pattanaik,2005; Haque,2006; Entregue ,2006; Kumar, 2007; Rahman, 2007) . In spite of the resolution of the Chakma issue in 1997, India feels that the anti-India elements in Bangladesh continued to provide logistics to ethnic militants from India's north east. Indian

security forces have provided a list of 175 camps of the various ethnic militant groups from the north eastern states that are thriving in different parts of Bangladesh (The Telegraph, 2008; Baruah, 2004; Haque, 2006). Indian security analysts believe that Bangladesh is using the Indian militant groups as pawns to settle other bilateral issues and to keep India under pressure. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has accused India for sheltering its criminals and 39 anti-Bangladesh camps, including those of the Shadhin Bangabhumii Andolon and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) (Routray, 2004).

Fifthly, the issue of illegal immigration of the Bangladeshi nationals has been perceived as another threat to the socio-political stability of India in general and states along the Bangladesh border in particular. It has been proved indirectly: while the growth of population in border villages in Bangladesh has been comparatively lesser than her national average, the same is just reverse in Indian side of the fence (Ghosh, 2001; Sobhan, 2002; Jamwal, 2004; Choudhury, 2004 [a] ; Choudhury, 2004 [b]; Datta, 2004; Baruah, 2004; Pattinauk, 2005; Hussain, 2005; Haque, 2006; Joseph, 2006; Hazarika, 2006; Bhuyan, 2006; the Bartaman Patrika, 2008). This fact has been used to draw inferences about the illegal immigration of the Bangladeshi nationals into India. Since India neither has any national population register, nor any national citizen identity card, it is difficult to prove in the court of law the citizenship of an immigrant and also to arrive at any reliable estimate of the size of the Bangladeshi immigrants into India. However, in a Group of Ministers report on national security, headed by the then home minister, Mr. Lal Krishna Advani, it was estimated that a total of 15 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants are staying in India (GOI, 2001). Of which, 12 million are staying in different states of north eastern region of India (GOI, 2001). In fact the issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigration has already destabilized the border state of Assam and it is spilling over gradually to other north eastern states. The public demand for fencing the Indo-Bangladesh border can be seen as a defensive measure against this illegal cross-border infiltration.

Sixthly, India's program of fencing the Indo-Bangladesh border in order to stop illegal immigration, free movement of the insurgent groups and smuggling of small arms has met with criticism from Bangladesh. As Bangladesh is surrounded by India from all three sides, fencing will create a suffocative condition for Bangladesh. Bangladesh feels to have been caged by Indian fence. India finds no alternative other than to erect fences all along the 4000 km border length as she has not received any cooperation from Bangladesh to stop the menaces mentioned above. Instead of shared border, managing the border has become a big botheration for India. Bangladesh, however, does not see the fencing activities as a good neighborly behavior.

Seventhly, India's request to have transit facilities to move goods from mainland India to the north eastern region could not be accommodated by Bangladesh. As the territory of Bangladesh chips in between the mainland India and her north eastern region, a distance of 700 km from Kolkata to Agartala via Dhaka becomes 1700 km via Guwahati (<http://www.enwikipedia.com>) while traveled through Indian Territory. As a result, it involves huge amount of transport expenditure to move goods from the mainland to the north eastern region of India. A transit facility through Bangladesh could cut the expenditure less than half. This will be beneficial for both. India can move goods from mainland to north east at a lesser cost and shorter time, Bangladesh could earn transit fee in return (Das, 2007; Choudhury, 2005; Rashid, 2005). Another example where a more co-operative Indo-Bangladesh relationship can be developed is for the enhancing regional utility of Chittagong port, for all exports from India's north eastern region as well as Bhutan and Nepal, generating billions of dollars of revenue annually for Bangladesh and considerable savings for India (Dixit, 1999; Pattanaik, 2005; Rashid, 2005; Sobhan, 2006; Mohammed, 2006). However, transport and transit connectivity has been another important issue for both the country.

Eighthly, the river system of Bangladesh, being the lower riparian country, is an extension of the river system of India, the upper riparian country. Rivers originated in the Himalayas find their way to the Bay of Bengal through the coastal Bangladesh. The three major rivers of Bangladesh, i.e., the Ganga, the Jamuna and the Meghna, are the older version of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Barak of India respectively. Some Eastern Himalayan and Patkai hills rivers like Tista, Tosrsha, Mahananda, Atrai, Surma, Kushiara, Baulai, Karnaphuli, Gumti which flow through the Indian territory feed the Ganga-Jamuna-Meghna river system of Bangladesh. As the river systems of India and Bangladesh are integrally linked, both the countries are having overlapping competitive interest as far as water is concerned. Being the upper riparian country, India enjoys the advantage while Bangladesh finds itself at the receiving end. Free flow of these water bodies from India is of Bangladesh's interest. As India sees the same set of rivers as her resource as well, it is only natural that she will plan out the best utilization of her water resources. Given the vastness of India and her growing need, Bangladesh feels threatened about her water security. Being primarily an agrarian country, Bangladesh requires huge fresh water for cultivation and for allied activities. She feels that given the Indian intention to control the water flows of these rivers and ambitious inter-linking of rivers project, there will not be enough water left for Bangladesh particularly during the lean season. It is this anxiety that has led Bangladesh to protest against all the river-based

development projects (having implications for Bangladesh) of India like the Farakka barrage, Tipaimukh dam and Inter-linking of rivers project. Bangladesh feels that India is not sensitive enough about her need as well as her right over the common property resources. The Bangladeshi protest is, in turn, not viewed as friendly gesture by India and is often interpreted as the unnecessary intervention in the internal affairs of India. Thus, the geographical location has made the interests of India and Bangladesh coterminous. The search for the harmony of interest has led to the signing of the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty between them. However, forces inimical to India often make it an issue to fan anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladesh.

Ninthly, being a small neighbor, Bangladesh suffers from the fear of Indian hegemony. In terms of land mass, India is about 23 times larger than Bangladesh. In terms of population, India is about 7 times more than Bangladesh. In terms of GDP, Indian economy is about 25 times larger than Bangladesh. It is, thus, only natural for Bangladesh to apprehend big brotherly behavior of India. In fact, India also expects that Bangladesh should fit herself into the Indian regional strategy as a gesture of goodwill to reciprocate India's role in the liberation war of Bangladesh. India seeks to create a regional hegemony in South Asia and intends to keep China out of this region. China's South Asia policy factors into this dimension. Thus, while India intends to shape the foreign relations architecture in South Asia and expects Bangladesh to harmonize her foreign relations matrix to that of India, Bangladesh, in turn, gravitates away towards China-Pakistan axis in order to minimize the influence of India. This disharmony in the foreign policy goals in these two neighbours often acts as the springboard of bilateral tension (Pattanaik, 2005; Rashid, 2005; Hussain 2005; Pant, 2006; Kibria, 2006; Hussain, 2006).

Tenthly, Bangladesh is facing a secular deficit balance of trade vis-à-vis India. India being one of the largest trade partners of Bangladesh, the other being China, Bangladesh repeatedly requested India to undertake measures so that the trade asymmetry could be reduced. Although India has reduced tariff lines on a large number of imports from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations, of which Bangladesh is a member, the trade asymmetry has shown no sign of reduction. While India feels that the extremely narrow export basket of Bangladesh is the prime cause behind this trade asymmetry, Bangladesh feels that protectionist measures on the part of India stand on the way of enhancing exports of Bangladeshi goods into the Indian markets. Anti-Indian forces in Bangladesh often make this trade asymmetry an issue to trumpet their horn in order to derive political mileage out of it which hots up the Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations (Ihtesham and Rahman, 2005; Rahman, 2005; Mahmud, 2006; Ahmed, 2008).

The overall Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship has often been affected by varying political complexion of governments in two countries. While India, particularly the Congress-led government, appears to have practiced a regime specific Bangladesh policy, similarly Bangladesh followed a country specific India policy often coached in binary religious perspective (Pattanaik, 2005; Singh, 2006). Indo-Bangladesh relations need to be freed from these idealistic prejudices and channelized in the direction as has been visualized by Gujral Doctrine (Dixit, 1999; Datta, 2004; Rashid, 2005). The installation of the Awami League (AL) in the Ninth Jatiya Sangsad elections held on December 29, 2008 and the Congress party to power in the two countries created a congenial ambience to settle long-standing challenges through productive negotiations because of the historic links between the two parties since the 1971 liberation war.

3. CONCLUSION

India and Bangladesh cannot re-fashion geographical as well as historical relations, hence, the two countries are destined to live next to each other. Playing the "blame game" with each other is of no use. Better relations are imperative for economic development of the two neighbors given its geo-physical location, that's why, both India and Bangladesh should establish a broad framework in which political, economic and social concerns are sorted out amicably to mutual benefit and sustainable development. A cost benefit analysis in political and economic terms should be made so that development can be initiated between both the neighboring countries.

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