

Diplomacy and Development: India-Bangladesh Relations in Modi Era

Sanjeev Kumar Bragta

Himachal Pradesh University, Department of Evening Studies, The Mall-Shimla, India

Email: sanjeevbragta@gmail.com

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Abstract

India-Bangladesh shares a deep historical, cultural, and economically multifaceted relationship that has evolved over the period. Since the Modi government has assumed the office in 2014, bilateral relations have witnessed a significant development in terms of trade, cooperation, and geopolitical engagements. However, there has been continuity and change through the course of history with its cordial and strained relations. In overall, the bond between the two has been of comprehensive relationship based on cooperation and collaboration till the oust of Bangladesh Prime minister Sheikh Hasina. It is in this light the present study seeks to analyze the bilateral relations between the two nations in terms of geopolitical and economic development. Also, would like to answer briefly the issue and challenges in recent times.

Keywords: Bilateral Diplomacy, Economic Cooperation, Geopolitics, Development

Introduction

Before the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the region was part of British India. Soon after India's independence, Pakistan came into existence through the partition of India. The truncated state of Pakistan divided between the two wings-East and the West Pakistan through thousands of miles square territory inhabited by the Muslim majority. The contemporary Bangladesh previously known as East Pakistan achieved its independence on 16th December 1971. This can be substantiated from the announcement and Sheikh Mujib's message to his countrymen, "*This may be my last message. From today Bangladesh is independent, I call upon the people of Bangladesh to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistani occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh, and final victory is achieved. This began the Bangladesh freedom struggle which succeeded on 16th December 1971.*" (Rahman, 2012, 1-323)

However, Zia-Ur-Rahman of Bangladesh has been ruthless in overpowering his adversaries and has fought a lot in creating a strong democratic image and institutions. With economy looming large, he managed to restore law and order in the state. (Marcus, 1981, 357-380). The internal dynamics played significant role in framing the bilateral engagements between India-Bangladesh relations. It was immediately after its independence, India was among the first country to recognize Bangladesh as an independent state by establishing its relations with Dacca. This remains a fact that India's relations with Bangladesh are civilizational, cultural, social, and economic that is reflected in its multi-dimensional and growing relations among the two. There is a complementarity, cooperation, and collaboration between the two country and presents an opportunity to develop better relations (MEA, 2017).

In addition to this, the geographical location and its proximity provide an opportunity to have a closer link between the two. Though, the degree of bonds between the two was deep rooted but it was never homogenous. For a better understanding, it becomes pertinent to unfold the history of the two after the liberation of Bangladesh that was a turning point in the history of Indian subcontinent.

Not only this, India played an important role by sheltering millions of refugee during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. Soonafter, in 1972 India-Bangladesh signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace for a period of twenty five years. Both the state enjoyed warmth relationship during the Sheikh Mujibar Rahman period. It was for a brief stint that national struggle could reshape itself, Mujibar Rahman was assassinated in 1975 and military took over power in the state of Bangladesh. During in the post mujib era, Zia-Ur-Rahman took charge and there was a noteworthy change in Bangladesh's foreign policy, as secular credential was taken over by the religious fundamentalism. Similar trends continued under General Ershad. Despite of all this, India's approach under Rajiv Gandhi was more active policy towards Bangladesh.

Though, the post-cold war era with the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1990s the relations appeared to be more hopeful between India-Bangladesh. The Khalida Zia came into power with the support of Islamic fundamentalist groups (Jamaat-I-Islami) and her policy was pro-Pakistan and tilted towards China to counter balance India. Whereas, Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) made a progressive approach for better understanding of the relations between the two states which reached to a comprehensive partnership and with warmth relations during her tenure. Then, again Khalida Zia (2001-2006) took over charge in the first decade of the present century. The period saw few bilateral visits with train services resumed after long span.

With the beginning of new era, Sheikh Hasina assumed the office again and made a visit to New Delhi in January 2010. Both the states made a quick start to converge the relations and worked out to sort out the divergent issues among them. During her visit both the state signed 51-point communique with a wide range of issues. On a reciprocal basis, India's PM Manmohan Singh visited Dacca made a significant decision like removal of 46 items from negative list under South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA). Later in February 2013, both the states signed an extradition treaty and liberalised the visa rule.

In a similar manner, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi took over charge in May 2014 and soon after the External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj visited Bangladesh on 25th June 2014 that has been proactive, strong, and sensitive approach. However, PM Modi made his first two days visit to Bangladesh in 2015, with the signing of 22 agreements and a 60-paragraph joint declaration as mark for future roadmap. In her reciprocal visit PM Sheikh Hasina came to India in April 2017. In this way both states came together with a new progressive start under Modi regime. It is against this background the present article tends to analyze the bilateral relations between the two states and issues of convergence/ divergence among them.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze in short, history of India-Bangladesh relationship.
2. To explore study and scrutinize bilateral relations in terms of diplomacy and economic development among the two nation during in Modi era.
3. To analyze in brief certain challenges in the changed geopolitical environment.

Methodology

The existing research paper is based on historical, analytical, and descriptive study. The data will be collected from various primary and secondary sources pertaining to official, government, non-governmental organizations and the relevant policy documents, reports, and books, articles, debates to understand the bilateral interaction between India-Bangladesh.

Review of Literature

While, there is no scarcity of literature with respect to India-Bangladesh relations. However, it becomes imperative to know the theoretical and conceptual study through the existing study of

literature. The study tries to review a few selected literatures relevant to the present study. In this book, (Ayoob and Subramanyam, 1972) tries to attempt the developments in Bangladesh and the liberation war from its South Asian and global perspective. Thus forming one of the important initial study on war in liberation. The book by (Rashid, 1975), made a comprehensive detail and description of terrain of Bangladesh by arguing of its rural as well as agricultural character in it forming the institution in Bangladesh. The study by (Sharma, 1978), pertains to strategic view of the war by giving us a sequential account of relations between the two states as well as extra regional powers like US, USSR, China etc. In this work, (Ghosh, 1983) discuss about the role of India in Bangladesh's liberation war. The author made a serious attempt to examine India's role in a comprehensive and general perspective. Also the study discuss about the South Asian sub-system as a distinct part of the global arrangement. The authors in this study (Sisson and Rose, 1999) examine the issues related to creation of Bangladesh and certain ironies drawn out in authority in Pakistan that led to its dismemberment. In this work, (Jacob 1997) author's personal experience from defense perspective with a narration of India's pragmatic role with a determined leadership of Indira Gandhi and army's strategy led to the liberation of East Pakistan. Further, (Rashid, 2002) in his work described well about Indo-Bangladesh relation through his own experience and talked about pre as well as post war Bangladesh relationship. Besides this, security interests of India in the region and many ups and down were discussed among the two states.

The edited works of (Haider, 2005), discuss about the common interest and solution to the issues of illegal migration, unbalanced trade, porous border etc. Thus, to resolve the contentious issues requires active cooperation among the two states. In this article (Pant, 2007) discussed the various factors shaping the relation and certain converging as well as diverging issues between Indo-Bangladesh. There is already a trust deficit among the two states and constructive steps needs to be taken to improve the relation with its neighbours. In this edited book (Pattanaik, 2012), touches upon the India's indispensable role in the genesis of Bangladesh and its political discourse. The study not only talks about problems but also have suggested certain measures to carry bilateral relationship forward.

In this research article (Majumdar, 2014), deliberated about geopolitical discourse between the Indo-Bangladesh intertwined in cooperation as well as in discord. The study analyses the patterns of relationship among the two states in a mixed way of cooperation as well as hostility, arising with the change of regimes in Bangladesh, mistrust persists there. The present article by (Mantoo, 2015), discusses about the agreements, unresolved issues, and the bilateral relation of Indo-Bangladesh through changed regimes. The research article of (Karim, 2015), talked about the Indo-Bangladesh relations that have surged fast in several sectors in recent times. Both the states tried amicably to solve boundary demarcation on land, river and in the Bay of Bengal. Not only this, India-Bangladesh have made significant progress on several issues that has gained momentum amongst the South Asian neighbours. In this article (Gupta, 2018), discuss the India-Bangladesh relations having immense potential and new models of cooperation are also being discussed. There exist positive relations between the two states that can transform the benefit to the region.

Results and Discussion

Political and Economic Engagement

The coming into power of Narendra Modi government was required of possibilities and opportunities to engage India with the rest of the world. The greatest possible reason before the government was to boost India's economic strength and to have more resources for domestic as well as external activities. The Narendra Modi government started its foreign policy by inviting the leaders

from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for the swearing in ceremony during in 2014, putting forth the Neighborhood First Policy (NFP) in its priority list (Madan, 2014). In the words of an eminent scholar Brahma Chellaney, the very first idea of Modi government appears to reinvent India as more competent, confident, and secure nation by emphasizing on foundations of a strong domestic policy (Chellaney, 2014). The very first visit of Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on 6th June 2015 marked the new milestones between the two nations. As many as 22 agreements were signed and renewed on multi-layered subjects like security, connectivity, power, and trade etc. The sincerity of India's NFP reflected through ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) that emerged as significant in India-Bangladesh relations during Narendra Modi's regime besides the cooperation and connectivity between the two states (Quader, 2019). Above and beyond, the official visit of PM Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi in April 2017 was marked by her contribution of strengthening the bilateral relations among India-Bangladesh by signing various agreements on energy cooperation and connectivity related issues. In addition to this, the 3rd September 2014 and 4th October 2017, India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meetings were held at foreign minister's level in fostering bilateral relation. Whereby, both the delegates emphasized the common issues of energy, security, connectivity, development, and cooperation were discussed and highlighted (Ibid, 2019).

It was Hasina's visit in 2017 that was followed by PM Modi's visit to Bangladesh in 2021, putting India-Bangladesh ties on a stronger footing and closer engagement in trade, connectivity and people-to-people ties. Whereas, the positive relations go back to Hasina's coming into power in 2009. Her unilateral decision to shut down terror training camps and to hand over more than 20 wanted criminals and terror suspects to India. New Delhi is equally sensitive to Dhaka's concerns, particularly on deporting Rohingya refugees (The Editorial 2022). The governments of India and Bangladesh have strengthened its cultural ties by opting the exchange programme among them. The significant development been seen in beginning of additional trip by Maitree express between Kolkata -Dhaka since February 2020. Besides this, border haat (i.e., open air market) to strengthen the bilateral relations to deepen the people to people contact among the two states were started.

Economic Engagement

In the words of an Eminent Bangladeshi journalist and author Syed Badrul Ahsan, when the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power, many believed that ties between the two countries would take a downturn. However, he said the relations between the Awami League and the Modi government have been excellent. The Bangladesh relations with India are on an upward swing. India's exports are \$14 billion to us but ours are lesser (Kumar, 2023). The constructive cooperation in the relationship between India and Bangladesh was seen during the pandemic period as well.

Though, trade and commerce were severely affected but New Delhi continued to work on development projects during the pandemic period. It was in June 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Agreement, that allows goods to move by sea from Kolkata in West Bengal to the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh and reached to certain point of understanding among them in relation to coastal management and Indo-Bangladesh Coastal Shipment Agreement, signed in 2018 leading to the cargo movement in July 2020 (Datta, 2020, 183-190). On 21st January 2021, after supply of the vaccine doses to Dacca, the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, tweeted "Touchdown in Dhaka: Vaccine Maitri (friendship) reaffirms the highest priority by India to relations with Bangladesh" (Shukla, 2020, 245-253).

India and Bangladesh are placed to develop new areas of cooperation in research development. During the pandemic times, Corona vaccination drive in Bangladesh was done due to India's supply of two million free doses to fight the pandemic decisively (Datta, 2020, 183-190). Not only

this, cooperation and educational training for human resource development is an important aspect of Indo-Bangladesh relations. In this regards, Indian government has launched a program for providing training to civil servants, law enforcement officers in Bangladesh (Kashem and Islam, 2016, 250-267).

Contestations

Though, India-Bangladesh has already signed the historic sharing of Ganga water treaty in 12th December 1996. However, in recent years the issue concerning is of sharing the Teesta River water that is still unresolved between the two states. It needs to be applauded, the sincere efforts being made by the Modi government at centre but certain delays by the West Bengal government. There is a serious attempt being made by New Delhi to resolve the Teesta River dispute between the two states. Besides this, the issues of non-tariff barriers, power plant issue, Rohingya refugee issue to a lesser extent has caused the discontent among the two states. The illegal migration from Bangladesh has continuously persistent since its creation. This has brought the political turmoil in the states in India receiving the illegal migrants. Thus, not only leading to the conflict but also changing the demographic position, competition over resources became deeper. The issue of illegal migrants has brought the securitization of the borders and loss of control of the New Delhi over its borders, posing challenge to its sovereignty. The stand of Narendra Modi government is very much clear on illegal migrants to be sent back to their homeland. The major issue concerning illegal migration is the national security and complex demographic, socio-economic and cultural change of natives by the illegal migrants. It is a serious concern and implications on between the Indo-Bangladesh relations (Das, 2016, 114-116). The post-Sheikh Hasina period is facing a new challenge in the India-Bangladesh relationship due to less pro-India government and engagement of Bangladesh with regional powers like China, Pakistan to reduce the reliance on India. However, Hasina's exit is marking a significant shift in India-Bangladesh relations.

Conclusion

The study tried to provide a brief overview of the Indo -Bangladesh ties during in the Narendra Modi government. Despite of all this, India-Bangladesh relationship has scaled new heights through peaceful resolution of the long-standing maritime dispute and the ratification of the historic LBA, as well as regional economic integration among the two states. Besides this, few major regional challenges of illegal migration of Bangladeshi, Rohingya's and of lesser extent of disputes lie water disputes, non-tariff issues etc. needs to be addressed judiciously. Finally, India needs to prioritize its relations with Bangladesh. Therefore, India should take the lead forward to have free and open dialogue to serve the opportunities by the blue economy of Bay of Bengal as well as challenges to eradicate radicalization in Bangladesh that will serve the long-term goals of New Delhi. Besides, post-Hasina's exit Delhi needs to make sure of any significant shift and deterioration in view of its old ties. Notably, India should adapt its diplomatic approach to strengthen its economic engagement and to maintain strategic persistence to ensure constant and cooperative relation with Bangladesh in the longer run.

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