

India-Bangladesh Friendship: Strengthened, but a Long Way to Go

By Rupak Bhattacharjee

The year 2015 had been incredible for the India-Bangladesh relations. The two South Asian neighbours achieved breakthroughs in many areas of bilateral relations, including implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), granting of transit facilities to India's isolated North Eastern states, broadening of cooperation in the energy sector, expansion of economic and security cooperation, increase of bilateral trade and signing of several agreements especially up gradation of cross-border connectivity and opening of new bus routes.

India's bilateral engagement with Bangladesh has broadened and deepened ever since Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina returned to power in January 2009. Bangladesh holds key to India's "Act East" foreign policy plank due to its strategic location and resource potential. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government is aware of the importance of this eastern neighbour of India and it began calibrating the bilateral relations immediately after assuming power in May 2014.

It picked up the threads of India's multi-faceted ties with Bangladesh from where they were left by the previous United Progressive Alliance government. Bangladesh always expects more from its bigger neighbour. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a two-day visit to Dhaka in June 2015 and tried to fulfill many aspirations of the people of Bangladesh.

Modi's Dhaka Visit

Modi's ground breaking visit to Dhaka on June 6-7 took the India-Bangladesh ties to a new height. Both the sides inked as many as 22 agreements related to road, railways, waterways, business, security, trade, infrastructure, communication, science and technology and cultural cooperation during the Indian premier's stay in the Bangladesh capital. He held wide-ranging talks with Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina covering the entire gamut of ties and exchanged ideas with her to strengthen them further.

Boosting trade and connectivity especially people-to-people relations was the focus of Modi's visit, while Dhaka attached priority to bilateral issues like sharing of Teesta water, killing of Bangladeshi nationals along the international border, trade imbalance and cooperation in the power sector. Barring the intractable Teesta problem, Modi's visit infused a new momentum to the bilateral ties and Bangladesh's policy makers, academics and media acknowledged his positive intent.

Implementation of the LBA

After a gap of 41 years, the Indian Parliament finally ratified the LBA on May 7, 2015. Both the houses of the Parliament displayed rare unanimity in passing the Constitution (119th Amendment) Bill to settle the lingering border dispute with Bangladesh. The LBA came into effect on July 31, 2015 delineating the land boundary dividing the two neighbours. One of the most significant aspects of the operationalisation of the LBA was peaceful transfer of 162 enclaves—many of them were adversely possessed. India's Ministry of External Affairs described July 31 as a "historic day" for both India and Bangladesh as "it marks the resolution of a complex issue that has lingered since independence".

The implementation of the LBA was a huge relief for more than 51,000 "stateless" enclave dwellers. They had the option of choosing citizenship of either country. As the LBA came into effect, the basic human rights of these people had been restored. Both the governments also undertook several measures for their proper rehabilitation. The two neighbouring nations fully cooperated with each other and the whole transfer process was completed in a friendly spirit. While speaking at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on September 30, 2015, Bangladesh premier Hasina referred to the Indo-Bangladesh pact on enclaves as an example for the world in solving problems.

Border Management

The operationalisation of the LBA would also facilitate effective management of the 4,096 km-long India-Bangladesh borders, the fifth largest land border in the world, plagued by smuggling, trafficking in arms, drugs and people, illegal immigration and many other illegal activities. During Modi's visit, New Delhi and Dhaka signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the prevention of human trafficking along the international border. The MoU seeks to prevent all forms of human trafficking especially that of women and children, and ensure speedy investigation and prosecution of traffickers and organised crime syndicates in either countries. A joint task force of India and Bangladesh would take coordinated action against individuals and agents involved in human trafficking.

In order to maintain peace, tranquility and contain transnational crimes along the border, secretary-level meetings and interactions between government functionaries and senior border guarding forces personnel are arranged regularly. New Delhi raised the problems of the influx of fake Indian currency, drug trafficking and illegal immigration during such meetings held in 2015 with Bangladesh and sought Dhaka's cooperation to combat these menaces.

India sent a 23-member delegation led by Border security Force (BSF) Director General (DG) DK Pathak to Dhaka for the bi-annual DG-level talks with Bangladesh counterpart—DG of Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) Major General Aziz Ahmed from December 22 to 27, 2015. Among other things, the

two sides discussed the modalities of stopping cattle smuggling along the international border—a constant source of friction between the two countries.

The killing of Bangladeshi nationals by the BSF in the border regions has emerged as another bone of contention in the bilateral relations. Despite New Delhi's pledge to Dhaka and its directives to the BSF personnel to bring down such incidents, the situation at the ground level did not improve much. In the recently-concluded BSF-BGB DG-level meeting, both the sides agreed to completely stop the border killing incidents and explored ways of enforcing strict security measures by the two sides to achieve this objective.

Cross-border Infrastructure and Connectivity

In 2015, India and Bangladesh made significant progress in enhancing cross-border connectivity and up grading transport infrastructure along the international boundary. The connectivity deals signed during Modi's visit included: Guwahati-Shillong-Dhaka and Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus routes; Kolkata-Khulna train service; coastal shipping between the two nations and use of Mongla and Chittagong ports. Besides, the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade was renewed for another five years. These connectivity deals are set to boost trade and investment between Bangladesh and India and accelerate the process of integrating economically-isolated and landlocked North Eastern region with the mainland.

India is currently engaged in the up gradation of the neighbouring country's transport infrastructure especially along the international border in Tripura which is virtually Bangladesh-locked. The cross-border connectivity projects undertaken in this region include: construction of a bridge over the Feni river to access Chittagong port, building a 15 km railway link between Agartala and Akhaura and a 70 km road from Sabroom in south Tripura to Chittagong port and renovation of Bangladesh's Ashuganj port. The Centre reviewed the progress of the work of these projects in 2015 and took necessary steps for their early completion.

Bangladesh also plays a crucial role in India's sub-regional connectivity projects that include Nepal and Bhutan. New Delhi and Dhaka finalised the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement during Modi's visit paving the way for regional economic integration in South Asia. Bangladesh stands to benefit hugely from such initiatives as the country is poised to emerge as South Asia's gateway to Southeast Asia.

Economic and Commercial Ties

Indo-Bangladesh commercial ties and economic cooperation had been expanded considerably over the last few years and Modi's June 2015 Dhaka sojourn added further impetus to them. Modi announced a fresh US \$ 2 billion soft loan to Bangladesh and assured quick implementation of the earlier line of credit \$ 800 and full disbursement of \$ 200 million. These loans are to be used for the up gradation of road, rail and port in Bangladesh.

The signing of a MoU on the development of ocean-based blue economy during Modi's visit opened a new avenue of economic cooperation between the two countries. The Bay of Bengal has enormous deposits of oil and gas and the peaceful delimitation of the Indo-Bangladesh maritime boundary by a landmark judgment of the UN tribunal in July 2014 has unlocked the floodgate of opportunities for increasing economic cooperation in the marine sector.

Bangladesh, which had been facing acute shortage of electricity for many years, also benefited from the June 2015 Bilateral Summit. Deals worth \$5.5 billion were signed between the Indian companies and Power Development Board of Bangladesh to set up 4,600-MW power plants in the neighbouring country. Responding to Dhaka's consistent demand, New Delhi agreed to provide 600-MW of power in the next two years by up grading transmission networks. Both the sides also finalised the modalities of supplying 100-MW power to Bangladesh from Tripura's Palatana Power Project in 2015.

Trade and investment between India and Bangladesh have increased considerably in recent years. Bangladesh has emerged as India's largest trading partner in South Asia. The present bilateral trade stands at \$ 6.5 billion but Bangladesh's exports to India accounts for meagre \$ 500 million. In their bids to minimise the persisting trade deficit, both the sides decided to take some steps, including creation of two Exclusive Economic Zones for India in Bangladesh during Modi's visit.

Security Cooperation

One noticeable aspect of the warm and friendly ties between India and Bangladesh has been the growing security cooperation. Both the sides face the common threat of terrorism and they have intensified their collaboration in the aftermath of the October 2014 Burdwan blast. With the implementation of the LBA, the two neighbouring nations could now formulate joint strategies to curb the problems like transnational crimes and cross-border movements of insurgents, criminals and foil the attempts of the jihadi forces to destabilise the sensitive border regions of West Bengal and North East. Hasina government's "zero-tolerance" policy to all forms of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation has been lauded by several foreign nations, including neighbouring India.

The interactions between the security forces of the two nations had been intensified during the last one year. Bangladesh Army Chief Lieutenant General ABM Shafiqul Huq visited India in September 2015 and held talks with Indian Army chief and government officials to strengthen security cooperation. Meanwhile, the border protection forces of the two nations, BSF and BGB, are making efforts to hold first ever joint exercises between the two sides in West Bengal's Sunderban—a crime-prone zone, in January next year. Dhaka also

seeks New Delhi to extradite some hardcore criminals and jihadi operatives who had been using Indian territory especially Bengal.

The political leaders of India and Bangladesh know fully well that close cooperation between the security and intelligence agencies of the two nations is essential to contain the insurgents and radical Islamic groups which often join hands to subvert the friendly bilateral relations. During the home secretary-level talks in Dhaka on November 17, 2015, both the countries agreed to share intelligence on terrorism and insurgency. India's Home Secretary Rajiv Mehrishi and his Bangladesh counterpart Mozammel Haque Khan also reviewed internal security and cross-border issues. Both the home secretary and BSF-BGB DG-level talks assume significance as they took place against the backdrop of the exchange of top United Liberation Front of Asom leader Anup Chetia to India and notorious criminal Noor Hossain to Bangladesh.

Another positive development in the bilateral ties is the expansion of maritime security cooperation in 2015. In April, coast guards of both the nations held a high-level meeting in Kolkata where several pressing issues, including containing maritime crimes and training of Bangladesh Coast Guard personnel were raised. Earlier on February 22-26, India's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral RK Dhowan undertook a visit to Bangladesh, while his Bangladesh counterpart Vice Admiral Muhammad Farid Habib paid a return visit to India on November 2-5. They discussed the maritime security challenges confronting the two navies and reviewed the existing cooperation between them. Bangladesh Navy sought greater collaboration with Indian Navy to deal with non-traditional threats like piracy and sea robbery and underscored the need for bolstering maritime security in the Bay of Bengal.

Understanding between Political Leadership

Bangladesh and India share a common history and their political leaders are familiar with each other's concerns and sensitivities. Hasina enjoys the goodwill of India due to her persistent and sincere efforts to address New Delhi's vital security concerns. A number of ministers from the NDA government repeatedly acknowledged Bangladesh government's full cooperation in tracking down religious extremists, anti-India insurgents and criminal elements. The Indian leaders have also expressed satisfaction over the prevailing warm ties between the two nations. President Pranab Mukherjee, who enjoys excellent rapport with the ruling Awami League, noted on November 19, 2015, that India attaches the highest importance to its relations with Bangladesh and their present bilateral relations are the "best ever since 1974".

The closeness of the current Indo-Bangladesh ties has also been reflected in the frequent meetings between the two prime ministers. Hasina met Modi on August 19, 2015, when she came to New Delhi to attend a funeral and observed that both the neighbouring nations would achieve "great things" if their markets could be tapped together. The two leaders got together again on September 30 in New

York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session and reviewed the progress in bilateral relations and discussed the ways to take them forward. They expressed happiness over the smooth implementation of the LBA. Hasina also reiterated Bangladesh's support for India's bid for a permanent seat in a reformed UN Security Council.

The Teesta Question

Amidst deepening of the Indo-Bangladesh ties one of the most important bilateral issues—sharing of the Teesta waters, has remained unresolved. New Delhi could not arrive at an understanding with Dhaka on the Teesta question as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had sought some more time. Water is a state subject and the Centre can not strike deal on the Teesta with Dhaka if Mamata does not give her consent to it. However, Bangladesh is a lower riparian country and India can not ignore the neighbouring country's concerns for long. The Teesta, which flows through the northern part of Bangladesh, has almost dried up threatening the livelihoods of 9.5 million people in five districts of Rangpur division.

Bangladesh's river experts claim that India is withdrawing a large volume of water through the Gazalboda Barrage to meet its irrigational needs. The Bangladesh government complained that the country had received only 232 cusecs of water at the barrage point on March 22, 2015—the lowest in the history. Bangladesh requires at least 4,500 cusecs of water for 60,500 hectares of cropland in northern districts. But Mamata is not ready to concede Bangladesh's demands as it may require her state to use less water. It appears that the populist chief minister is worried about the political fallout of signing a deal. She is unlikely to commit anything on the Teesta before the next assembly elections in May/June 2016.

People-to-people Relations

India and Bangladesh are bound by historical, religious, cultural, linguistic and kinship ties and people-to-people relations constitute a significant facet of the bilateral relations. Prime Minister Modi highlighted this aspect during his Dhaka visit and it had gone down well with the people of Bangladesh. It has been estimated that the Indian missions in the neighbouring country issue nearly half a million visas every year for the Bangladeshis.

They visit India for treatment, education, pilgrimage, business, tourism and many other purposes. However, they have been confronting lots of difficulties in obtaining visas. It has become a normal practice in Dhaka and elsewhere to resort to unfair means for procuring Indian visa as scores of syndicates are operating in the country.

A Policy Perspective

The number of Bangladeshi visitors has increased manifold over the years and New Delhi should attach priority to sort out the persisting visa-related problems

for expanding people-to-people contacts. After all, the Bangladeshi visitors immensely contribute to the local economy especially Bengal. India has to initiate steps to liberalise the visa formalities and dismantle the syndicates with the cooperation of the Bangladesh government.

The people of the two neighbouring countries have a passion for literature, art and music. Therefore both the sides should enhance cultural exchange programmes and interactions at various levels for a better understanding of each other. New Delhi could consider Dhaka's demand to allow operation of more Bangladeshi television channels in India. Bangladesh is really doing well in the cultural arena and many of its programmes are popular in Indian border states.

New Delhi also needs to do more to rectify the growing trade imbalance with Dhaka. A section of the Bangladeshi political elites perceives that the expansion of bilateral trade has only ended up benefiting India which has a bigger market. Dhaka's business community says there are enough scopes for increasing Bangladesh's export to India's North East given its geographical proximity and familiarity with the market. New Delhi must seize every opportunity to broaden its economic and commercial ties with this eastern neighbour and initiate concrete steps to achieve the goals envisaged in the ambitious "Act East" policy.

The foremost priority for the Indian leadership should be to expedite the process of reaching an amicable settlement of the vexed Teesta water sharing issue. Both the nations share 54 common rivers and Bangladesh's proposal of joint endeavours for optimal utilisation of the water resources at their disposal merit attention. An early and mutually-acceptable solution to the lingering Teesta question may bring back the euphoria of 1971 when the bonds between the two nations reached their pinnacle.

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