

INDIA-BANGLADESH BILATERAL RELATIONS: A STUDY OF POST-2014 SCENARIO

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Abstract

India-Bangladesh shares historical, geographical, cultural, social, and economic ties over civilization. India shares its 4094 km of land border with Bangladesh on three sides, the fourth side being open to the Bay of Bengal. However, despite some issues and challenges, both countries tried to make a strong relationship in the recent past. Now this article has tried to analyze the recent bilateral relations of India and Bangladesh since 2014 when Modi as a Prime Minister came to power in India and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. This article has very much emphasized the bilateral visits, agreements, initiatives, and more clearly positive sides of the relations and argued despite some issues and challenges of the relations, both countries have made strong relations as immediate neighbors in South Asia.

Keywords

Narendra Modi, Sheikh Hasina, LBA, Water Disputes, Bilateral Trade, Economic Assistance, Security.

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Introduction

India's Ministry of External Affairs annual reports (2022) claimed that India-Bangladesh shares historical, geographical, cultural, and socio-economic ties over civilizations. After the liberation of Bangladesh from West Pakistan (now Pakistan), Bangladesh started a strong relationship with its neighbor country India. However, India's role in the liberation movement of Bangladesh is immensely important. After the liberation, both countries signed the Peace and Friendship Treaty. Both countries shared a wonderful relationship until the assassination of Mujibur Rahaman. After that, the relations received many ups and downs trajectory till Narendra Modi's coming to power (Quader, 2019). The bilateral relations did not witness a smooth relationship. Domestic politics became one of the factors of this tragedy. However, this article has tried to discuss the history of Bangladesh and the role of India in Bangladesh's liberation and after that briefly discussed the bilateral relations till Modi's coming to power. The primary aim of the paper is to critically discuss the bilateral visits, agreements, cooperation in various areas, security issues, trade, and successes and challenges of the relations since 2014 just after Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power.

Bangladesh's Liberation and Role of India

Before going into the discussion, need to discuss the general history and liberation of Bangladesh and the role of India in Bangladesh's liberation. Bangladesh was a part of British India, which was divided into two separate countries namely India and Pakistan after the British left. The sovereign power of Pakistan covered the east and west sides of Independent India. Consequently, Pakistan has emerged as a sovereign country namely East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Present Bangladesh was recognized as East Pakistan while present Pakistan was as West Pakistan. But after two decades, the Pakistan General Election of 1970 changed the domestic politics of Pakistan. In the General Election, Awami League emerged as a single majority party in the Pakistan National Assembly with 167 seats out of 313, its leader was Mujibur Rahaman and on the other hand, PPP (Pakistan People's Party) whose leader was Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto became the second largest Parliamentary party. However, without handing power to Mujibur Rahaman, the Pakistani Army launched a brutal crackdown in Dhaka, targeting particularly students, Bengali police, and paramilitary forces. It was a brutal assault on East Pakistan's people under the leadership of Yahya Khan (Pakistan's President from 1969 to 1971). Consequently, it led to a full-scale war (Drong, 2016). During that period the peoples of East Pakistan also claimed that they belonged to different languages and cultures, they had no similarities with the peoples and cultures of West Pakistan. So separate

recognition of the peoples of East Pakistan became an important factor in their liberation aspirations. However, 'Mukti Bahini' was formed by the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. During this time India's charismatic leader, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced its full support to the peoples of East Pakistan for their liberation on 27th March 1971 by opening the Indian border and establishing refugee camps near Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and West Bengal. India's government's view was to provide a safe shelter for Bangladeshi refugees (Quader, 2019). The role of India, especially of military forces, was an indelible historical reality. When the Bangladeshi masses were assassinated by the Pakistani army, immediately India intervened and dispatched military forces to help the liberation combatants. The role of India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was vital for Bangladesh's liberation. Indira Gandhi decided to go on with the war but failed to get American support and sympathy for the Bengalis people. Finally, he signed a peace and friendship treaty and cooperation with the USSR. However, most of the political scientists argued that Indira Gandhi and her personal, political, and diplomatic initiatives were inseparable from the history of the country (Drong, 2016).

India-Bangladesh Relations after Bangladesh's Liberation

However, after the victory, India became the first country who recognize Bangladesh as a sovereign, separate, and independent state just after Bangladesh's liberation from West Pakistan. India immediately established its diplomatic relations in December 1971 (MEA, 2017). After that, both countries agreed to sign a long-standing treaty for their bilateral relations. India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh's Prime Minister Mujibur Rahaman signed a 25-year-long treaty of 'Friendship, Cooperation and Peace' on 19th March 1972, which began a new journey and made a special relationship. With the friendly vision, India had assisted Bangladesh by providing financial assistance for its post-reconstruction process. Some agreements, that were highly important for their relations, were signed by India and Bangladesh on water, connectivity, culture, science, and technology during the Mujibur era in Bangladesh. Over the years, both countries made significant progress in establishing a good bilateral tie. However, since then, the bilateral relations have not been on a straight and upward trajectory throughout. The special relations that the two countries shared irreversibly ruptured when Mujibur Rahaman was assassinated in 1975. After the assassination of Mujibur Rahaman, subsequent military dictators started to distance their country from India taking power in their hands (Bhattacharjee, 2020). The military government led by General Ziaur Rahaman took an anti-India stance as a 'trump card'. During his tenure, creating the Islamic and nationalist identity became one of the major features of domestic politics in

Bangladesh and India was projected as an imperialistic and opportunistic regional hegemon during the Ziaur Rahman and Ershad's regime. Even during the periods of 1991-1996 when Khaleda Zia- (BNP, a democratic party) came to power, there were no visible changes. But possibilities to strengthen the bilateral relations came when the Awami League returned to power after almost two decades in Bangladesh. After returning to power AL signed with India the Ganges water-sharing treaty for thirty years. However, during the second tenure of BNP (2001-2006) Indo-Bangladesh relations became weak. One of the important reasons was that the BJP in India was vociferous about the migration issues during its election campaign in 1998. However, India-Bangladesh close connections began to restart when Man Mohan Singh in India and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh came into power. Several protocols including the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) were signed during the visits of Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in 2011. Although the complexities of India's domestic politics, especially from the opposition party BJP massively opposed the LBA, it did not come into force. Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee also refused to approve the Teesta water sharing. Consequently, Man Mohan Singh and his government failed to strengthen the bilateral relations (Quader, 2019).

An Overview of India's Relations with Bangladesh during the Modi Era

In the 2014 General election, Narendra Modi-led BJP came to power in India, and on the other hand, Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League again came to power in Bangladesh in the same year. The Premiership of Narendra Modi started on 26th May 2014 as the 14th Prime Minister of India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi after coming to power, emphasized on neighborhood-first policy to make wonderful and synergetic relations with its South Asian neighbors in various areas such as economy, science, technology, research, education, etc. Modi's neighborhood-first policy is also seen as a manifestation of Modi's vision of building *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakan* (the world as one family). However, we need to mention one of the important comments on foreign policy approaches made by C. Raja Mohan, an Indian foreign policy analyst is that "*without enduring primacy in one's neighborhood, no nation can become a credible power at the global stage*". However, it is a core component of India's foreign policy. Modi after coming to power has very well comprehended the importance of cultivating and sustaining relations with its neighboring countries (Srivastava, 2022). According to Modi, "We will deepen regional connectivity and cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal". Modi emphasized the neighborhood-first policy which he saw as an integral part of Indian foreign policy. Consequently, having the geopolitical significance of Bangladesh and as a part of this neighborhood-first policy, Prime Minister Narendra

Modi paid 2 days of visits to Bangladesh on 6-7 June 2015. It has a big significance as the visit has generated a great deal of hope for a new and dynamic shift in the bilateral relations of India-Bangladesh. This visit provided a new turn in the history of bilateral relations of India-Bangladesh (Sahay, 2015). India's Ministry of External Affairs of 2015-16, claimed that the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dhaka has drawn the two countries closer together. The role of both countries in strengthening the bilateral cooperation on all issues including settlement of land boundary issues, infrastructure development, connectivity, sub-regional cooperation, security, and people-to-people exchange, etc. is immensely important (MEA, 2015-16). Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister of India in the fourth India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative meeting, argued that India, following the policy of neighboring first and Bangladesh is foremost among the neighbors. Bangladesh also has been recognized as an 'important neighbor' by Ajit Doval, the National Security Advisor (Quader, 2019). However, after assuming the charge, Sushma Swaraj, External Minister of India, and V. K Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs, paid Bangladesh on 25-27 June and 24 August 2014 respectively. As former Indian President Pranab Mukherjee visited Bangladesh in March 2013, Bangladesh President Md Abdul Hamid visited India in December 2014. It was Bangladesh's first ceremonial Head of State visit to India just after the 42-year gap. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India from April 7-10, 2017 at the invitation of Narendra Modi. Before this, she also paid a visit to India to participate in the BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit on 16-17 October 2016 (MEA, 2017). However, apart from the official engagement to New Delhi, Sheikh Hasina also visited places of historical and cultural importance located in India. The visit signaled a remarkable movement in the bilateral relations of the two countries. It was nearly 7 years of Hasina's trip to India and it was her first time visiting India after Modi came to Power in India. During her visit to India, several MoUs have been signed in various areas including capacity building, defense, technologies, high technology areas of civil nuclear energy, space, information technology, etc. Modi assured India's commitment and continuing efforts to solve the Teesta River water-sharing issue to the Bangladeshi People, which was opposed by the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee. Modi's statement was "*I firmly believe that it is only my government and Excellency Sheikh Hasina, your government, that can and will find an early solution to Teesta water sharing*". (Chaudhury, 09 April 2017). Not only these, two Prime Ministers also presided over a commemorative ceremony in honor of Indian martyrs of liberation from the war of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has upheld or publicly recognized first time the role and contribution of the

Indian government people, and armed forces to the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 (Verma, 2019).

After a few months of Modi's coming to power for a second term in India, Sheikh Hasina visited India from 3 to 6 October 2019. During the visit, Sheikh Hasina participated in the India Economic Forum organized by the World Economic Forum in Delhi on 3 and 4 October. However, India-Bangladesh reviewed the state of the bilateral relationship and issued a long joint statement during her visit to India. Strategically the joint statement was very important for the India-Bangladesh relationship's future roadmap. Border security, management, win-win business partnership, boosting connectivity on land, skies, water, and cross-border energy cooperation as well as cultural cooperation were highlighted as the priority areas in the statement (Bhattacharjee, 2019). However, this visit would be analyzed in juxtaposition with Prime Minister Hasina's visit to China that preceded the visit.

However, during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on March 26-27, 2021 to attend Bangladesh's Golden Jubilee celebrations of Independence and the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, violence spread across the country in Bangladesh. Protesters attacked Hindu temples and trains in eastern Bangladesh. A dozen people have been injured in clashes between police and demonstrators in Bangladesh. Accusing the anti-Muslim sentiment of Modi in his own country this violence was organized by the protesters, who were mostly from the Hefazat group. Burning furniture and tires on the road and chanting anti-Modi slogans were one of the main features of this protest in Bangladesh. However, during this visit, Modi promised to give 1.2 million COVID-19 vaccine shots to Bangladesh. Although the Bangladesh government did not comment on the protests (28 April 2021, Aljazeera). Cultural relations also had been emphasized by both the countries during Modi's visit. Modi and Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the Bangabandhu-Bapu Digital Exhibition in Dhaka. The life and legacy of the two iconic leaders and the 50th anniversary of the India- Bangladesh relations were celebrated during the visit. The bilateral relations further had been emphasized by the visit of Sheikh Hasina to India in 2022 where seven MoUs were signed. In June 2022 to attract Bangladeshi talent, India launched a revamped version of the Bangladeshi Youth Delegation Campaign. Although to boost the common cultural linkage between India and Bangladesh, the role of the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre and the Indian Cultural Centre in Dhaka play is immensely important (MEA, 2022).

However, economically India during Hasina's visit to India in 2017, has announced to provide a 3rd line of credit worth US\$4.5 billion for the implementation of several projects in Bangladesh. The aims were the development of infrastructure,

creating new jobs, improving its economic growth, etc. However, civil nuclear energy cooperation added a new dimension to the relation of bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh (Kumar, 2017). Based on ‘Soft-Power’ India has provided financial assistance to its neighbor country to Bangladesh. Indian Government for the construction and development of schools, colleges, laboratories, and community centers. etc. Indian Government for the construction and development of schools, colleges, laboratories, and community centers. etc. assisted namely ‘Aid to Bangladesh’ to Bangladesh (MEA, 2017). Economic development has become a priority area between India and Bangladesh. Both countries committed to reviving the transport network in the pre-partition period and further integrating Eastern South Asia. Although, both the countries are part of BIMSTEC, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal regional framework (Pattanaik, 2022). India and Bangladesh both are members of SAARC. However, during the tenure of Prime Minister Modi economic development became one of the major agenda in his foreign policy. Now coming into the bilateral trade relations of India-Bangladesh basically in the Modi era. According to the MEA report-2022, India’s biggest trade partner in South Asia is Bangladesh while India is the second biggest trade partner of Bangladesh in Asia. India has been the largest export destination of Bangladesh in Asia.

India’s Trade with Bangladesh in US\$ Million from 2013-2014 to 2021-2022

Years	Imports	Exports	Total Trade
2013-2014	484.34	6,166.93	6,651.27
2014-2015	621.37	6,451.47	7,072.84
2015-2016	727.15	6,034.94	6,762.09
2016-2017	701.68	6,820.11	7,521.79
2017-2018	685.65	8,614.35	9,300
2018-2019	1,044.80	9,210.06	10,254.86
2019-2020	1,264.74	8,200.75	9465.49
2020-2021	1,091.66	9,691.56	10,783.22
2021-2022	1,977.93	16,156.37	18,134.3

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Commerce

In the year 2021-2022, India’s exports to Bangladesh share 3.8285 percent of its total trade in the world. During the year India’s exports to Bangladesh witnessed 66.71 percent growth than its previous years. On the other hand, 21.05 percent growth took place in India’s imports from Bangladesh during 2019-2020 than its

previous years. During this year India shares its import from Bangladesh 0.2664 percent of India's total imports from the World while it decreased 16.69 percent of India's imports from Bangladesh during 2020-2021 than its previous year (Government of India, Ministry of Commerce. n. d).

Another area of India-Bangladesh's bilateral relations is establishing the 'Border Haats' to increase the trade volume and people-to-people contact. A senior official of the Indian foreign ministry stated that "*India and Bangladesh are considering the establishment of 16 new border haats to increase the trade volume*". According to the source, these new border haats will be located in Mizoram and West Bengal, and their establishment is now under discussion. According to a senior diplomat Smita Pant, "*the new border haats may improve marketing and economic opportunity for border communities while reducing informal trade across borders*". However, both countries have eight operational haats located across several northeastern Indian States like Tripura and Meghalaya (The Business Standard, 17 August 2023). The first Border Haat was inaugurated in 2011 in the West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya at Kalaichar and Kurigram in Bangladesh. However, border haats mainly will contribute to the bonding of people to people to contact between the peoples of the borderland of India and Bangladesh. It is essential in cementing ties between the two neighbors (News Services Division, 07 May 2023).

Security has become another important area of cooperation in bilateral relations. Both countries are against terrorism. During the visits of Hasina to India in 2017, Modi appreciated the efforts that had been made to contain the Bangladeshi religious extremism and radicalism, which are major concerns for India. However, cooperation with Bangladesh on security has been a major priority of the Indian Government. Establishing peace and security in the northeastern states of India has been a major concern for India. During Zia's regime, Bangladesh became a sanctuary of Indian insurgents and terrorist groups who, with the support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, acted against India. After suffering a series of terrorist attacks, Sheikh Hasina and her government realized that it would be necessary to work with India against terrorists and their organizations. Consequently, Hasina launched a heavy crackdown on anti-India groups and handed over 20 most wanted terrorists to India. The "Bharat-Bangladesh Moitree-Chirojeebi Hok" (Long live the India-Bangladesh friendship) became an important slogan of India-Bangladesh (Verma, 2019).

Promoting defense ties with Bangladesh was India's strategic foreign policy as China has been continuing its thriving footprint on India's neighboring countries. As China's relationship with Bangladesh had been promoted from 'Comprehensive Partnership Cooperation' to 'Strategic Partnership Cooperation', Modi was forced

to send the Defense Minister of India to Bangladesh to build defense ties between the two countries. India during Hasina's visit to India in 2017, had also provided US\$500 Million to Bangladesh to purchase military hardware (Kumar, 2017).

The power sector cooperation has become one of the hallmarks of India-Bangladesh relations. According to the report of India's Ministry of External Affairs (2017) Bangladesh has imported about 660 MW of power from India. (MEA, 2017). Bangladesh imported 1160 MW of power according to the annual reports of India's Ministry of External Affairs- 2022. Energy cooperation between India and Bangladesh has also seen considerable progress.

The Success of the Modi Regime

Ratification of the 'Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 2015, was one of the major successes of the Modi regime. It has facilitated the transfer of 111 enclaves adding up to 17,160.63 acres from India to Bangladesh. Conversely, India received 51 enclaves adding up to 7,110.02 acres from Bangladesh (Banerjee, Chaudhury, and Guha, 2017). The Land Boundary Agreement was drafted in 1974 but after coming to power of Modi, India approved the agreement by the 100th Constitutional Amendment, consequently after a long time the bilateral relations took a new turn (MEA Annual Report 2015-2016). However, in 2011, between Man Mohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina a Protocol was signed to maintain the status quo in addressing the issues of adverse possessions of land. However, due to the disagreement of the opposition party, mainly the BJP in the Indian Parliament it failed to come into force. During Modi's tenure, a ratification bill was passed by both houses of parliament, first in Rajya Sabha and then in Lok Sabha. However, three issues have been resolved by the ratification of LBA, 1. the exchange of 162 enclaves 2. the demarcation of a 6.5 km new boundary 3. the exchange of adverse possessions of each other's territories (Quader, 2019).

The maritime boundary was a long-standing issue between India and Bangladesh. In 2014, the Permanent Court of Arbitration provided its verdict as Bangladesh went to the court for the solution of the maritime boundary issue in 2009. After hearing the logic of the arguments of India and Bangladesh in 2013, the Court officially conveyed the result to both parties in 2014 (Rashid, 2014). However, the PCA accepted the line of argument of Bangladesh and gave the judgment in favor of Bangladesh as the verdict provides 19,467 sq km of the total 25,602 sq km sea area which was 76 percent and leaving 6,135 sq km which is 24 percent to India. The judgment also allows Bangladesh a 200-mile exclusive economic zone, the continental shelf beyond the 200-mile economic zone, and access to the open sea, thus preventing it from turning into a 'sea-locked country' (Rashid, 2014). However,

the decision of PCA was welcomed by India, and reportedly said that the judgment would further enhance the goodwill between India and Bangladesh by putting an end to a long-standing issue.

Issues

First of all, the detrimental trade was a big issue, which affected the relationship. Bangladesh has a large trade deficit and a large volume of informal trade with India across the land border. The deficit narrowed for the first time in the fiscal year of 2005-2006. Now India has become the largest single source of its imports. However, there is no sign to reduce the gap. Illegal and informal trade from India to Bangladesh is another challenge. Water dispute is another area that is a major constraint of bilateral relations. India and Bangladesh share 54 transboundary rivers but there is no water-sharing treaty except the operational 'Ganga Water Sharing Treaty' (1996). In recent times the Teesta-river water sharing dispute has deteriorated the relations to an unprecedented level. Prime Minister Modi made an honest attempt at resolving the dispute but it was not honored by West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Rampal Power Plant, Rohingya issue, alleged illegal migration of Bangladesh to India, and border killing are major challenges in the India-Bangladesh relations (Quader, 2019).

Conclusion

Post- 2014 scenario the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations received new healthy relations. As the immediate neighbors of each other, India and Bangladesh shared a friendly relationship in South Asia. The relationship would be outstanding if the bilateral issues were solved. The prediction is that as Modi and Sheikh Hasina have been maintaining a strong relationship, the bilateral issues will be solved shortly. Another piece of advice to the Government of India is to be concerned about the Chinese influencing Bangladesh policy, which is now a big headache for India.

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