

Understanding the Evolving Bangladesh- India Relationship: Key Factors and their Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's relationship with India is multifaceted, encompassing ideological, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. Initially, the bond was strong, fueled by India's significant role in Bangladesh's historic liberation war, creating a foundation of expectation and hope. However, despite the solidarity during the liberation struggle, the relationship faced challenges stemming from Bangladesh's nation and state-building efforts. India's policy towards Bangladesh also struggled to transcend the political party lines within Bangladesh. Various bilateral issues continued to strain the relationship.

Since 2009, Indo-Bangladesh relations appeared to be back on track, but recent regime changes have placed the relationship at a crossroads, making the honeymoon period of the last 15 years (2009-2024) seem distant. Key factors such as trade, transit, water sharing, security, and border management are increasingly driving the two countries apart, with these determinants becoming more interdependent. Identifying and addressing these key determinants is crucial for a sustainable bilateral relationship. Without addressing these concerns, a lasting and stable relationship will remain elusive.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh achieved its independence from Pakistan as a result of the great Liberation War of 1971. India initially provided unwavering support to the Bengali Freedom Fighters and later formed a joint military command to deliver a decisive blow to the Pakistani occupants. India's role in the birth of Bangladesh is well-recognized and appreciated. However, within a few years, this relationship began to sour. The remarkable and historic achievement of 1971 failed to fully deliver the expected outcomes, possibly due to a lack of alertness, premature euphoria, or a misreading of the defeated forces' sentiments. Looking back over the last 40 years, the relationship has often been a source of disappointment and frustration for the people of both countries. This raises the question, "What went wrong? Why have India and Bangladesh become estranged and distant?"

Over the years, Bangladesh and India have encountered numerous points of contention. Political parties in both nations have often hesitated to pursue reconciliation, deterred by lukewarm responses from their counterparts and the potential for domestic backlash. This reluctance has prolonged and deepened their disagreements. Critics have raised questions about the costs and mutual benefits of their relationship since its inception. Did India's role in facilitating Bangladesh's independence inadvertently create a new challenge along its border, adding to its economic burden? For Bangladesh, did independence merely replace one economic dependency with another? Furthermore, could India have foreseen the need to construct thousands of kilometers of barbed wire to curb migration, despite having welcomed millions of Bangladeshi refugees during the 1971 crisis?

These questions have emerged as the relationship between the two countries has fluctuated from bad to worse, to tolerable, to smooth, and everything in between. Unfortunately, it has never fully matured. There was a significant transformation in the state of the relationship after the immediate past government in Bangladesh assumed power in 2009. However, with the fall of the last regime, the relationship seemed to be at a crossroads and going through a critical period. Despite terming the relationship prior to August 5, 2024, a 'Golden Chapter,' it quickly deteriorated. Initially, major political stakeholders engaged in propaganda and counter-propaganda campaigns. Now, the media and various quarters in both countries are blaming each other for the sudden decline

in the relationship.

This article aims to explore the dynamics of India-Bangladesh relations and identify the major factors affecting the relationship. By understanding these elements, we can gain insights into the complexities of the relationship and the challenges that need to be addressed for a more harmonious future.

Historical Background of the Relationship

The relationship between Bangladesh and India is multi-dimensional, encompassing ideological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. Both nations were once part of British India, which was under British colonial rule for nearly two centuries. Following World War II, British India was partitioned along religious lines, leading to the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947. As a result, Pakistan was formed as a Muslim-majority state, consisting of two geographically separated regions: West Pakistan (modern-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh), with India situated in between.

The two parts of Pakistan—East and West—had far more differences than similarities. While East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was predominantly Bengali speaking with a distinct culture, West Pakistan was home to a diverse mix of ethnicities and languages. Despite these differences, both regions were united by the ideological framework of Pakistan. Over time, tensions between East and West Pakistan grew, particularly regarding the political and economic dominance of West Pakistan. As dissatisfaction with the West Pakistani government mounted in East Pakistan, India, with its cultural and historical ties to the Bengali people, expressed solidarity with the Bengali independence movement. This support was not just ideological, but also political, as India had long-standing tensions with Pakistan. By 1971, after three wars between the two nations, India acted decisively to support the creation of Bangladesh. India's military intervention, alongside diplomatic and material support for the Mukti Bahini, played a key role in Bangladesh's birth, and in many ways, India can be seen as the "midwife" of Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

Factors Affecting the Relationship

The advantages of having good relationship with India cannot be over emphasized. Bangladesh cannot afford to have bad relationship with India, especially on whom she depends so much, beginning from rice to onions, to yarn and even water. Likewise, Bangladesh's importance for India's security and prosperity cannot be overestimated. However, this interdependence should not be looked at as a weakness; rather, it should be considered as strength. If Bangladesh depends on India for import, India also depends on Bangladesh as a destination for export. However, the relationship between the two has moved through a topsy-turvy path. In the last 54 years, this relation has been determined by numbers of factors, which are discussed below:

Bangladesh's Foreign Policy vis-a-vis India's Neighbourhood Policy

India's policies towards Bangladesh can be studied within the broad parameters of its neighbourhood policy. Smurti states, the basic objective of such policies can be identified as: (i) India's desire to see a friendly, secular and democratic regime in Bangladesh; (ii) to ensure that, it does not pose any security challenge to India; (iii) to seek trade and transit for its North East (NE) region or, at least, have an integrated approach to economic development; (iv) to adopt a bilateral approach to resolve problems between the two countries. These four steps have influenced India's Bangladesh policy in a substantive manner¹. Unlike Pakistan, India has consistently aspired to become a regional superpower through its military and economic strength. In its pursuit of dominance, India views Pakistan and China as significant obstacles. This apparent preoccupation with these two countries often overshadows the importance of Bangladesh in India's strategic considerations.

The foreign policy of Bangladesh, like that of any other state is also primarily a projection of the country's socio-economic and political compulsions in the international arena. Being the largest neighbour, India always

¹ Smurti S Pattanaik. (2011). India's Neighbourhood Policy: Perceptions from Bangladesh. Strategic Analysis, 35:1, P. 73

occupies the centre stage of Bangladesh's foreign policy. India's failure to assess or evaluate the political importance of Bangladesh is proverbial. Bangladesh had been very critical of India's lackadaisical attitude to her. It often appears that for India, Bangladesh is more of an area of concern and not a positive partner for mutual benefit and development. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been perceived more as a nuisance, as a source of militancy, shelter for insurgents and illegal immigrants by some quarters in India.

India's relationships with its neighbouring countries are fraught with challenges. Sharing borders with seven nations, India faces varying degrees of tension with each. Nepal remains discontented over the Kalapani-Lipulekh issue of 2019, and the unofficial blockade of 2015 has left lasting resentment among its citizens. Relations with Sri Lanka are shaped by the Tamil issue, China's growing influence, and accusations of Indian interference in Sri Lankan politics. In the Maldives, the current president, elected in 2023 on an "India Out" platform, has strained ties further by prompting the withdrawal of Indian soldiers stationed there. The animosity between India and Pakistan is well-known, with mutual accusations of terrorism sponsorship. However, the presence of nuclear weapons has so far prevented an all-out war.

India's neighbour Myanmar grapples with internal conflicts, the spillover of which poses significant concerns for India. Relations with Afghanistan are complex and unpredictable. While India has not recognized the Taliban regime, the Taliban has occasionally shown interest in engaging with India, especially when tensions with Pakistan arise. India and China, both vying for dominance in the Indian Ocean Region, have a strained relationship. This reached a low point in 2020 when their armies clashed in a physical altercation. On many geopolitical fronts, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region, the two nations often find themselves at odds. India has traditionally maintained a comfortable and strong relationship with Bhutan. However, the increasing influence of China in Bhutan's affairs has become a point of concern for India.

India's foreign policy has traditionally been centered around its two large neighbors, Pakistan and China, due to security concerns and geopolitical competition. The Kashmir issue and tensions with Pakistan have long shaped India's policy, while the growing influence of China in South Asia is becoming increasingly important. As a result, smaller neighbors like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan sometimes feel sidelined in India's foreign policy priorities. While India has strong ties with these countries, there is a perception that the focus on China and Pakistan has led to a certain degree of neglect of smaller neighbors. Indian policymakers should recognize that fostering regional prosperity through cooperation could help demonstrate that India's rise is an opportunity for its neighbors, rather than a source of threat.

Fractured Nature of Polity and Society in Bangladesh

The political culture of Bangladesh is marked by confrontation. As Smurti says, problem with the two major parties in Bangladesh is that, they do not have any strong socio-economic programmes or foreign policy goals. Each move is calculated through a populist barometer and the perceived political mileage². Public perception suggests that one political party in Bangladesh is overly friendly towards India, while the other adopts a strongly anti-India stance. India-Bangladesh relations have experienced cyclical highs and lows, often influenced by the changing governments in Dhaka and New Delhi. This inconsistent political landscape does not benefit Bangladesh. Many think tanks believe that the two major political parties in Bangladesh lack a unified approach to dealing with India on critical issues such as water sharing, transit, trade, and NE insurgents. The absence of consensus, particularly on water sharing, has allowed India to take unilateral actions. Sometimes, India appears to negotiate treaties with specific political parties rather than with Bangladesh as a whole.

From January 2009 to August 2024, Bangladesh-India relations reached new heights. Due to the positive attitude displayed by the Bangladeshi authorities, India secured most decisions in their favour. Bangladesh addressed nearly all pending issues from the Indian side, including critical matters of transit and security. Additionally, India expanded its economic interests in ways that primarily benefited them. Conversely, Bangladesh had

² Smurti S Pattanaik. (2005). Internal Political Dynamics and Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Towards India. Strategic Analysis, 29:3, P. 413

significant expectations from India.

Despite addressing most concerns related to India over the past 15 years (2009-2024), India has not reciprocated to the same extent. The Teesta water treaty remains elusive, border killings have not ceased, and Bangladesh has not received the expected support on many issues. Consequently, the people of Bangladesh have grown frustrated, blaming both the regime in power and the Indian authorities.

Smurti says, India's participation in the liberation war, and its latter policies towards Bangladesh, did not converge. The public perception in Bangladesh is that, India, as a bigger country, should be giving more concessions to Bangladesh; since, it argues that it supported the war on humanitarian and political grounds. India's insistence on transit, permission to use the Chittagong Port, perceived unwillingness to correct trade imbalances, and the perceived 'unfair' deal on the Ganges water sharing, have all attributed to India's intention to exploit Bangladesh and its 'real' purpose in participating in the liberation war³.

Equitable Share of Water

One of the major irritants in the relationship has been the perennial debate over the 54 common rivers, running between Bangladesh and India. If one single issue that has degraded India in Bangladesh to the optimum, is Farakka. Because of Farakka, Bangladesh has suffered to the extreme; even India is not benefited out of it. It is widely believed prior to the construction of Farakka, anti-Indianism was a peripheral phenomenon in Bangladesh. However, once the impact of Farakka had started becoming evident, this anti-Indianism became far more popular and to some extent, turned into an aspect of mainstream politics. By building Farakka, India have decimated the interest of Bangladesh so much, that the relationship turned into an extreme bitter one.

Subsequently, India undertook more projects on the common rivers; namely, river linking project, Tipaimukh Dam and Gazaldoba Barrage, etc. These projects have been an epitome of political manipulation, using scientific principles, to interfere with natural laws. Both Gazaldoba and Tipaimukh, have been constructed or planned to deprive Bangladesh of an equitable share of water. Muchkund suggests, anything, which amounts to denial of this right would be perceived by the Bangladeshis, as an assault on their sovereignty and as an example of India's "hegemony," "high-handedness," "big brotherly attitude" and "a desire to dominate"⁴. The sharing of the river waters, therefore, is a highly emotive issue for the policy makers, people and media in Bangladesh.

Following the fall of the previous regime, the people of Bangladesh began voicing their concerns over the unilateral withdrawal of waters from shared rivers. Bangladesh's efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of the Teesta river's withdrawal through a Chinese project faced resistance from India, citing security concerns due to the project's proximity to the Siliguri Corridor. Consequently, significant areas in northern Bangladesh are facing desertification challenges, as India neither shares an equitable portion of water nor removes objections to the Chinese alternatives. This has led to growing impatience among the people of Bangladesh regarding the deprivation of their rightful share of water from common rivers.

Even the Ganges Water Treaty, which was signed on December 12, 1996, failed to meet the expectation of the common people of Bangladesh. It has been alleged frequently that the Indian side is not interested to even share the amount that has been mentioned in the treaty. As a result, Bangladesh side does not seem to be over enthusiastic to the renewal of the treaty, once it gets expired in 2026. Deprivation of the water right has got tremendous effect in the minds of the common people of Bangladesh, who believes that it is the high-handedness of India, which is inhibiting them to provide Bangladesh with the equitable share of water.

³ Smurti S Pattanaik. (2005). Internal Political Dynamics and Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Towards India. Strategic Analysis, 29:3, P. 415

⁴ Muchkund Dubey. (2011, October). Indo-Bangladesh Relations- failure of Leadership on the Indian Side. The Daily Star, Forum

Security Related Issues

India's concern for security is axiomatic and proverbial. As Smurti informs, India's sympathies with democratic forces and its aversion to extra-regional presence, are all geared to optimise its security interest, which is ensconced in its principal belief of a stable neighbourhood while engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship⁵. However, there is a realisation in India that on its own it can do little to enhance its security environment, and it needs the active cooperation and support of its neighbours. Anand believes, an increasing number of Bangladeshis have of late been getting involved in terror activities inside Indian territories⁶.

India found to be very serious as regards to the alleged existence of the terrorist camps of Indian Insurgent Groups (IIG) inside Bangladesh. This remained to be one of the debateable issues between the two countries until 2011. To curb insurgency and ensure political stability, India oft-repeatedly sought Dhaka's cooperation without which, they thought, would be difficult for them to crack down on IIG. Apart from the harbouring insurgents, Bangladesh was also considered to be a potential breeding ground for religious extremism. Conversely, Dhaka felt that the Indian allegation was an exaggeration of fact which was tarnishing the image of Bangladesh in the international community. Consequently, there were multiple instances of sharp exchanges, leading to a deterioration in the relationship.

The transformation of security scenario began, once the immediate past government assumed power in Dhaka 2009. Bangladesh had taken decisive steps to curtail the activities of militant organizations that had been fomenting insurgencies in India, particularly in NE. Not only, Bangladesh curbed their activities, but she apprehended and handed them over to Indian authorities. Now, it can be said that India is overtly happy with Bangladesh as no major allegation of harbouring IIG came to the fore. Conversely, Bangladesh also has some security concerns.

After the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Treaty was signed in December 2, 1997, it was clear that few of the insurgents used the Indian soil to operate against the security forces of Bangladesh. Though the treaty was signed in 1997, the situation in CHT has not reached to the satisfactory level, where the people can say peace has been restored. Uneasy peace prevails, with sporadic incidents taking place in different parts, mainly to establish dominance over the counter part. Again, the insurgent groups are alleged to be hiding in India, once the security force chase them. So, it is evident that, security remains a major concern for both countries.

Trade, Transit and Connectivity

Economically, within 40 years India has grown from a struggling underdeveloped country to a near middle income one. It is now recognised as an economic superpower that has posted an average annual growth of 5.82% for the last ten years. In contrast, though the economy of Bangladesh has grown over in the same period, it is only a shade compared with India. The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute estimates that full economic integration with India could raise Bangladesh's average rate of economic growth from 6% to 8%. For Bangladesh, the relationship began to be affected by the lopsided trade. In the 1990s, when both countries opened their markets to each other, India capitalized on most of the opportunities, while Bangladesh struggled to do so. Issues such as the negative list, non-tariff barriers (NTBs), and para-tariff barriers (PTBs) are perceived as India's reluctance to fully open its market to the limited range of exportable items from Bangladesh. As Smurti describes, in 2005 India filed a case of anti-dumping with World Trade Organisation (WTO) against Rahimafrooz Batteries and lost. This case is mentioned frequently to argue that India will not treat Bangladesh fairly. The anti-dumping measure received much adverse publicity in the local media and was held up as a glaring example of India's

⁵ Smurti S Pattanaik. (2011). India's Neighbourhood Policy: Perceptions from Bangladesh. Strategic Analysis, 35:1, P. 71

⁶ ibid, P. 106

implacable animosity to Bangladeshi exporter.⁷

Bangladesh is geographically located in a place which makes it lucrative to act as a transit country, connecting the major portion of South Asia with the South-East Asia. India's ambition to develop its NE Region is intrinsically linked to transit through Bangladesh. Through signing Indo- Bangladesh Trade Agreement on March 28, 1972, Bangladesh accorded transit facility to India through waterways, railways and roadways. Article V of the agreement offered transit, which was renewed in 1986 and 2006. Bangladeshi think tanks and security analysts argued against this transit to India on three factors. Firstly, Bangladesh might be drawn into the conflict between India- China, as the transit facilities might be used by India to move its military avoiding the strategic 'Choke Point' of Siliguri. Secondly, transit is possibly the best trump card Bangladesh has got to bargain with India. Thirdly, instead of providing Indian transit to the NE, Bangladesh might expedite the opportunity to make NE her export destination.

Despite raising concerns within Bangladesh, India was granted transit facilities through land and water. India provided financial support for the development of the railway network in areas where they could transport goods from one part of India to another. This has reinforced the public perception in Bangladesh that India is primarily interested in serving its own interests. Conversely, Bangladesh has long sought a positive response from India regarding land transit from Bhutan and Nepal. This would economically benefit Bangladesh, as both Bhutan and Nepal are landlocked, and Bangladeshi ports are the nearest for commercial shipping. In this context, despite the economic benefits, providing transit or connectivity to India remains a debatable issue, potentially complicating bilateral relations.

Border Issues

Bangladesh and India share a land boundary of 4096.7 km, which is the fifth longest border in the world. This border is porous, intersected by rivers and characterized by hilly and mountainous terrain, making it very challenging to guard this extensive stretch of land. Border is an artificial barrier, which bars the people of both countries to move between them, which they had done for centuries. The central politics has definitely got influence on the border land. However, the border has got its own dynamics, which is dictated by the security compulsions, border economics and activities that are intrinsic to the livelihood of the bordering people.

The terrain and demographic composition of the bordering areas make it conducive for people of either side to sneak into the other side and also to get easily assimilated into the local populace. India had long been claiming wide-spread illegal migration from Bangladesh. Magnitude of this migration has reached such an astounding level, that the Indian believes, it had begun to alter the demographic profile and threaten the socio-political fabric of the bordering states. The porous nature of border and constant flow of people also allows the IIG to cross over to Bangladesh. Apart from insurgents, it is not unlikely, that religious extremists in the garb of economic migrants, can transgress this artificial boundary. Thus, Indian prime concerns; illegal migration, operations of IIG and security of the state are intertwined with this border.

Like India, Bangladesh also has some genuine issues related to the border. Indiscriminate killing of Bangladeshis by BSF, rampant smuggling of arms and drugs, unresolved border issues, perennial problem of cattle trade etc, has negatively undermined the bilateral relation. Unresolved boundary issues had only created misunderstandings between the two countries and starkly brought out the distrust between them.

WAYS FORWARD

To improve the bilateral relation, both Bangladesh and India have to build a correct frame of mind. A holistic approach to address all issues is an immediate requirement. To improve the relation following steps may be adopted:

⁷ Smurti S Pattanaik. (2011). India's Neighbourhood Policy: Perceptions from Bangladesh. Strategic Analysis, 35:1, P. 77

1. India might benefit from reflecting on its approach towards Bangladesh, considering how the assumption that Bangladesh will always be grateful for its independence could impact their relationship. Recognizing that a politically and economically stable Bangladesh is beneficial for both countries is crucial. Additionally, India could consider adopting a more balanced approach, moving away from a predominantly security-focused perspective, which may have hindered the development of a successful neighbourhood policy.
2. To ease tensions between the two neighbouring parties, proactive measures must be implemented. Policymakers, media, and influential figures should recognize that continued strain between them benefits no one. Rather than fueling discord through misleading narratives and media manipulation, both sides should engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue to foster understanding and cooperation.
3. Both sides must actively work to strengthen people-to-people connections. This relationship should remain unaffected by the shifting tides of domestic politics, ensuring its integrity and mutual benefit.
4. India's relationship with Bangladesh should not be dictated by its relationship with Pakistan and China; with whom it has undergone prolonged conflict and competition. A dominant approach by India could negatively affect its bilateral relationship with Bangladesh.
5. India has to act as a regional power in case of water sharing just like the way they are acting in terrorism. Depriving Bangladesh of its legitimate right over the water will assist anti-Indian propaganda in Bangladesh, to gain currency.
6. For Bangladesh, a broad-based national consensus among the political actors has to be reached about its external relation, and some of them have to come out of negative politics.
7. Bangladesh needs to continue with its present policy of zero tolerance on terrorism. If it can be continued and does not become the vagaries of politics, it will have a long-lasting impact on the bilateral relationship.
8. Trading of essential goods should be legalized to avert smuggling. The concept of 'Border Haat' is a positive step and should be explored as far as possible.
9. Use of non-lethal weapons and exercise of utmost restraints by BSF is of paramount importance. However, to address the problem in long term would require comprehensive border management, which would necessitate, joint management and sharing of responsibility by BGB and BSF.
10. To avoid friction, a warm, symbiotic relationship should be established between the local people and border guarding forces on both sides of the border.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh and India had a chequered history. Despite having great potential this relation failed to deliver the expected outcome; rather, it appeared to be a source of disappointment for the people of both the countries. Instead of complimenting counter part's development, they, to some extent became inimical to each other. Vilification, counter-vilification and propaganda continued to fly back and forth. Over the years, both the countries developed differences in the fields of trade, transit, water sharing, border management and security. All these factors act as the determinants of the bilateral relationship.

International relation is a very complicated subject. Bangladesh feels the lop-sided trade is unfair to her interest. Unfortunately, the trade imbalance is growing over the years in favour of India. On the contrary, India is hesitating to open her market for Bangladeshi exporters. Moreover tariff, PTB and NTB from the Indian authority hindered growth of Bangladeshi products. India also continues to deny Bangladesh an equitable share of water from the common rivers. India's unilateral withdrawal of water at upstream, is causing near desertification and destruction of ecological balance in Bangladesh. Ironically, India fails to understand the cost Bangladesh is paying, for her wrong policy. Probably, it is the deprivation from the water right which makes India, the midwife to Bangladesh's birth, an overbearing stepmother.

India is aspiring to become a superpower. In the quest of supremacy, India finds its fragile security to be her Achilles heel. For India, security is the prime concern; but she cannot deal with it single-handedly. India needs close cooperation from Bangladesh to root out religious extremism and rendering IIG in NE, ineffective. However, most of the security concerns of India, demand effective border management.

India has three major concerns with Bangladesh; terrorism, border management and illegal migration and connectivity. It is evident that, Indian concerns are security centric and she emphasizes on strengthening her fragile security structure. She expects Bangladesh to be a positive partner in addressing her discomforts. It is needless to mention that, meeting the Indian demands is a prerequisite, to attend Bangladeshi concerns; water sharing, trade imbalance and border management, by India.

To improve the bilateral relation, building a correct and positive frame of mind is the prime requirement. India needs to reconsider her policy towards Bangladesh and has to come out from the security centric approach. India must realise the difficulties faced by Bangladesh for her water strategy. She also needs to build an image of a trustworthy partner. To effectively manage the border both the countries need to strengthen bilateral institutional mechanisms. India and Bangladesh need to cooperate to create a border that not only enhances trade efficiency but is also secure.