

Rethinking Indo-Bangla Relations

With a shared history and culture, it was expected that Indo-Bangladesh relations shall have a good trajectory but in reality, they have been always held hostage to misplaced priorities owing to mutual misunderstandings. Indo-Bangla relations have so far been a tale of missed opportunities, even though there have been streaks of hopes also in between, marking our hot and cold relationship.

A bilateral relationship which was supposed to be predicated on the strong foundation of a successful 'joint venture' resulting in Bangladesh's liberation through Indian assistance has all gone awry. The potential of bilateral cooperation in sundry fields based on this supposed mutual bonhomie has never been unleashed in a way which could have changed the very face of the economy of Bangladesh and could have resulted in substantive gains for India as well, particularly its north-eastern region.

Indo-Bangla Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's liberation was never allowed to work to its potential owing to various developments including negative political developments in Bangladesh from time to time. Some thorny issues have always plagued this relationship right from the beginning. Such issues, inter alia, include Tin Bigha Corridor, New Moore Island, Ganga water sharing, Tipaimukh Dam on Barak river in Manipur, Farakka barrage and border fencing. While issues like Tin Bigha, Indo-Bangla enclave exchange, New Moore Island, water sharing and Farakka barrage have been resolved, more or less to mutual satisfaction, but there are still many more awaiting resolution, where the cobwebs of misunderstanding and mutual apprehension need to be cleared.

India has, from time to time, raised its concern over the alleged free run provided in Bangladesh to the Indian insurgents and terrorists who have used this Bangla hospitality to launch incursions and terrorist strikes against India. Bangladesh, while allegedly continuing turning a blind eye to the operations of such forces inimical to India's interests, on its part, has always denied any such involvement in aiding and abetting them. Rather, it has often believed and seen an Indian role in the disturbances in its Chittagong region, something India has

always denied. India, in fact, was a reluctant host to thousands of refugees from Chittagong for a long period before they were repatriated following an amicable settlement of the issue, but many refugees are still said to have stayed back fearing loss of life and property back home.

Illegal but regular immigration from Bangladesh into India has also been a cause of concern for the latter and despite appreciation of the problem on two sides, nothing substantive seems to be happening. Today, illegal Bangladeshi immigrants into India are said to be over ten million in number, something Indian security agencies have been rightly concerned about, as there have also been instances of ISI agents finding ways into Indian territory through Bangladesh.

With Bangladesh becoming a safe conduit for such illegal activities as drug trafficking, human trafficking and proliferation of small weapons, India has found further reasons for being concerned owing to the prejudicial upshot of the same. Moreover, the sustained negative activism by the forces of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh has posed further threats to India's security and integrity.

But despite all these security threats to India emanating from its soil, Bangladesh still does not appreciate the imperatives and advisability of border fencing by India and has vehemently opposed the same arguing that the same may further sour bilateral relations. Thanks to a positive diplomacy, the long-standing Indo-Bangla problem of enclave exchange was recently resolved to the mutual satisfaction of the two countries. Now the challenge is to mainstream all these new citizens in the two countries and iron out the necessary procedural and infrastructural issues as remain to be tackled in the aftermath of the enclave exchange.

Coming to economic cooperation, while India, as an elder partner, has always been more magnanimous in its concessions to Bangladesh, the latter, for some quaint reasons, is still quite inhibited in getting into a full-fledged economic cooperation, not realising the fact that it may result in immense benefits for her as well. Despite the trade deficit for Bangladesh running into six billion dollars at the moment, there are immense benefits to be reaped from a full-grown economic cooperation between the two. Joint exploration of gas and oil resources as found in Bangladesh and utilisation of the same through the proposed pipeline needs to be seriously considered by Bangladesh as the same would not only yield it economic dividends, but would also take Bangladesh on the path to economic prosperity.

Huge benefits await Bangladesh as a result of allowing transit facility through its territory to South East Asian countries for India as the same would earn huge economic rewards for her in terms of customs duty and other relevant tariffs.

An Indian industrial MNC, the Tata Group, has been working on its investment plans worth three billion dollars for Bangladesh in its gas resources, something which has been touted as the largest so far in Bangladesh. Many more such investment opportunities are already lined up, not to speak of those already functional. With both the countries reducing bilateral customs duties and reducing their negative lists significantly, both can earn immense financial rewards in terms of customs duties as much of the illegal and underground trade would come over ground, thereby removing the uncertainties thrown up by the illegalities.

With Dhaka–Sealdah train service in the offing and Dhaka–Kolkata bus already operational, one just hopes that Indo-Bangladesh relations would take a turn for the better in times to come, more so with the incumbent Sheikh Hasina government of Bangladesh intent on improving the bilateral relations with India. With the interim government's cracking down on corruption and fundamentalism and vowing to attend to India's security concerns, one can hope for better relations between the two in times to come.

There are other issues that the two countries need to resolve. They inter alia include poppy cultivation in border areas, cattle smuggling, construction and improvement of land customs station and land port, movement of militants along the border, sharing intelligence to curb the menace of terrorism, women trafficking, illegal arms smuggling, exchange of prisoners languishing in each other's jails, setting up immigration centres at the border, survey, construction and repair of missing border pillars, exchange of Cadastral Survey records (Some CS records of Bangladeshi Dinajpur district are in Indian South Dinajpur and some CS records of South Dinajpur of West Bengal are in Bangladeshi Dinajpur.), export–import issues, promotion of tourism, border management of common rivers and sharing of their waters including that of Teesta.

It is believed that more than one crore Bangladeshis have entered this country illegally over the years, something which Bangladesh Government stoutly refuses to accept. The Hasina administration, if earnestly committed to its agenda, should not only open multi-level dialogue with India to resolve all the outstanding issues with this country, but ought to make honest effort to discourage illegal emigration into this country. It should also take the British government into confidence to get to the bottom of the sinister operations behind the façade of religious instructions as unearthed recently. The same should be done in right earnest with all seriousness it deserves if Bangladesh really wishes to come out of the trap-door of under-development to promise a better future to its populace. A happy and prosperous neighbour is always a better bet for India's security.

Since South Asian Free Trade Area still is a long way into future, both countries would do well to explore the advisability of having a bilateral Indo-Bangla Free Trade Agreement in keeping with the mutuality of each other's national interests. If both the countries are able to resolve the outstanding issues while taking positive and proactive steps for taking the bilateral relations to a new high, Indo-Bangla relations can actually set the pace for regional cooperation for rest of South Asia.

Salient Points

- Indo-Bangla relations have so far been a tale of missed opportunities.
- Indo-Bangla Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's liberation was never allowed to work.
- Some thorny issues have plagued this relationship including Tin Bigha Corridor, New Moore Island, Ganga water sharing, Tipaimukh Dam, etc.
- India raised its concern over the alleged free run provided in Bangladesh to the Indian insurgents.
- Sustained negative activism by the forces of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh has posed further threats to India's security and integrity.

- Thanks to a positive diplomacy, the long-standing Indo-Bangla problem of enclave exchange was recently resolved.
- Joint exploration of gas and oil resources in Bangladesh and utilisation of the same through the proposed pipeline needs to be seriously considered.
- Huge benefits await Bangladesh as a result of allowing transit facility through its territory to South East Asian countries for India.
- With the interim government's cracking down on corruption and fundamentalism and vowing to attend to India's security concerns, one can hope for better relations between the two in times to come.
- Since SAFTA is still a long way into future, both countries should explore a bilateral Indo-Bangla Free Trade Agreement.