

THE FATE OF INDIA -BANGLADESH RELATIONSHIP

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PREFACE:

Indian Foreign Policy Functions in Three broad Circles(Akin to Kautilya’s ‘Mandal Siddhanta’) – Neighborhood, Extended Neighborhood and Rest World. Peaceful periphery – A friendly and cooperative working relationship with all its neighbouring countries. This objective has remained unfulfilled especially with regard to Pakistan. A certain distrust continues to trouble the ties with other neighbours too. For instance, Border issues with Nepal, Recent Deterioration in its Ties with Myanmar etc. In this Overall picture, Bangladesh presents a ray of hope. The ties with Bangladesh are of critical importance to India’s South Asian relations and to its burgeoning Relations with Southeast Asia.

India and Bangladesh Not only share the largest border (4096 km) ,but the relations are anchored in common history, Heritage, culture and geographical proximity, the foundation of which laid down in 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.Hence it was assumed by Bangladeshis - “Friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh. “Despite this, relations soured within a few years as military regimes took control. There was a rise in anti-India sentiment in the mid-1970s over issues ranging from boundary disputes and insurgency to the sharing of water. The instability continued for a few decades until Sheikh Hasina stormed to power in 1996 .

Since 2009, Bangladesh has moved away from a relationship which had earlier been marked by the mistrust. The shift in attitude helped in improving the bilateral relationship. India has reciprocated in a similar manner. The relationship gained momentum after the since 2014. For example Land Boundary Agreement 2015.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To analyse the trend in India Bangladesh relationship.
2. To understand the significance of Bangladesh to India.
3. To study the issues hampering the Deepening the ties.
4. To acknowledge the future trajectory of relationship.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIA -BANGLADESH COOPERATION:

Bangladesh is at the intersection of India’s Act East Policy and The Neighborhood First Policy. Strong ties with Bangladesh make it possible to imagine a Vibrant North East region of India as well as secure and Peaceful Bay of Bengal Periphery. If Bangladesh ally with China , it would provide China with a conduit right into North East Region of India. In past , the security cooperation has not only helped in taming insurgency in India’ s North East but has been effective in curbing militancy in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the biggest trading partner of India in South Asian region. The connectivity between two countries is the major dimension of partnership. Enhanced connectivity help India’s landlocked north east to gain sea access . Furthermore Bangladesh’s Transport and manufacturing Industry will be a major beneficiary.

India’s growing focus on Bay of Bengal as a maritime space and as a gateway to Southeast Asia makes Bangladesh central to the New Delhi’s Regional Remapping as well as to the broader Indo – Pacific .

INITIATIVES TAKEN TO DEEPEEN THE TIES:

- Border settlement –The Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh signed the Land Boundary Agreement in 1974 to exchange the enclaves and simplify their international border . On 7 May 2015, A revised version of the Agreement was adopted by the two countries , When Parliament of India passed the 100thAmendment to the Constitution of India. Under this agreement India received 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in the Indian mainland while Bangladesh received 111 Indian enclave in Bangladeshi mainland.
- Connectivity–Transit Agreement 2010 , logistics Infrastructure development like Marine express, Dhaka -Darjeeling Bus service, Akhaura -Agartala Rail Line, Use of Chattogram and mongla ports in Bangladesh for transportation to north east States. India has granted duty free and quota free access to Bangladesh on all tariff lines except tobacco and alcohol Under SAFTA in 2011. Both nations have agreed to BBIN(Bangladesh -Bhutan-India-Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement to promote sub regional connectivity. The look forward for digital cooperation synergising India’s digital infrastructure development aid with 2041 Smart Bangladesh Plan.
- Energy Collaboration – Cooperation in Power sector has become hallmarks of bilateral relations.India -Bangladesh Friendship pipeline(reduces diesel supply cost and mitigate power cuts in Bangladesh), Maitree Thermal Power plant to enhance power supply to Bangladesh. India and Russia are jointly developing Rooppur Nuclear power project
- Security - Bangladesh has cooperated with India in sorting out security issues in the Northeast. It involved Intelligence sharing, Handing over top ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) leaders like Anup Chetia, Arabinda Rajkhowa etc. Joint military exercise “SAMPRITI” focuses on joint counter terrorism and Counter Insurgency operations.
- Hydro Collaboration - India Bangladesh Share around 50 trans order rivers. Ganges Water Treaty, signed in 1996 is successful example of Peaceful resolution of River water dispute. Recently signed Kushiyara river water agreement aimed to benefit the southern areas of Assam in India and the Sylhet region in Bangladesh.
- Multilateral cooperation –They share the vision to utilize their wide- ranging bilateral cooperation as an anchor for integration in the Global South, through common platforms such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) , South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) , Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) .

ISSUES IN INDIA- BANGLADESH COOPERATION :

India and Bangladesh’s Fraternal Friendship is regarded as s textbook example of a neighbourly relationship. However myriad of challenges jeopardizing the friendly tie.

1. Illegal migration – Bangladesh is known as the ‘Mexico problem of India’. India got deeply enmeshed with 2 waves of refugees from Bangladesh and currently around 30-40 million Illegal Bangladesh Migrants are living in India. It has triggered Ethnic movements, Insurgency in India’s Northeast states. For example Assam Agitation in 1980s.
2. Porous borders Facilitate Information cross border trade, Human and drug trafficking, Spread of Radical Islamist Fundamentalism in across the borders.

3. Federalization of foreign policy –Rise of Regional forces in India has resulted into local forces driving national concerns(Shibashis Chatterjee) for instance, . Last minute opposition by west Bengal to Teesta Water treaty.
4. Issues in Hydro collaboration –Joint River Commission set up in 1972 has been dormant since past few years. Both lack technical data on river volume Talks are only about Jumping into decisions to reach water sharing agreement. (Economist Gouri Shankar Ghosh) .
5. Bangladesh’s Domestic Factors –India Out Campaign is making inroads in the country following Sheikh Hasina’s re-election as prime minister for a fourth term in January 2024. Students protests, violence and ongoing political instability in Bangladesh after resignation of Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh has shrouded its future in development trajectory in uncertainty . All these questions the future of bilateral cooperation .
6. China’s inroads –For China, Bangladesh is a crucial foothold in the Bay of Bengal region and a critical node in its flagship Belt and Road Initiative. China is the largest trading partner of Bangladesh for 13 consecutive years. It is Second largest source of foreign investment to Bangladesh (\$ 3.2 billion in 2023) . Chinese Contribution to infrastructure development is significant – seven railway projects, twelve highways, more than thirty power stations. It has potential to pose a threat to India’s national security.
7. Strained USA- Bangladesh ties- In2021, Biden administration slapped Democratic backsliding in Bangladesh, sanctions on a Bangladeshi anti-crime and antiterrorism task force, citing human rights violations, and escalated tensions by announcing a policy to restrict visas for Bangladeshis.

CONCLUSION:

India should gear up its efforts under Gujral Doctrine and Neighborhood First policy. Former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, Veena S advised to issue work permits to migrant workers to ensure orderly entry and exit to deal with the issue of Illegal migration. Both India and Bangladesh should come out of big brother – small brother syndrome.(C. Rajamohan) . Gear up on Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) is need of hour. In case of hydro collaboration, Narrow regional interests should not be prioritised over national interest. Joint River commission should be revived from slumber. With India being emerged as a pivotal player in Indo Pacific, maritime Collaboration with Bangladesh in Bay of Bengal becomes crucial. Sheikh Hasina’s resignation is possibly one of the biggest shocks for new Delhi in recent years. The India- Bangladesh ties were like flowing river- full of generosity during Hasina’s government in Bangladesh. With recent political unfolding in Bangladesh, both require trust building and respecting each other’s redlines.

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