



## **REFLECTIONS ON INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS**

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### **Introduction**

Caesarean birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was indeed unique in many ways. It marked the success of first armed separatist struggle in post-1945 and post-colonial Third World<sup>1</sup> and demonstrated decisive application of India's Comprehensive National Power, commencing with establishment of a favourable external environment with astute diplomacy outsmarting US-China combined support to Pakistan and backing it up with equally smart, swift and punitive blow to Pakistani forces on the battlefield. Result was a dwarfed Pakistan, a fatal blow to the very premise of 'Two Nation Theory'<sup>2</sup> and a friendly Bangladesh replacing hostile East Pakistan wedged between mainland India and its Northeastern Region (NER). Paradoxically, victory euphoria did not last too long as gains of battlefield could not be converted into concrete outcomes at Shimla by India and philosophy of birth of Bangladesh was put to an abrupt end on 15 Aug 1975 by a bloody military coup leading to assassination of Bangladesh's Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members.

Two consecutive terms of Awami League (AL) Government under Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina have not only rekindled bilateral relations but also enabled unprecedented bonhomie after a rather long hiatus. PM Hasina's 'Zero Tolerance' policy on terrorism enabled decisive actions against resident and transiting Indian insurgent groups including its key leadership in Bangladesh. Similar decisiveness and cooperation on part of the Indian Government enabled successful resolution of one of the most complex and longstanding border issue in 2015 through the signing and implementation of the 'Land Boundary Agreement' and resolution of long-standing maritime boundary dispute in the Bay of Bengal. Notwithstanding the current bonhomie in bilateral relations; a nuanced evaluation of trajectory of Indo-Bangladesh relations makes one conclude that Indian policy seems to lack a Plan 'B' in its approach which can lead to equally dramatic reversals with change of guard in Dhaka. While Indian ethos and values are naturally aligned with AL and need to be nurtured; concurrently, India needs to ponder upon how to sustain positive relations even in absence of AL dispensation. Since lack of continuity in relations is largely related to internal complexities of Bangladesh leading to a 'love-hate relationship'; this article seeks to flag socio-political and

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economic paradoxes of the Country and outline suitable recommendations for Indian foreign policy approach.

### **Socio – Political Environment**

**Ideological Polarisation.** Politics permeates every walk of life in Bangladesh. While on one hand political parties have led struggle for independence and restoration of democracy, they have also vitiated the political culture that is marred by ideological polarisation, politicisation of religion, confrontational politics and political violence.

Democratic process is yet to mature as executive dominates most institutions and other organs of the state. Party system inherited by Bangladesh at birth underwent significant changes over the years. During first three years of elected civilian rule (1972-1975), country moved from one-party dominant to a single-party system. Following fifteen years of military rule (1975-1990), Bangladesh witnessed return of multi-party system, as also emergence of state-sponsored political parties or *Sarkari* Parties through which military dictators legitimised their continuance in politics. Period after the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991 is marked by a two-party system which later evolved into two electoral alliances led by the two major parties. Root causes of polarisation are issues related to identity and pro and anti-liberation belief system based on the same. Religion based identity was brought to fore both by Zia and Ershad for political consolidation. In April 1977, General Zia, a day after becoming President, through a martial law ordinance, dropped Secularism as State principle and replaced with the words “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah”. Later, through 8th Amendment on 09 Jun 1988, General Ershad made Islam the State religion. Self-described ideologies of the leading political parties are3:-

- (a) **AL.** Bengali nationalism, democracy, secularism and non-communal politics and socialism – establishment of exploitation-free society and social justice.
- (b) **Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).** Bangladeshi nationalism, democracy, free market economy, preserve teachings of Islam, religion of the majority and other religions.
- (c) **Jatiya Party.** Independence, sovereignty, Islamic ideology and freedom of all religions, Bangladeshi nationalism, democracy, social progress and economic emancipation.
- (d) **Jammat.** Establish Islamic way of life, exploitation-free society and state, Faith and trust in Allah, democracy, economic and social justice, ensure basic needs of all citizens irrespective of religions and ethnicity, fraternity with world Muslims and friendship with all states.

Promulgation of Enemy Property Act in 1965 by Pakistan and its subsequent continuance in name of Vested Property Act in Bangladesh created an endemic deprivation amongst minorities. Similarly, population inversion is altering the demographics in Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) due to mass migration of ethnic Bengalis. An uneasy peace currently prevails in CHT after Peace Agreement of 1997. Notwithstanding, it is also a fact that syncretic Bengali culture abhors violence. In fact, Sufi and spiritual Islamic traditions of Bangladesh have many similarities with ethos of most Indian Muslims. Crucial challenge actually is dilution of these values due to politicisation of religion as a symbol of identity leading to growth of ritualistic Islamic culture. This, in turn, offers a fertile ground for radical ideologies to creep in.

**Strained Social Homogeneity.** Bangladesh has a homogenous social matrix with 98 per cent of the population being ethnic Bengalis bonded by common culture and language. However, growing ritualistic Islamic outlook has created misgivings amongst communities and linguistic nationalism has taken a back seat. Majoritarian religious arrogance often surfaces in society and minority community is often targeted with violence and treated with contempt.

**Terrorism and Violent Extremism.** Altering societal fabric has enabled Islamic radicalism to make inroads in society. Horrific incident of Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016 brought the cruel reality at global horizon. Iron fist approach of current Government has crippled terrorism infrastructure but ideological roots persist. Two main causative factors for this are the politicisation of religion and inroads by inimical elements like the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan who are much too eager to pull in Bangladesh into mess of radicalisation and violent extremism. Rohingya influx, territorial losses and setback to ISIS and Al Qaeda in the Middle East and Afghanistan may force it to seek newer frontiers like Bangladesh.

**Human Capital.** Bangladesh is seventh most populous country in the world and ranks 139 out of 188 countries in Human Development Index (HDI). Multiplicity of education system including religious education, universal health care system, smuggling, drug and human trafficking are societal challenges looming large on Bangladesh.

### **Economic Environment**

**Basket Case to Show Case.** On its birth, Bangladesh economy was classified as Malthusian. Derided as a 'basket-case' and 'test case for development' only four decades ago; over the years, Bangladesh has emerged a development miracle, gradually moving from an aid driven to a trade driven economy. Goldman Sachs classified it as one of the 'Next Eleven' most potential economies and Moody's affirm Bangladesh's rating at Ba3 with stable outlook. With an exemplary performance on Millennium Development Goals (MDG), country has embarked

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on its journey of implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. It also has ambition of being a middle income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041. In fact, the current government is being credited for heralding a 'Development' oriented narrative in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has eight Export Processing Zones and government plans to establish 100 Economic Zones of which six are functional already.

**Drivers of Economic Growth.** Competitive labour is the single most important driver that has enabled growth of select labour intensive industries viz readymade garment (RMG) in which Bangladesh is the second-largest garment-exporting country in the world. RMG accounts for around 80 per cent of its exports and 13 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Other sectors include ship building, pharmaceutical and jute. Self-sufficiency in agricultural production with adaptive technologies including genetically modified (GM) seeds is a landmark achievement for a country that was marred by famine not too long ago. Inward remittances from close to 10 million Bangladeshi expats contribute to about 11 per cent to gross national income (GNI). Democratically formed governments, since 1991, have performed immensely better vis-a-vis military regimes of the past. Since 2007, Bangladesh has had more people of working age than non-working. Currently, more than 65 per cent of the population is of working age, between 15 and 64. Window of this demographic dividend is expected to last till 2040 and can help to accelerate economic growth.

**Challenges.** Two most critical challenges to Bangladesh economy are infrastructure (including energy) and skill deficit. Other areas of concern are poor investment climate, mainly arising from political uncertainties and corruption. In World Bank's Ease of Doing Business report 2018; Bangladesh ranked 177 among 190 economies. Among the eight South Asian countries, Bangladesh is only ahead of Afghanistan that ranked 183. Similarly, it ranked 145 out of 176 countries in Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International. Due to inadequate investment in human capital (education and health), Bangladesh has not been able to harness full potential of its demographic dividend. On the contrary, unless education sector is overhauled and investment in economy picks up substantially, Bangladesh may well face a 'middle income trap' and 'jobless growth' signs of which are already discernable. According to World Bank, between 2003 and 2016 an average of 1.15 million net jobs were created in Bangladesh each year whereas around two million workers entered labour market each year.

**Opportunities.** Shifting global economic centre of gravity to Asia, location of Bangladesh between two economic power houses of Asia, regional connectivity dividend accruing from the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) and

India's Act East Policy (AEP) are crucial opportunities which Bangladesh can exploit in order to realise its visions 2021 and 2041.

### **Indo-Bangladesh Relations**

**Bangladesh Foreign Policy.** Bangladesh follows foreign policy dictum of 'friendship to all, malice towards none'. It also promotes interests of Islamic Ummah and seeks to benefit from the same. As a least developed country (LDC), it enjoys Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) from European Union (EU). The US suspended GSP for Bangladesh in 2013 on account of labour safety standards. On the global horizon it's a leading voice amongst LDC and its contribution towards UN Peace Keeping Operations has been significant. In the regional context, while, it is keen on sub regional connectivity, it concurrently desires to join One Belt One Road (OBOR) with a view to balance India-China relations. Rohingya crisis is the single most critical challenge to its foreign policy today. It is a multifaceted crisis which has brought Bangladesh on crossroads. Never before has Bangladesh got as much global spot light post its liberation. Choices it makes will certainly have long term impact on its future. It felt betrayed by India and China for lack of their support over the issue. Despite India rendering immediate humanitarian aid and abstaining from UNHCR resolution on Rohingyas (China voted against); Bangladesh feels more disappointed with India. Some sections in strategic community even advocate a whole hog embrace of China, even shunning its golden foreign policy dictum. Fringe analysts also advocate arming and training of migrant Rohingyas on lines of Indian support to Bangladesh's liberation war<sup>6</sup> and also talk of military option<sup>7</sup>. Key issue though is the ineffectiveness of its Myanmar policy or lack of a policy over the years marked by absence of any worthwhile bilateral engagement and leverages.

**Perceptions about India.** Bangladesh espouses mixed feelings towards India. AL cadres and intelligentsia is overwhelmingly positive. Unfortunately, owing to events of history; Bengali nationalism could not flourish in true sense and negative perceptions of India have also grown. Writers like Mr MBI Munshi opine that Indian support for Bangladesh emanated from its negative approach towards Pakistan as it wanted to eliminate later as a regional competitor based on its irredentist concept of 'Akhand Bharat'. In the book titled '*India Doctrine*', he outlines that this concept regards South Asia as a single unit to be controlled and managed according to Indian order of things. Bangladesh has been particularly affected by 'India Doctrine' and Bangladesh-India relations are a case of 'absentee landlordism' especially when AL is in power and any other party coming to power is considered mere squatter by India.<sup>8</sup> Clearly such writings are motivated and may again gain prominence if current

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dispensation suffers a setback in 2019. Indian intervention was triggered due to humanitarian crisis which, if not addressed, would have been a hugely unaffordable burden. Besides, Mukti Bahni could not have achieved its aim without Indian intervention. A favourable strategic poise for India accruing from liberation was mere incidental and certainly not the *casus belli*. It is also a historical truism that India has never been expansionist or imperialistic.

### **Indian Policy Approach**

Bangladesh considers itself India locked; therefore, anxieties about Indian approach are understandable. India on the other hand is anxious with growing footprint of China in South Asia coupled with Bangladesh's desire to play China Card. China sees Myanmar and Bangladesh as means to access Bay of Bengal somewhat like access to Arabian Sea through Pakistan. Bangladesh considers itself sandwiched between two giants; a dilemma around which opinions keep swinging.

Salience of Bangladesh stems from the fact that Indian NER is semi landlocked by it. Five Indian States share boundary with Bangladesh. The border is porous with homogenous population on either side having historical and cultural affinities which has unfortunately negatively manifested in illegal influx of Bangladeshis causing internal security concerns<sup>9</sup>. On the positive side, it has geographical and economic contiguity with NER and emerges as a natural pillar of India's AEP. Under the ambit of AEP, cooperation on bilateral and regional connectivity, power and energy, trade and commerce, and management of water resources is gaining momentum. In April 2017, India announced a US\$5-billion loan to Bangladesh and signed 22 pacts and business deals worth investments of US\$9 billion. The line of credit was the biggest offered to any country at one go by India. This took India's total line of credit to Bangladesh to US\$8 billion in the past six years. However, India cannot match the deep pockets of China which in Oct 2016 secured 27 deals (worth US\$ 24.45 billion in soft loan) in various sectors. Good part though is that Bangladesh is not as gullible as some other regional countries who are getting enslaved into Chinese debt trap. India on its part must trust its historical, cultural and societal bonds with Bangladesh which China can never match. Therefore, two sides need to shelve anxieties in building relationship. On its part Bangladesh must realise that it is only through sub-regional connectivity epitomised in true spirit of BBIN and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that its economic potential can fructify for which India holds the key. Given the level of disparity between economies, a hop-stop-jump over sub-regional connectivity in favour of BCIM may not be a good economic sense.

Bangladesh is growing economically but political and social philosophy of liberation has taken a back seat. While Chinese inroads are economically driven; Pakistan spearheads its agenda based on hard-line religious fraternity which is increasingly finding a fertile ground. This does not augur well for India. Trajectory of future bilateral relations will be more impacted by developments in socio-political domain. However, Indian approach seems to be focussed more on greater economic integration. India needs to strengthen its bilateral cooperation in such a way that radical and extremist ideologies do not gain ground in Bangladesh. Inter and intra-faith exchanges in form of conferences and seminars propagating spiritualistic Islamic values must be encouraged. Over 20 Indian television channels have access in Bangladesh which can facilitate Indian outreach. Our outreach must also include BNP leadership at track 2 level. People to people connectivity must be facilitated and made seamless. On its part, India must embrace Bangladesh in spirit of elder brother and not big brother. Measures to address trade imbalances and other unresolved issues must also be adopted.

### **Conclusion**

Ideological drift of Bangladesh is indeed paradoxical. Causes rest more in its socio-political domain than economic environment. 'India Doctrine' syndrome is more psychological than empirical. The issues need to be addressed holistically by reinforcing Indian Soft Power which can never be matched by China.

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