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**INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONSHIP UNDER PM NARENDRA
MODI'S REGIME: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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ABSTRACT

Among South Asian countries, India-Bangladesh shares a specific kind of bonding due to their historical linkage and geo-strategic proximity. Despite many scholars' prediction of continuing exemplary friendship between the two, the relationship could not enjoy a smooth ride in the recent past. However, the fear of increasing distance along with the BJP coming into power of India could not last in the following period. Rather, a steady growth and commitment towards neighboring countries have been witnessed. The development moreover is not beyond questionable doubts. This study aims at taking a descriptive and analytical approach in examining the post 2014 political environment of both the countries to understand the bilateral relation between India-Bangladesh under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's period.

KEYWORDS: *India-Bangladesh Relations, Sheikh Hasina, Narendra Mod, South Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

Coming from the same womb, both the countries India and Bangladesh have much more to share in common be it culture or heritage, and strengthen the knot between the two rather than focusing on the turmoil. The relationship between the countries has stood along with the tests of time. The connection among the hearts of the common people has always left behind the divisions of land boundaries and political insecurities. The holy birth of Bangladesh clinching the shadow of former 'East Pakistan' led by virtue of great liberation war with the assistance of India has given the country immense impunity to stand out any question regarding its friendship towards Bangladesh. However, the kind of relationship both countries used to share during the Mujib-Indira period (1971-1975) has undergone some rough phase following the rule of the military regime of Bangladesh, anti-India sentiments started to grow among the people which further extended with the country closing the tie with Pakistan and other Islamic nations as well as being part of different allies during the cold war period of the

1980s. Lack of trust and mutual suspicion stated in between till the Awami League government came into power in 1996. The common understanding between Dhaka and Delhi in the Awami League and Indian National Congress (INC) tenure is well accepted due to historical facts. During the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led regime (2001-2006) tensions reached a peak between the two countries' relations. The relation was regained during the Manmohan Singh- Sheikh Hasina period with the visit of Sheikh Hasina to Delhi in 2010. But when Narendra Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed government in 2014 Bangladesh started speculating arising of tensions due to its *Hindutva* aka Hindu extremism and offending mandates of tagging 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants' about a section of people living in Assam and West Bengal in general. These issues were further stringed by border killings, terrorisms, etc. On the contrary, PM Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in 2015 released such predictions and reassured his strong stand for the 'neighborhood first' policy. The irritants regarding the complete shift in the nature of the relation between the two faded away with his continuation of Look East Policy as 'Act East Policy' as confronted by the scholars. The policies are undertaken and agreements show positive attributes of the strong bilateral relationship and resolving the existing issues if we overlook the silence of Indian foreign policy towards the Rohingya issue, hegemonic attitude in the border, and unfair distribution of river water.

This paper intends to examine the political shifts, regional groupings, attempts to resolve years-long disputes over land and maritime boundaries as well as water share disputes, security concerns, connectivity, and economic partnership that occurred between the countries in the post-2014 period through the lens of media and academics.

Political Shifts Following 2014 Modi Period

Bangladesh is seen as a landlocked region by India due to its geographical realities. It is surrounded by India from three sides and shares approximately 4,094 kilometers of land boundary with one side open towards the Bay of Bengal. Though, India helped in the birth of the new nation-state Bangladesh and extended its helping hand in the formation of the country anti-Indian sentiments have always existed there. Pro-Pakistan and China friendly political parties never left the chance to further demoralize the public feelings using territorial disputes, enclaves' issues, and BSF's shoot to kill policy at the border. Moreover, the India factor has played a crucial role in its domestic politics since the very beginning. Where, in post-2007 elections, Awami League-led coalitions started forming government in Bangladesh, and the principal political oppositions like Bangladesh National Party (BNP), Jatiya Party (JP), and extremist Islamic groups like Jamaat-e-Islam Bangladesh started losing their acceptance due to their linkage with war crimes and military-backed background India's political changes still created a lot of confusion in the domestic policies of the country. Due to historical facts, the Awami League government could put their trust in Indian National Congress (INC) but the win of Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to stimulate the tensions due to Narendra Modi's manipulative personality as well as his mandates. However, later it has been proved as more successful than the other regime on the various dispute settlement issues.

Land Boundary Agreements

India shares its largest international border with Bangladesh consisting of the states of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. Since 1947, numerous attempts have been undertaken by the governments of both countries to address the demarcation of the land boundary and to decide the fate of the approximately 50,000-1,00,000 people living in the enclaves but could not succeed. The failed attempts of the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (concerning the demarcation of the land boundary between India and Bangladesh) could not come into any consensus regarding 6.1km unsettled land boundary, exchange of enclaves (51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India and 111 Indian

enclaves in Bangladesh) and issues regarding adverse possessions. During 2011 a protocol was signed by Dr. Manmohan Singh to move forward such indulgence but could not do much especially the dissatisfaction about water share exists there. Subsequently after 41 years of independence of Bangladesh, in June 2015 PM Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka brought light to the issue and showed his seriousness about his government's 'neighborhood first' policy. The Constitution (119th Amendment) Bill was passed in the parliament of India with a special majority which proves India's friendliness towards Bangladesh irrespective of political parties. However, as mathematically India had to transfer more area than it gained (510 acres in lieu of 10,000 acres) it remained a major concern especially from affected states (North-East and West Bengal) political leaders. But due to geographical realities, India had no access to those parts anyway. Moreover, both the countries look into the benefit of the inhabitants of the enclaves, and adverse possession was taken into account. As expected, the implication of the agreement will ensure minimizing illegal migration, human trafficking, cross-border criminal activities, and finally, people were able to get citizenship of respective countries which further promotes their human rights and development of the region. 22 agreements were signed altogether to promote the connectivity of India's Northeastern region with Southeast Asia. Moreover, India got access to China built Chattogram Port which will accelerate its trade by saving time and money. Though, Inland Waterways Agreement is still a major setback.

Utilizing Common Sea

India's gesture of goodwill has not been limited to land boundary settlement only. The country has shown respect for the decision of maritime boundary settlement issue by the Permanent Court of Arbitration after Bangladesh filed a case against India in 2009. Though the decision resembles Bangladesh's win, however, the negotiation process could not come to any successful conclusion. India has taken into consideration that the proposed median line would confine Bangladeshi water into a narrow triangle between India and Myanmar and could lead to injustice for Bangladesh. This acceptance has taken the India-Bangladesh relationship to another level. In 2015 for the first time in history, Bangladesh-India came to an agreement of utilizing their common sea as Bangladesh decides to allow Indian cargo vessels to use Chattogram and Mongla ports.¹ This decision has been seen as a great achievement in economic terms. No doubt, India's Northeastern regions are benefited from the agreement. Following that, in 2018 India offered Bangladesh to use its Kolkata and Haldia ports for international shipments which are currently under careful evaluation.² This offer has been floating for over a year, India's view is that these ports are used by India-Bangladesh bilateral use but as the Chattogram and Mongla ports need capacity building Bangladesh can use these ports offered which will help them in the shipment of their cargo (especially garment) to European and American buyers. However, the Bangladesh government will only take decisions after consulting with its non-government stakeholders.

Development in Economic Partnership

India-Bangladesh economic cooperation and investment have been based on three primary concern areas; they are energy, infrastructure, and connectivity. Since 2015, both the countries have concluded more than 90 agreements; the bilateral relationship is enjoying its reach to another height. Hi-tech areas such as IT, space, cyber security, electronics, and civil nuclear energy and trade have been focused. Bilateral trade has witnessed an increase of 28.5 percent from 2015 to 2018 (from 7 billion US dollars to 9 billion US dollars).³ Partnership in the energy sector is a reciprocal process; Bangladesh facilitates transportation, whereas India promotes business and technology. Despite high criticism over electricity price from the stakeholders, Bangladesh government Reliance Power by Adani doing 4.5 billion US dollar business in the Energy sector for setting up the liquid gas-fire plant and establishing floating port in consequence of Modi's promise of doubling the power supply to Bangladesh (500

MW to 1100 MW). This is the single largest foreign investment in Bangladesh.⁴ In the infrastructure and connectivity sector, due to being a common member of many regional and sub-regional groupings like SAARC, BBIN, IORA, Commonwealth India and Bangladesh naturally share common projects including FTA, road, and highway construction, digital connectivity. To balance China, India under its 'Act East Policy' has widened the scope for investment in Bangladesh to develop its northeastern part and to connect it with Kolkata and other parts of the country. To increase existing inter-regional trade among BBIN nations (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) up to 60% India has approved an ambitious project of 1.04 billion US dollars to construct and upgrade 558 km of roads to link the countries and to accelerate the movement of passengers and cargo.⁵ This project has been officially approved with 50% funding by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It will improve the ground connectivity of the region as expected. Now Modi government is trying to smooth out the Motor Vehicle Agreement to regulate passenger, personnel, and cargo vehicular traffic among the South Asian neighbors. Apart from these, India is also a development partner for Bangladesh in 1350 MW Rampal Coal-fired Power Plant, Akhaura-Agartala, Kulaura-Shahbazpur Rail Tracks, construction of 130km Friendship Pipeline, etc. It is mentionable here that, in 2015 PM Narendra Modi declared a two billion US dollar line of credit for Bangladesh with a promise of quick implementation of earlier 800 million US dollar line of credit and full disbursement of 200 million US dollar.

Response to Covid Pandemic

In the first quarter of 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasted the global economy may shrink 3 percent in the current year. The recent report of South Asia Economic Focus has estimated that the crisis will reinforce inequality in South Asian countries which may lead to food insecurity. The earlier experiences of disease outbreaks resemble that, social, economic, and political consequences of the covid-19 pandemic is going to be wide-ranging. South Asia with its large population can bring disaster if it fails to control the outbreak of any infectious disease. Under the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on 15 March heads of all the eight-member states jointly expressed their commitments to develop a regional protocol to overcome this pandemic as well as the future ones.⁶ Besides, India proposed a 10 million dollars covid-19 emergency fund and urged voluntary contribution from others. In response, on 21 March, the Maldives announced 0.2 million dollars and Bhutan declared 0.1 million dollars contribution; next day, Bangladesh 1.5 million dollars.⁷ In the following days, Nepal and Afghanistan respectively committed to contribute one million dollars each.⁸ Sri Lanka announced five million dollars on March 23.⁹ Even, Pakistan announced a contribution of three million dollars with conditions of negotiable utilization which led to the total worth 21.8 million dollars.¹⁰

Security Perspectives

Bangladesh occupies a very strategic location in South Asia. Sharing common land as well as historical background and threats has given rise to similar security concerns. India-Bangladesh high level delegations have always addressed these issues on several occasions. Major concern areas as identified are countering terrorism, human and drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal immigration, circulation of fake currency. Bangladesh is seen as a major transit point for all these criminal activities. Following the rise of religious extremism and several terrorist groups activities Bangladesh is deeply concerned to combat them. As a part of these combatting activities, in 2013 Supreme Court of Bangladesh banned the politics of Jamaat-e-Islam. In 2009, Bangladesh government handed over four militants to India who was held responsible for terrorist activities in northeast India. Both the countries showed zero tolerance in uprooting such elements of emerging terrorism. Identifying terrorism as a major challenge India has shown its interest to support Bangladesh in this regard. There is no doubt that India-Bangladesh cooperation is very important to maintain peace and stability in the

region. The history of defense relations between the two countries can be found back to 1971. The defense services of both countries are now also participating in joint exercises, medical assistance and training programmes. At the end of 2017, *Sampriti*, the joint exercise operation to counter terrorism between the two armies has completed seven rounds. Bangladesh is alarmed with the drug trafficking from Northeast region of India. Thousands of Bangladeshi women are being trafficked to India every year for prostitution and slavery. Though there are special laws in both the countries which provide severe punishment for the perpetrators they seemed to enjoy the loopholes of criminal justice system. According to a human rights activist, 30 people were convicted out of 4000 cases of human trafficking in Bangladesh after the year of 2012.

Challenging Aspects of India-Bangladesh Relation

The historic bondage between India and Bangladesh leave no scope to leave behind the ties of the two. Apart from the coldness in the relationship during previous governments presently, Bangladesh and India is enjoying a steady period of their relationship under the regime of Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi.

If India and Bangladesh can solve their problems in the area of Teesta and Feni river water share issues as was attempted by Modi government it will help in tightening the years old trust and friendship. Teesta is considered to be the lifeline for the people of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Teesta River Basin is home to around 30 million people. Out of which roughly 2% are located in Sikkim, 27% are located in North Bengal and the rest 71% are located in North Bangladesh. As a lower riparian, Bangladesh is completely dependent on India, the upper riparian, for keeping minimum flows in the Teesta River. No wonder any bilateral talk between these two does not complete without Teesta issue. Bangladesh wants a fair and equitable, obviously higher share than it gets now. Talks are ongoing about this issue since 1972 still the water flow is lean in between April-December when the water is mostly needed by Bangladesh. Cultivation of north region of the country is highly hampered due to this. India should take proactive role to solve this matter of dispute.

Where Bangladesh should not be concerned about the internal decisions of India, it cannot close its eyes when such stance affects Bangladesh. The National Registered of Citizen (NRC) is an Indian government's attempt to identify and define legal citizens of Assam. But the recent news shows that the Muslim community of the region is being marked as Bengali immigrants. Moreover, the objectionable comments of politicians of the state have made the situation more critical and headache for Bangladesh government.

Using of lethal weapon by Border Security Force (BSF) in Bangladesh border has always questioned India's approach towards Bangladesh. Accusation of trespassing borders and torturing the citizens of Bangladesh was always there. According to the report of Ain o Salish Kendra, a Bangladesh based human rights organisation, 41 Bangladeshi citizens were killed in the border by BSF alone in the first ten months of 2020.

India's silence about Rohingya influx has been hurt the Bangladeshi sentiments since 2017. India's closing the tie with Myanmar has created mistrust from Bangladeshi side. The country with the largest democracy failed to take stance against Myanmar's atrocities. On September 26, 2019 India abstained from voting on a resolution titled "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar" at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Though the resolution was passed with 37 votes out of 47 India's silence has exposed its diplomatic difference with Bangladesh.

Diplomatic relations do not depend on any single issue. In aspect of trade, India-Bangladesh trade claimed to enjoy its peak era it has ensured duty-free access of Bangladeshi goods to Indian market, an increase of Bangladesh ready-made garments exports to India in 2018 by 115 percent (from USD 30 million to USD 280 million), and an increase in Indian

investment, including in process, from USD 3 billion to USD 10 billion.¹¹ On the other hand, there are scope of widening the gaps between the two in terms of water share, hegemonic nature of BSF at border, irresponsible decision regarding migrants from Bangladesh as well as its own people, religious extremism surrounding *Hindutva*, questionable inclement towards the Government of Myanmar etc. Any kind of turmoil in this region will invite alien powers to interfere in this region which is not expected for the betterment of the common people. In this regard, India cannot avoid the expectations on its leadership skills and play with the trust people have put on it.

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