

Recent political unrest in Bangladesh: Understanding the complexities of India-Bangladesh relations.

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Abstract

Since its separation from Pakistan, Bangladesh has faced numerous challenges in the nation-building process. India has played a crucial role in this journey. The two countries have signed several treaties to promote bilateral relations. Bangladeshi politics has been predominantly influenced by two major parties: the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Each party has created a distinct political landscape under its respective regime. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party tends to align itself closely with Pakistan and China, while the Awami League primarily seeks to strengthen ties with India. Although India-Bangladesh relations have experienced positive and negative phases, they continue evolving. Since 2009, relations between India and Bangladesh have remained relatively stable, with several positive developments. Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladeshi soil has not been used against India, and Sheikh Hasina has acted against anti-India organisations. Conversely, India has consistently prioritised Bangladesh as its closest neighbouring country. However, recent uncertainty in Bangladesh raises significant concerns about India-Bangladesh relations. The current interim government does not appear to be fostering good bilateral ties. This article explores the challenges facing the relationship between the two countries.

Keywords

India, Bangladesh, migration, border Security, geopolitics, developments

Introduction

Before the 1947 partition, the present-day sovereign nation of Bangladesh was part of the Bengal province in united India. During British rule, Bengal was divided into two regions for administrative convenience: West Bengal and East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Based on the Two Nation Theory, the British Government separated India into two distinct nations—Pakistan and India—in 1947. In East Bengal Muslim populations were the majority, obviously it remained as part of Pakistan, even though it had little similarity with the rest of Pakistan. Pakistan comprised two regions: The two parts of Pakistan East and West were distinguished by over one thousand miles of Indian territory. This geographical oddity and several other differences between the two regions made nation-building particularly challenging.

The population of East Pakistan was culturally homogeneous, with most people speaking Bengali. To promote national unity, it was decided in Karachi that Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan. Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Prime Minister of Pakistan was a Bengali community Muslim who spoke Urdu, was persuaded to visit Dhaka and publicly announced that "Urdu shall be the state language." While East Pakistan's economy flourished, most of the development budget was allocated to West Pakistan, relegating the population of East Pakistan to second-class citizenship.

In East Pakistan, the Awami League was the prominent political party, while in West Pakistan, it was the Pakistan People's Party. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, East Pakistan faced immense social, political, and economic oppression from West Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was announced as the president of the Awami League in 1966 and thereafter he dedicated himself to increasing the party's grassroots support. He emerged as a popular leader in East Pakistan and announced a six-point program, calling it the "Charter of Survival," which aimed for self-rule in East Pakistan.

In December 1970, the first general elections were held in independent Pakistan, and the Awami League, under Mujibur Rahman's leadership, achieved remarkable success, winning 167 out of 313 seats in the Pakistan National Assembly. Thereafter the leaders of West Pakistan rejected the results of the election and refused to transfer the power in the hands of Mujibur Rahman. In response, he called for a non-cooperation movement in East Pakistan, urging the people to resist the "Pakistani enemy" and framing this struggle as one for emancipation and independence.

The Pakistani army on 25 March 1971 commenced a brutal operation in Dhaka, which was considered the initiation of the Bangladesh freedom war. At the time, India's Prime Minister Mrs. Indra Gandhi voiced her government's unconditional support for the Bangladeshi freedom movement. The struggle for liberation ended on December 16, 1971, and Bangladesh has appeared as a sovereign nation-state on earth.

India claimed that we were the first country to recognise Bangladesh as a sovereign nation-state and very soon started ambassadorial relations with Bangladesh in December 1971. The geographical proximity of India and Bangladesh presents opportunities for enhancing connectivity and economic collaboration. Bangladesh is the second trading partner of India in South Asia and India always gives priority to Bangladesh. Since 2011, India has approved Bangladesh free access to all trade lines without duties or quotas, excluding tobacco and alcohol, under the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

India has consistently supported Bangladesh in times of requirement, providing funding and monetary properties to support it in handling the effects of natural calamities and flooding. Following the devastation caused by Cyclone Sidr in November 2007, the then External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, visited Bangladesh in December 2007 to express India's condolences for the loss of life and destruction in affected areas. Before this visit, India had announced an extensive aid package worth over Taka 250 crore, which included relief materials such as medicines, tents, blankets, ready-to-eat meals, and portable water purifiers.

Current State of Affairs

Recently, Bangladesh has seen political instability that is a great concern for its social, political, and economic stability and growth. Since 2009 Bangladesh has proved itself a trusted ally country for India, but present scenarios have created concerns for India. In Bangladesh, some sections of the society have seen strong anti-India sentiment and some renowned political leaders from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party expressed India's oppressive nature in the country, which has created new obstacles in two countries relationship. Undoubtedly, the present situation in Bangladesh is alarming for India's financial, safety, and geopolitical benefits.

Under the leadership of the Sheikh Hasina Awami League government over one and half decades Bangladesh has had significant achievements in the economy and security field. The visionary outlook of the Bangladesh government has strengthened its relationship with India. In the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh is one of the biggest trade partners, and in Asia, India is the second major trade companion of Bangladesh. In the fiscal year 2023-24, the entire trade between the two countries reached \$14.01 billion, with India purchasing \$1.97 billion worth of goods from Bangladesh. Bangladesh is also one of the top exportation destinations universally. The existing unrest in Bangladesh might hamper trade relations between the two countries. To exacerbate bilateral trade both countries agreed to settle a part of their trade transactions through their currencies Indian rupee and Bangladeshi Taka. The two countries agreed on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement to enhance economic complementarity. Recently in 2023, both nations inked a Memorandum of Understanding to increase easy cross-border payment transactions.

India has become a popular destination for Bangladeshi citizens seeking tourism and medical treatment. It offers fifteen different types of visas for Bangladeshi nationals. In 2022, India granted 1.27 million visas to individuals from Bangladesh. Among these, the claim for medical passes is the peak, benefiting from a smooth process that is uniquely available to Bangladeshi citizens. As a result, India remains the top destination for people from Bangladesh.

Over the last fifteen years, two countries have made numerous agreements to accelerate the power and energy sector. The demand for Bangladesh's electricity has been fulfilled by the installation of Bangladesh's Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, which is smoothly delivering the needs of Bangladesh. Two countries have created a milestone for cross-border energy supply. The India-Bangladesh friendship pipeline (IBFP) is a great step towards connectivity, it will open up people-to-people linkages between the two sides. In India's foreign policy, Bangladesh always gets preferences and is considered the topmost trade partner.

In the India- Bangladesh relationship the most crucial aspect is development cooperation. Since the beginning of the diplomatic relationships between the both states development cooperation has grown rapidly. Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina during her visit to India in 2017, with the extension of USD 5 billion Bangladesh became the topmost development partner of India. Three aspects are visible in India-Bangladesh development cooperation, these are the line of credit, grants, and capacity building programs in Bangladesh. Several development projects in Bangladesh have been covered through the three Lines of Credit of USD 8 billion. India's Ministry of External Affairs also aids Bangladesh's budget to cover socio-economic development. Smt. Sushma Swaraj External Affairs Minister of India during her visit to Bangladesh in 2017 inaugurated 15 new grant projects covering health care, education water supply, and social welfare. The Capacity Building program in Bangladesh is also crucial to strengthening India- Bangladesh development cooperation, India played a significant role in this regard

The backdrop of Political unrest in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has faced significant challenges in political stability since its independence. The assassination of the country's first leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975 initiated a series of military coups that shaped the political landscape. As of January 2024, Sheikh Hasina was inaugurated for a fourth consecutive term as Prime Minister. However, her electoral victory has been accompanied by concerns regarding allegations of electoral irregularities, the use of coercive measures against the opposition, and international criticism regarding the state of democracy in Bangladesh during her previous three terms (2009–2024). The Awami League, which Hasina leads, has gradually experienced a decline in public support, reflective of accumulated grievances that have emerged over recent years.

While Hasina was able to utilise state resources to secure her election, a surge in student protests beginning in June indicated a notable shift toward active dissent against her administration. Initially focused on the contentious quota system, which reserves 30% of government jobs for the relatives of freedom fighters (Mukti Joddhas) from the 1971 Liberation War (Mukti Juddho), these protests quickly expanded to educational institutions nationwide. Students articulated their demands to abolish this quota, viewing it as inequitable and inconsistent with the principles of equal opportunity.

The quota system, perceived to favour supporters of the Awami League, has also been regarded as a strategic mechanism used by Hasina to appoint trusted allies to crucial bureaucratic roles, enhancing her control over the state apparatus. This has inadvertently compounded issues related to youth unemployment and constrained career prospects at a time when securing stable employment in the civil service is a priority for many. As Bangladesh strives for further economic development, the quota system has been viewed by some as an impediment to opportunity, thereby fuelling dissatisfaction among the youth.

The quota system was initially established post-1971 to honour the contributions of freedom fighters who sacrificed during the struggle for independence from Pakistan. Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—who is highly respected as the “Father of the Nation”—the system was formally implemented in 1972. It remained in effect until his assassination in 1975.

In subsequent years, the quota system saw fluctuations in its application, being sidelined under various military and extremist regimes. Sheikh Hasina sought to reinstate the quota during her first premiership from 1996 to 2001. However, during the tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia (2001–2006) and subsequent interim governments, the policy was not a focal point. Upon returning to office in 2009, Hasina reinstated the 30% reservation for freedom fighters and their dependents, which was ultimately abolished in 2018 in response to growing student opposition. Ahead of the December 2018 elections, she opted to suspend the policy to mitigate potential electoral fallout.

The resurgence of protests surrounding the quota system intensified in Dhaka, following an appeal by Hasina's administration to the Supreme Court, which reinstated the quota in June 2024, soon after her re-election. This decision prompted renewed protests from students, and tensions escalated as government authorities remained firm on continuing the policy. Tragically, clashes during this period resulted in the loss of over 133 lives, comprising students, civilians, and security personnel. On July 21, the Supreme Court ruled to abolish the quota for all government jobs. While this ruling was anticipated to restore some measure of peace, unrest persisted, as many student leaders raised concerns about intimidation and violent responses linked to the Awami League.

Additionally, tensions were heightened by comments reportedly made by government officials, including Prime Minister Hasina, referencing the protesting students with the term “razakars,” which holds negative connotations associated with those who opposed the liberation effort in 1971. The Awami League's portrayal of anti-quota advocates as unpatriotic served to galvanize the protesters' resolve. Even after the

Supreme Court's verdict on July 21, ongoing frustrations persisted, particularly due to the elevated unemployment rate, especially within the government sector. According to a preliminary analysis by the United Nations and an International Labour Organization (ILO) report, the unemployment rate in the government sector reached 12.3% in 2023, a notable contrast to the overall labour market unemployment rate of 3.58%.

Challenges in India-Bangladesh Relations: Both nations have experienced fluctuations in their bilateral relations. However, India's foreign policy has placed significant emphasis on Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi government's cooperation with India has helped maintain sustainable ties between the two countries. Recently, massive protests in Bangladesh and the subsequent resignation of Sheikh Hasina have raised serious concerns about their bilateral relations.

Illegal immigration

Illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is a perennial problem. However, India has always remained a better place for the Bangladeshi people because of its stable government, several public welfare schemes, enough livelihood opportunities, and the most successful democracy in the world. India and Bangladesh share the fifth-largest land border in the world, the maximum of which is porous. Illegal immigration started even when present-day Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan. Five Indian States including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura share a border with Bangladesh, of which West Bengal shares 2217 kilometres. Although there is a perception that only Hindus are migrating from Bangladesh due to persecution, the fact is that Rohingya Muslims are mainly identified and caught during operations in border areas. Over the last fifteen years, there was a lack of intention to migrate to India because of good relations between the two countries and political stability in Bangladesh. The recent political crisis in Bangladesh has created an environment of illegal migration in border areas. The prominent media channels of West Bengal and even national media channels have covered several numbers of incidents where people of Bangladesh especially Hindu communities gathered in border areas to cross the border.

Security Issue

India and Bangladesh are closely related to each other and are linked historically, culturally and linguistically. Bangladesh has immense importance for India and certainly, Bangladesh needs India's support for overall development. Bangladesh since its independence has gone through political unrest and the recent political instability has raised grave security concerns for India. Historically it is observable that Bangladesh has always ruled by two Political parties. In Bangladesh, several anti-India organisations have built their bases like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), Independent Liberation Army of Assam (ILAA) and the People United Liberation Front (PULF) using Bangladeshi land for the fulfilment of their purpose. The Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Harkat-ul Jihadi-al-Islami (HuJI) all Pakistani origin terrorist organisations using Bangladeshi soil against India and frequently carried out terrorist activity in India. The Awami League government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina acted against several anti-India organisations and assured that Bangladesh soil would not be used against India. Three MoUs related to security issues were signed during Hasina's visit to India after came into power in 2009. For the enhancement of the security system, both countries collectively build some mechanisms like the Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG), and regular Border Coordination Conferences Between the directors General of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). On the other hand, when BNP was in power strong actions had not taken against such organisations. Henceforth ouster of Sheikh Hasina has created grave security concerns for

India. The present interim government failed to maintain law and order in Bangladesh and previously banned organisations now became very active. The earlier accused criminals are now out of prison, so obviously they involved themselves against India.

Development Issues

National interest is the main priority of a nation, after the Second World War all the newly independent countries in Asia and Africa focused on the nation's development. In South Asia, countries are underdeveloped and developing and are struggling with numerous challenges like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and deficiency of infrastructure and technologies. All the countries within the region jointly made several platforms for their developments like SAARC, and BIMSTEC. India in its foreign policy always prefers neighbouring countries and gives them special focus. India as the largest economy is trying to reshape regionalism. Bangladesh and India collectively work in many fields covering trade, connectivity, infrastructure, energy and security. In South Asia, Bangladesh has secured the second position as India's biggest trade partner and India has second position as Bangladesh's trade partner. Under SAFTA Bangladesh has been given duty-free and quota-free access to all its items except alcohol and tobacco in India for trade and economic cooperation. Under the Modi regime, Bangladesh and India achieved several milestones in connectivity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina inaugurated six cross-border rail links Between India and Bangladesh. One of the crucial pillars in bilateral relations between the two countries is cooperation in the power and energy sector. Bangladesh is currently importing 1160 MW of power from India. The recent political crisis in Bangladesh has created uncertainty and the interim government's closeness with China has raised grave concerns about the development cooperation and friendly bilateral relations.

Cultural Issues

During British India Bengal province had two parts East Bengal and West Bengal, since then two parts have been related culturally. During the 1947 partition, it was noted that East Bengal became a part of Pakistan while West Bengal remained a part of India. In 1971 Bangladesh became separate from Pakistan and emerged as a sovereign nation state. Many factors, such as languages, food habits, dress codes, and occupations, unite the two countries. Many cultural academies like Indra Gandhi Cultural Centre and Indian Cultural Centre in Dhaka played a crucial role in maintaining people-to-people connection between the two nations. Rabindra Nath Tagore the polymath wrote two countries' national anthems. It was reported that youth from Bangladesh were participating in an Indian cultural reality show and securing top ranks. Artists from both countries play a role in movies produced in Bangladesh or India. Several incidents have raised grave concerns in cultural relations. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed in 2019 in India creates a distance between the people of the two countries, although it is India's domestic matter. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in March 2021, a protest spread in Bangladesh. The persecution of the Hindu community in Bangladesh and the reaction of the Indian government and people made a sudden distinction culturally.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that the strategic locations of both countries are of paramount importance for their respective development and national security. The two nations are closely related in every aspect of human life. Since the beginning of bilateral relations, the two countries have seen ups and downs. Despite huge difficulties, the two nations have achieved milestones of success in development cooperation. Moving forward the two countries engage in open dialogue and diplomacy to overcome the conflict condition and turn it into a cooperative relationship. Fostering mutual respect not only strengthens bilateral relations but

also promotes regional stability. Jointly, India and Bangladesh can navigate their differences and pave the way for prosperity.

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