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INDIA–BANGLADESH RELATIONS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NARENDRA MODI’S REGIME

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to explore the recent developments in India-Bangladesh relations under Narendra Modi's regime. Challenging the popular perception that is India-Bangladesh relations aggravate when Bharatiya Janata Party come into power, this article clearly indicates that India-Bangladesh relation has got new momentum during Modi's tenure as the prime minister of India. Significant developments have been made over three key thematic areas during Modi's government in India. These are; dispute resolution, cooperation and connectivity. However, this article also highlights a number of pertinent challenges like water dispute, non-tariff barriers, Rampal power plant and regional Rohingya issue, alleged illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India and border killings which need to be addressed carefully for a sustainable friendly relation and establish a win-win situation. The article recommends that in this age of growing interdependence and sharing, there is no alternative but to strengthen Bangladesh-India relations. Therefore, consistency in Indo-Bangladesh friendly relations needs to be maintained no matter which regime remains in power both in Dhaka and Delhi.

Keywords: India–Bangladesh relations, Narendra Modi, Land Boundary Agreement, Rampal power plant, Rohingya issue.

INTRODUCTION

India-Bangladesh shares historical, geographical, cultural, social and economic ties over civilizations. Bangladesh, previously Bengal, used to be a part of India and then Pakistan. Subsequently, Bangladesh got independence in 1971 through an armed struggle against Pakistan with massive contributions from India. Bangladesh wholeheartedly recognizes India's contribution during liberation war 1971. Despite such cultural, historical and geographical propinquity, and India's cooperation during crisis times of Bangladesh, Bangladesh-India relations have not always been smooth (Maini, 2015). In reality, the bilateral relations between these two states have often been bitter, tension-mounting, challenging and overwhelmed by allegations and counter-allegations (Kashem and Islam, 2016).

Popular perception about Indo-Bangladesh relation is that it gets a new momentum when Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and Indian National Congress (INC) regime are in power because of a historic old friendship between

BAL and INC. It was the Indira Gandhi of INC who spread her arms and embraced world-forsaken Bangladesh during and after the liberation war. On the contrary, when the Awami League (AL) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) come into power, India-Bangladesh relations aggravate which can be reflected in their foreign policies. Unfortunate though, when Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) forms the government in Bangladesh, Dhaka-Islamabad friendship strengthens to a larger extent instead of Dhaka-Delhi. Therefore, when BJP-led Narendra Modi (Hereafter 'Modi') came to power in 2014, the majority of the people of Bangladesh including academicians and policy-makers concerned that India-Bangladesh relations might not enjoy a deeper sense of friendship due to the BJP's ideological predisposition towards Hindu nationalism.

However, challenging all the odds, India-Bangladesh relation has gained a new pace and reached a new height during Modi's tenure as the prime minister of India. In this paper, recent accomplishments in India–Bangladesh

relations during Modi's tenure will be portrayed. Since Modi's government has no separate policy towards Bangladesh, the paper will also highlight the opportunities and challenges of Indo-Bangladesh ties which might provide new insights to the policy-makers to strengthen bilateral relations in future.

BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

There is no denying the fact that the contribution of the Indian government and people were indispensable for the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Despite historic non-alignment policy of India, on 27th March 1971, Indira Gandhi, a charismatic leader and the then prime minister of India, expressed her full support to the independence movement of Bangladesh by opening the Indian border and establishing refugee camps near border areas of Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal with a view to providing safe shelter for Bangladeshi refugees. The Indian government also arranged training and ammunition for Mukti Bahini (Freedom fighter) guerrillas. Indira Gandhi's government provided full political and diplomatic support during the entire nine-month long period of Bangladesh Liberation War. Indira Gandhi personally travelled across the globe to mobilize the support for Bangladesh. To recognize her role during the Bangladesh Liberation War and her charismatic leadership ability to manage such a complex regional war where global superpowers were involved, she was posthumously conferred the Bangladesh Freedom Honour award on 25th July 2011 (The Hindu, 2011a). It is the highest state award of Bangladesh conferred to the non-nationals and Indira Gandhi is the only person who has been conferred this highest state honour so far.

After the independence of Bangladesh, India and Bangladesh signed the 'The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace', best known as Indira- Mujib Treaty for a 25 years term on 19th March 1972. The treaty was grounded on the mutual respect for one another's independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty while non-interference in internal issues (Pant, 2007, p. 232). It is often opined that India-Bangladesh relations reached its peak during the tenure of Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur. From 1971 to 1975, the tenure of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman-led Awami League in Bangladesh, India became the largest development partner and aid donor of Bangladesh (Singh, 2009, p. 149). However, the India-Bangladesh relation came into a long spell of bitterness after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. At that

time, the military government led by General Ziaur Rahman used anti-India stance as a trump card as it became the best way of creating Islamic and nationalist identity in Bangladesh's domestic politics. With the possible exclusion of the Awami League, all political parties took the full opportunity of this practice (Chakma, 2015 and Pant, 2007, p. 233). During Ziaur Rahman's and subsequent Ershad's regime, India was projected as an imperialistic and opportunistic regional hegemon and India's hegemonic terror was effectively utilized to reestablish the pro-Islam image of Bangladesh (Majumdar, 2014, p. 333). Consequently, Indo-Bangladesh relation aggravated during the military regime in Bangladesh (Pant, 2015). Because of this long spell of bitterness, India and Bangladesh ties had witnessed no visible change even when Begum Khaleda Zia-led BNP, a democratic party, was in power between 1991 and 1996.

After BAL returned to power in 1996, waiting almost 2 decades, India-Bangladesh relations started to reconcile which was reflected through the signing of a thirty year comprehensive Ganges water sharing treaty. But this cooperative and friendly relations deteriorated soon after BJP formed the government in India in 1998. Notably, BJP was vociferous about the migration issue from Bangladesh during their election campaign in 1998. Moreover, the BJP government frequently linked cross-border insurgencies with Bangladesh which further exacerbated the India-Bangladesh ties (Singh, 2009, p. 154). As a consequence, India-Bangladesh relation aggravated to its lowest ebb during BNP's second tenure of BNP (2001-2006) (Pant, 2015).

India-Bangladesh ties gained a new momentum when Manmohan Singh (hereafter Singh) and Sheikh Hasina formed the government in India and Bangladesh, respectively. During Singh's historic visit to Dhaka in 2011, a number of protocols were signed including the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) protocol, however, without any conclusion on Teesta water sharing treaty and India-Bangladesh transit dispute. Mamata Banerjee, the 'spoiler' of Indo-Bangladesh relations (The Hindu, 2011), refused to approve the Teesta water sharing treaty with Bangladesh at the eleventh hour on the ground that it could be detrimental to West Bengal's interest. In addition, the ratification of LBA protocol was massively opposed by BJP in the Indian parliament session. Thus, despite his best and honest attempts, the Singh government failed to strengthen Indo-Bangladesh

relations, mainly due to India's domestic politics. It would not be wrong to claim that while the bitterness/warmness of Indo-Bangladesh relations depends on the political parties that form government in Delhi and Dhaka to a greater extent, a constant pattern of mutual mistrust and uneasiness prevails over water sharing dispute and land boundary ratification (Majumdar, 2014, p. 327). And the solutions to these vexing problems don't come up mainly because of the reluctant nature of Indian political parties. For example, even though LBA was signed in 1974 and was ratified by the parliament of Bangladesh within months, India didn't ratify that until 2015. The focus of this article is to examine the Modi's initiatives towards Bangladesh to strengthen the Indo-Bangladesh relations rather shed light on the tumultuous history. Therefore, the following sections concentrate on recent accomplishments in Indo-Bangladesh ties that are carried out under Modi's regime, major impediments in strengthening the bilateral relations and possible solutions.

INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS UNDER MODI'S REGIME

Since the Modi government doesn't have any separate policy toward Bangladesh, Modi's Bangladesh policy will be discussed under the larger framework of 'Neighborhood First Policy' (NFP). The NFP provides a new space to revitalize India's diplomatic relations with neighbours amid the deadlock situation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). According to Modi '[w]e will deepen regional connectivity and cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. There is a natural logic to this arrangement' (The Hindu, 2015). Moreover, Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister of India, argued that '[f]oreign policy begins on our borders and quite appropriately, we embarked on a "Neighbourhood First" policy from the very inception of our tenure' (Kashem and Islam, 2016).

India's sincerity about NFP can be reflected by LBA ratification with Bangladesh after waiting decades, acceptance of the verdict of Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) that was in favor of Bangladesh, India's leading role in post-earthquake rescue efforts of Nepal, invitation of all neighbor countries' heads of the states in Modi's oath-taking ceremony and official visits paid by Modi to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka within the first year of his entrance to the prime minister office (Kashem and Islam, 2016).

Bangladesh has emerged as a crucial country for South Asian regional initiatives like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In addition, connectivity and development of Northeastern states of India are priority domestic policies of Modi's regime which can be facilitated by Bangladesh as it can work as a catalyst. Hence, apart from NFP, the importance of Bangladesh in Modi's foreign policy can be perceived by the measures taken by the Modi government and opinions shared by Indian policymakers and government high officials. For instance, in fourth India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj argued that "[I]ndia is following a policy of neighbours first, and among the neighbours Bangladesh is foremost" (The Hindu, 2017c). Ajit Doval, the National Security Adviser of India, recognized Bangladesh as 'India's most important neighbour' in a seminar on India-Bangladesh relations in New Delhi (Haidar & Habib, 2015). Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Foreign Secretary of India, rightly contended "[I]f there is one example where the neighbourhood first policy has yielded good result, it is in case of Bangladesh" (The Hindu, 2017a). The landmark visit paid by Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on 6 June 2015 laid down new milestone in Delhi-Dhaka ties. 22 agreements were inked and renewed on multifaceted issues including security, connectivity, power and trade which is expected to bear the fruit in future. In addition, Delhi-Dhaka relation was fostered considerably by the official visit paid by the Minister of State for External Affairs of India to Bangladesh in August 2014.

From Bangladesh side, the official visit of Abdul Hamid, the President of Bangladesh, to India in December 2014 was significant in streamlining bilateral relation.

It was the first visit of ceremonial head of Bangladesh to India since independence. In addition, the official visit paid by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the executive head of Bangladesh, to India in April 2017 contributed to strengthening Indo-Bangladesh relation to the next level. With 22 government-to-government agreements on energy cooperation and connectivity issues, and another 14 agreements in the field of private investment, this visit was incomparable by all means to deepen the bilateral relations (The Hindu, 2017b). Apart from the above mentioned visits paid by the head of states, the third and fourth India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meetings which is delegated at foreign ministers

level were also important in fostering bilateral relation. In the third JCC meeting in September 2014, a wider range of issues were identified and discussed, especially security, connectivity, development cooperation, renewable energy, socio-cultural cooperation etc. (Government of India, September 2014). However, in the fourth JCC meeting in October 2017, both delegates emphasized the issues of connectivity, and economic and development cooperation between two states. It is worth mentioning, Sushma Swaraj, although didn't specify, contended to resolve all the irritants of the Indo-Bangladesh ties in the fourth JCC meeting (The Hindi, 2017c). Notably, it is Modi's government which persuaded Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, in ratifying LBA which reflects Modi's enthusiasm to deepen Indo-Bangladesh relations.

After reviewing the recent events, three key themes emerged in India-Bangladesh relations during Narendra Modi's regime: 1. Dispute Resolution, 2. Cooperation and 3. Connectivity. In the following sections, the recent developments in India-Bangladesh ties under these themes would be discussed.

Dispute Resolution: Two key disputes between India-Bangladesh, namely, LBA and Maritime Boundary, has peacefully been resolved during Narendra Modi's government.

a. Ratification of LBA:

One of the greatest successes of the Modi government towards Bangladesh is the ratification of the 70-years-old border dispute, the LBA. Ratification of LBA was always been a major issue in Indo-Bangladesh ties. Geographically, India-Bangladesh shares a territorial border of approximately 4,096 kilometres and a disputed area of approximately 6 kilometres. It is worth mentioning that although LBA got momentum during the official visit of Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in September 2011, the ratification failed due to the disagreement of Indian opposition parties, mainly BJP, in the parliament. However, during Modi's tenure, although there were some initial hurdles, LBA ratification bill was passed undisputedly in Rajya Sabha which was followed by Lok Sabha. During the 100th Constitutional Amendment, all 331 members of Lok Sabha voted for LBA which came up 4 decades after the Indira-Mujib Treaty (Gupta, 2015). The ratification of the LBA has resolved the three delicate issues of Indo-Bangladesh ties, that is, (i) the exchange of 162 enclaves located along India-Bangladesh

border; (ii) the demarcation of 6.5 kilometres new boundary; and (iii) the exchange of adverse possessions of each other's territories (Ali, 2015).

b. Resolution of Maritime Boundary

On 7th July 2014, the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) delivered its verdict in favour of Bangladesh and against India on the maritime boundary between two countries in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh decided to pursue international arbitration at the PCA in 2009 under the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to settle the long-standing sea boundary disputes. In their submissions to the PCA, while India claimed a boundary based on the equidistance principle, Bangladesh demanded the boundary based on equity. Bangladesh's claim was logical as boundary based on the equidistance principle can make Bangladesh a "zone-locked" state by the maritime zones of India and Myanmar. Therefore, without an equitable determination of sea boundary, Bangladesh would only have a trivial exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.

PCA accepted the line of argument by Bangladesh and gave the judgment where Bangladesh was awarded 19,467 square kilometres of the total 25,602 square kilometres (roughly 80 per cent) of disputed sea area. However, India welcomed the decision of PCA which contributed to resolving the decades-long sea boundary dispute between two neighbouring states. Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali rightly contended that "We commend India for its willingness to resolve this matter peacefully by legal means and for its acceptance of the tribunal's judgment" (Reuters, 2014). In a statement, The Ministry of External Affairs of India stated that "The settlement of the maritime boundary will further enhance mutual understanding and goodwill between India and Bangladesh by bringing to closure a long-pending issue" (Reuters, 2014).

India's welcoming of the verdict is a clear demonstration of newly formed Modi government's emphasis on straitening bilateral relations with immediate neighbours.

Cooperation: India-Bangladesh cooperation over economy, power, maritime, education and political issue (i.e. political prisoners' extradition) has reached a new height after Modi came to power.

a. Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation has manifested in Modi's foreign policy towards Bangladesh. Between 2004 and 2017, the bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India increased noticeably, from almost US\$ 1.6 billion to US\$ 6.8 billion. Table 1 gives a summary of import-export figures between India and Bangladesh. Another notable aspect of economic cooperation is the extension of India's line of credit for Bangladesh worth around US\$ 8 billion. According to Sushma Swaraj "[T]otally, three lines of credit amounting to USD 8 billion have been extended by India to Bangladesh so far. This is by far the largest development assistance that India has extended to any country worldwide" (The Hindu, 2017c). However, since independence, Bangladesh has always been suffering acute trade deficit with India and this trade deficit between two states has only been exacerbating over the years (Table 1). In 2017, the trade deficit for Bangladesh is US\$ 6.12 billion. Notably, to boost Indian investments in Bangladesh, an MoU has also signed to build two special economic zones for Indian companies in Bheramara and Mongla, Bangladesh. Hopefully, these economic zones will act as a thrust to foster Indo-Bangladesh economic ties in the foreseeable future. Contrarily, to facilitate the shipment of Bangladeshi apparels to retail shops across India, the Indian government has announced to provide 50 acres of land in Gujrat to build a warehouse for Bangladeshi companies (The Daily Star, 2015c). The warehouse is believed to contribute US\$ 1 billion worth of export to Bangladesh annually.

Indian investments in Bangladesh has also increased noticeably during Modi's tenure. For instance, two Indian giant power companies, namely, Adani Power Limited and Reliance Power Limited inked an MoU with Bangladesh to invest US\$ 5.5 billion to build two power plants capable of generating total 4,600 MW of electricity. It is worth mentioning that it will be the largest foreign direct investment in Bangladesh. In the fourth JCC meeting, Sushma Swaraj, the Indian delegates of the meeting, signed two MoUs, one for establishing a 'common facility center' in Khulna for small and medium enterprises and another for exporting of high speed diesel to Bangladesh. It is expected to boost the economy of the southern part of Bangladesh. (The Hindu, 2017c).

b. Power Cooperation

India-Bangladesh power cooperation has got new momentum after Modi came to power. With a view to easing the power shortage of electricity-starved Bangladesh, India is currently exporting around 500 MW of electricity to Bangladesh. At the 9th meeting of Bangladesh-India joint steering committee on power cooperation in Dhaka in May 2015, the decision has been taken to provide an additional 600 MW electricity to Bangladesh by 2017. Of this 600 MW, 500 MW of electricity will be supplied from West Bengal and 100 MW will be supplied from Palatana power project in Tripura (The Daily Star, 2015a, 15 May). And as discussed in the earlier section, two more power plants will be built that will make an addition of 4,600 MW of electricity to the national grid of Bangladesh. According to MoU, US\$ 3 billion will be invested by Reliance Power Limited to build a liquefied natural gas-based power plant capable of generating 3,000 MW and US\$ 2.5 billion will be invested by to set up a coal-based power plant to generate 1,600 MW (Dhaka Tribune, 2015, 6 June; The Daily Star, 2015b, 7 June).

From the Bangladesh side, building a new electricity grid between Bangladesh and Northeastern states of India were reviewed. According to The Daily Star, 'once set up, India will use Bangladesh's soil to transmit 6,000 MW of power from Assam to Bihar via Dinajpur' (The Daily Star, 2015a). Moreover, this new grid will help India in satisfying its desire to cross-border energy trading with SAARC member states (Karim, 2015).

c. Coastal Shipping and Maritime Cooperation

With a view to reducing the trading cost, India-Bangladesh signed a draft agreement and two separate pacts on coastal shipping cooperation in 2015. This agreement is expected to promote India's coastal shipping as the shipping cost will be cut by nearly two-thirds using Chittagong and Mongla ports of Bangladesh. Because of the direct access to Bangladeshi port, the overall shipping time for Indian cargo vessels will also down considerably (Hindustan Times, 2015, 7 June). According to Modi, '[T]he coastal shipping agreement will boost bilateral trade. The Indian economic zone will promote Indian investments in Bangladesh' (The Hindu, 2015).

In this age of globalization and connectivity, blue economy and maritime security have emerged as a vital

part of countries' foreign policy. India has already witnessed the 'Mumbai Attack' due to the maritime security breach. Thus, maritime cooperation is an important issue for both India and Bangladesh. During Modi's visit to Dhaka, the world witnessed the signing of India-Bangladesh maritime cooperation deal called

'Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean'. Besides the deal, an MoU has been inked between the University of Dhaka and Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) of India and for collaborative research on oceanography in the Bay of Bengal.

Table 2. Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh.

Year	India's export to Bangladesh	India's import from Bangladesh	Share of total imports by India from the world (in %)	Trade deficit for Bangladesh
2004-05	1,631	59	0.05	-1,572
2005-06	1,664	127	0.08	-1,537
2006-07	1,629	228	0.12	-1,401
2007-08	2,923	257	0.10	-2,666
2008-09	2,497	313	0.10	-2,184
2009-10	2,433	254	0.08	-2,179
2010-11	3242	446	0.12	-2,796
2011-12	3789	585	0.12	-3,204
2012-13	5144	639	0.11	-4,505
2013-14	6166	484	0.13	-5,682
2014-15	6,451	621	0.14	-5,830
2015-16	6,034	727	0.19	-5,307
2016-17	6,820	701	0.18	-6,119

All values in US\$ Millions.

Source: Ministry of Commerce, Govt. Of India.

d. Cooperation over Education and Training

The promotion of educational exchange, training and cooperation between India and Bangladesh is also manifested during Modi's tenure. Recently, the government of India has announced to spend 35 corer Bangladeshi Taka in next 5 years to provide scholarships to the descendants of Freedom Fighters. Every year two thousand students will be awarded this scholarship (Bangla Telegraph, 2018). Two MoU's have been signed Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 one between the University of Dhaka and Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) of India for collaborative research on oceanography in the Bay of Bengal, and another between the University of Rajshahi and India's Jamia Millia Islamia University for educational cooperation.

Providing training for human resource development is a crucial aspect of Indo-Bangladesh relations that reached a new height during Modi's regime. The Indian government has launched a programme for providing training to Bangladeshi bureaucrats and law enforcement agencies' officers. Reportedly, over the next 3 years, 1500 Bangladeshi bureaucrats and police

officers will receive training in different Indian institutions (The Economic Times, 2015, 7 May).

e. Political Prisoners Extradition

The progress regarding political prisoner extradition has been manifested after Modi came to power. Although Bangladesh-India extradition treaty came into effect since October 2013, it gained new momentum during Modi's tenure which can be supported by the transference of Indian separatist leader Anup Chetia to India in November 2015 waiting after nearly two decades. Similarly, India also handed over Nur Hossain to Dhaka in November 2015, the prime accused of sensational Narayanganj seven-murder case. It is believed that the implementation of the extradition treaty will deepen Indo-Bangladesh security ties.

Connectivity: Connectivity, both physical and socio-cultural, has clearly manifested in Modi's policy towards Bangladesh.

a. Physical Connectivity:

The Bangladesh government's decision to allow India use of its territory for transit of cargo and passengers to the North East may be seen as a major initiative of

Bangladesh in strengthening India-Bangladesh relations to the next level in Bangladesh. The transit facility was signed during Modi's visit to Dhaka in June 2015 and was officially inaugurated on 16 June 2016. The transit facility has reduced the Kolkata-Agartala distance by half from 1600 kilometres to 800 kilometres and cut the transportation costs from \$67 to \$35 US dollars per tonne with a transit fee of \$192.25 per tonne.

From the Indian side, strong determination Modi governments to engage with Bangladesh through rail, road and waterways connectivity can be reflected by the measures like initiating direct bus services between Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka-Guwahati-Shillong and mobilizing the establishment of a broad gauge rail line of 15 kilometres length between Agartala, Bangladesh and Tripura, India. The latter one will cut the distance between Agartala and Kolkata nearly one-third, from 1,650 kilometres to 515 kilometres. To materialize the rail line project, the Modi government has already sanctioned 1000 crore INR in July 2015. This direct rail connectivity is believed to promote socio-economic ties between these two countries to a greater extent (NDTV, 2015, 26 July). In addition, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) signed the historic Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) to facilitate the road connectivity among these neighbours. BBIN-MVA is expected to boost the intra-regional trade by around 60 percent and global trade around 30 percent. (The Daily Star, 2015d).

b. Socio-cultural Connectivity

To strengthen the cultural ties between India and Bangladesh, Modi adopted the cultural exchange programmes for the years 2015–2017 (Kashem and Islam, 2016). Notably, 'Maitree Express' has started running one additional round trip between Kolkata-Dhaka-Kolkata since January 2015, which now runs thrice a week. In addition, with mutual consent, both the governments have approved three borders *'haats'*¹ to deepen their bilateral relations. All these initiatives are believed to be imperative in promoting people-to-people connection in the long run.

CHALLENGES

The following section attempts to explore the prime challenges in India-Bangladesh relations.

Water Dispute: While Bangladesh and India share 54 trans-boundary rivers, no other water sharing treaty expect the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty is operational between the two countries. In recent time, the dispute centred on the Teesta river water sharing has deteriorating Indo-Bangladesh relations to an unprecedented level. It is unfortunate that this crucial issue has not been resolved for over 18 years. Besides, India's attempt to create a dam and divert water has incited Bangladesh. There is no denying that India needs more water for its ever increasing population, however, India cannot ignore the water rights of Bangladesh. It is worth mentioning, the Modi government showed an honest attempt at resolving the dispute, but his attempt was not honored by Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal Government. Regarding Teesta issue, the general perception in Bangladesh is of being deprived of water rights. Moreover, although delayed, the Indian government's controversial project called "Tipaimukh Dam" contributed to deteriorate India-Bangladesh relations to a larger extent. If India doesn't take any positive approach with urgency, water disputes would be the utmost reason of exacerbating the Indo-Bangladesh relations in future which could be irreconcilable.

Non-tariff barriers: Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has suffered severe trade deficit with India and it is widening year after year (Table 1). Expert opines that the reason for this imbalance is India's protectionist economic policy and excessive non-tariff barriers. There is no denying the fact that government of India has provided the duty-free opportunity for maximum Bangladesh products which can be reflected by the enlistment of only 25 items in India's sensitive list for Bangladesh compared to Bangladesh's sensitive list for India which has 1241 items (Sharma, 2016), however, non-tariff barriers in the form of customs and bureaucratic harassment delay shipment from Bangladesh which lead to increase the shipping cost from Bangladesh side and contribute to massive trade deficit. This vast trade deficit has now turned into a political issue rather than an economic one. Many Bangladeshi including academicians and policy-makers now feel a sense of deprivation which could be a major impediment to strengthening Indo-Bangladesh ties in future. Indian government should be resolved with some urgency, otherwise, India may lose a huge market of Bangladesh to China.

¹ A haat is an open-air market that is conducted on a regular basis (i.e. once, twice, or three times a week and in some places every two weeks) in the rural areas of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan serving as a trading venue for local people.

China, with its welcoming and encouraging attitude, is very proactive in this regard. It frequently organized exhibitions on Chinese products targeting only Bangladeshi traders, promotes technology transfers and also explores importable Bangladeshi commodities. Notably, India was Bangladesh's largest import origin country in 2003, but it has already lost its position to China (Sharma, 2016). This is alarming for India and this gap between India and China may continue to widen massively if India doesn't take proper care of the aforementioned non-tariff barriers.

Rampal Power Plant: On 11 January 2011, the governments of Bangladesh and India inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to set up two coal-fired thermal power plants in Rampal, Bangladesh, roughly 15 kilometres away from the Sundarban-the largest continuous mangrove forest in the world. It is a joint venture initiative between the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the Indian National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) at a cost of \$1.68 billion capable of generating 1,320 MW electricity.

There is no denying that government of Bangladesh is trying to mitigate acute electricity shortage, which is prerequisite for economic development, however, due to its close proximity to the Sundarban, Rampal project has been facing severe domestic resistance and international criticism since inception.

Unfortunately, despite vigorous domestic resistance, both governments' obstinate attitude towards completion of the project by any means is tarnishing the image of India and as well as ruling Awami League of Bangladesh. While Sheikh Hasina's strong backing for the power plant directly correlating with her alleged pleasing-India-at-any-cost attitude, India's imperialist hegemonic attitude towards establishing power plant creating an anti-India sentiment in the mind Bangladeshi people. Especially, Bangladeshi people are increasingly becoming suspicious due to the duality of India's intention. While government of India refrained from establishing Nayachar thermal power plant in West Bengal in 2015 (within 10 kilometres of the Sundarbans of India), the very same government is promoting the Rampal project ignoring the public demand which tends Bangladeshi people to think India is trying to outsourcing its energy trade at the same time getting rid of the pollution problem. India's disrespectful attitude towards the public demand of Bangladesh could lead to a major debacle in Indo-Bangladesh ties in the long run.

Rohingya Issue: Recent Rohingya crisis has resulted, although to a lesser extent, bitterness in Indo-Bangladesh relation. More than 800,000 Rohingya have crossed the border into Bangladesh since August, running from a military crackdown that was initiated after Rohingya militants attacked police posts, killing 12 members of the security forces (The Guardian, 2017). There is no denying that regional security is the prime concern of the Modi government. However, Bangladesh expected Modi, being a regional leader, will address the alleged persecution of the Rohingya Muslim community which will ease the repatriation process of Rohingya people in foreseeable future. But unfortunately, Modi expressed his deep concern on extremist violence only in his visit to Yangon on 5 September 2017 and stayed tight-lipped about the mass exodus and humanitarian crisis (Hindustan Times, 2017a, September 6). And amid a burgeoning humanitarian catastrophe, New Delhi threatened to deport the 40,000 Rohingyas on the ground of national security concerns which has slightly blunted India's regional and international image (Hindustan Times, 2017b, September 24). However, opposite to the general perception, China played a vital role and proposed a three-stage path for Rohingya repatriation (Lee, 2017), which world was expecting from India.

It is undoubtedly true that Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia which might explain India's soft-peddled attitude on the Rohingya issue. India has been working on connecting northeast Indian states to Sittwe port (Upadhyay, 2017). However, Bangladesh is crucial for expanding India's physical connectivity. And shunning Bangladesh in regard to Rohingya refugees didn't bring a good message to Bangladeshi policy-makers. Hopefully, India will get more involved in the long-term resolution of the Rohingya crisis and avoid the misleading geopolitical strategy.

Alleged Illegal Migration of Bangladeshis to India: Despite Bangladesh's repeated denial, India constantly accuses Bangladesh for huge illegal migration of Bangladeshis to the neighbouring Indian states to an extent that contributes to the gradual demographic pattern change. The High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh repeatedly expresses his concern over the illegal migration issue. According to the High Commissioner "[W]e have to be circumspect in issuing visas particularly when we know that around 25,000 Bangladeshis do not return after entering India every year. Those who enter unrecorded are many more. Our

concern about illegal migrants cannot be brushed aside" (The Daily Star, 2009). Kiren Rijiju, the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs of India, stated in Rajya Sabha that there are around 2 crore illegal Bangladeshi immigrants staying in India (Jain, 2016). However, it is merely an allegation as Rijiju did not provide any evidence to support his allegation. Indian politicians frequently use this 'illegal Bangladeshi' issue as a populist move to gain public attention. Very recently, Mamta Banerjee has accused cross border illegal Bangladeshi for poll violence during Gram Panchayat elections in several districts of West Bengal without any kind of proof. At least 21 people were killed during this poll violence (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). This blame game between India and Bangladesh inhibits to strengthening India-Bangladesh ties to a large extent.

Border Killings: Except 1973, every year scores of Bangladeshis are being killed by Indian Border Security Force (BSF). In a research from Odhikar (2017), between 2000 and 2017 4,138 Bangladeshi nationals have been killed by BSF. This is undoubtedly not an attitude a friend (or younger brother) can ever expect. Huge resentment is growing in Bangladesh which can irreversibly change the Indo-Bangladesh relations for worst. Although, after Modi came to power, this number is slowly decreasing, however, even one killing cannot be accepted. So, we hope Modi would take care of this issue with utmost importance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide an overview of the recent progress in Indo-Bangladesh ties during Narendra Modi's tenure. While challenging the popular perception, it is asserted that even though BJP is in power now, India-Bangladesh relationship has reached a new height.

In fact, the peaceful resolution of the long-standing maritime dispute and the ratification of the historic LBA is expected to strengthen the India-Bangladesh relations in the foreseeable future. However, the challenges like water dispute, non-tariff barriers, Rampal power plant and regional Rohingya issue, alleged illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India and border killings, need to be addressed carefully for a sustainable friendly relation and establish a win-win situation.

Last but not least, in this age of growing interdependence and sharing, there is no alternative but to strengthen Bangladesh-India relations. Therefore, consistency in Indo-Bangladesh friendly relations needs to be maintained no matter which regime remains in power

both in Dhaka and Delhi.

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