

# The Daily Star

## Bangladesh-India relations: The way forward

*Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, May 29, 2014*

INDIAN Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi's invitation to the Saarc leaders at his inauguration was an unprecedented move that reflected his vision of South Asia. He realises that if India is to build up as a regional power, then it must ensure a friendly neighbourhood. His reaching out to the neighbours before engaging with big powers such as the USA, Russia, China and the EU, is a clear indication of priority that Mr. Modi attaches to the region. In this context, Bangladesh should be close to the top of Mr. Modi's agenda, because Bangladesh not only shares the longest international border with India (3,500 km) and is her largest trading partner within Saarc (over \$ 5 bn. in 2012-13), it also holds a key strategic position vis-à-vis India's connectivity to SE Asia, and China. Despite occasional hiccups in the past, Bangladesh-India relations entered a new dynamic phase in 2008. Over the last five years, the two countries signed a number of treaties that encouraged trade and economic cooperation, provided easier connectivity resulting in more people-to-people contact, and most importantly, addressed a number of security issues that had strained our relationship in the past. With the regime change in Delhi, there will be questions raised about the direction India-Bangladesh relations will take and what the priorities will be in our relations.

From our side, the foremost issue would be the implementation of agreements and MOUs signed between the two governments. In September 2011, the two sides agreed to resolve the enclave issue by means of swapping 162 enclaves, giving residents a choice of nationality. India will receive 51 enclaves of 7,110 acres, while Bangladesh will get 111 enclaves of 17,149 acres. People living in the enclaves want to be recognised as citizens of the country inside which these enclaves are located and they have been agitating for this. Adversely Possessed Land (APL) is another legacy of the partition in 1947 that both governments agreed to resolve. About 3,500 acres of Bangladesh land is under India's possession and about 3,000 acres of Indian land is under Bangladesh possession in different points of the border. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) that addresses these issues is now awaiting ratification by the Indian Parliament. We hope that the BJP government, with its overwhelming majority and with the expected support from the opposition Indian National Congress (INC), will get the bill ratified, thus ushering in a new era in our relationship.

Water issues, and specifically Teesta water treaty, come next in the order of priority. An agreement on Teesta water was ready to be signed during the Indian PM's visit to Dhaka in September 2011, but the deal fell through when the chief minister of West Bengal, then a partner in the UAP government, refused to agree to the deal. It is not constitutionally binding on the central government of India to seek support from the

states on an international agreement, yet the UAP government could not ignore the opposition from one of its major coalition partner for fear of losing the majority in the Parliament. This was a huge loss of face for the Indian PM from which he could never recover.

We would expect that Mr. Modi, while not being burdened with squabbling coalition partners, will be decisive. He can now discuss the issue with Ms. Mamata Bannerjee from a position of strength and, in effect, can sign the water treaty with or without her support. Meanwhile, China has been building storage dams and hydroelectric projects on its part of the Brahmaputra without consulting the lower riparian -- India and Bangladesh. This could be a major challenge for both the countries. In fact, a China-India-Bangladesh-Bhutan joint effort to develop the Brahmaputra basin is the right way forward.

Next in our priorities will be to increase trade and investment between the two countries. Indo-Bangladesh trade has increased from about \$ 3 billion to over \$ 5 billion in the last five years. More significantly, Bangladesh's export to India has increased to bring the trade imbalance from 1:10 down to 1:8.5 over the same period. There exists, of course, a huge untapped market for Bangladeshi products in India that our entrepreneurs can seek out. We shall also be looking forward to greater Indian investment in industrial and infrastructure development in Bangladesh. Our cooperation in the energy sector needs to extend with our stakes in hydroelectric projects being undertaken in Sikkim (Upper Teesta), Bhutan and Nepal. We need to revive Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline project to address future power needs.

Increased trade and investment will need greater connectivity. The governments of India and China are keen to develop Kolkata-Kunming highway that will connect Bangladesh and Myanmar with the rest of South-East Asia. This would be an economic boon for us. Similarly, once Akhaura-Agartala railway line is completed, Chittagong will have direct railway connection with the whole of India's north-east. The next project could be to reopen Kulaura-Latu rail communication to provide an alternative approach to Chittagong. On the inland waterways we could restore Kolkata-Dhaka steamer service, as existed in pre-1947 partition days. This could be an attractive tourist choice as well as a viable commercial venture. On the civil aviation side, we need to start direct air communication from Dhaka and Chittagong to Guwahati, Shilchar and Agartala, with onward connection to the outside world.

Now that both the governments have agreed not to give space to the insurgents and terrorist outfits on their respective soils, we could move to the next phase of keeping our border peaceful. Both governments must work closely to curb smuggling and human trafficking. Border killing is another issue that seriously strains Indo-Bangladesh relations; the victims are often ordinary people living in border areas. This needs to stop immediately, for which a political decision at the highest level is necessary. Both sides of Indo-Bangladesh border continue to remain poorer than rest of their countries. We need to increase investment in border areas to create more jobs. Issuance of Special Border Pass for people living within 10 km of the border will ensure their safety, as well as deter illegal crossing of the border.

The list is not exhaustive, but addressing these issues could be the beginning of a new era in Bangladesh-India relationship. The time to seize the initiative is now.