



Visit To Bangladesh: Expectations and Challenge

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The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's forthcoming visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 will witness signing of a treaty to implement the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between India and Bangladesh, which has been recently ratified by the Indian Parliament. Bangladesh had already ratified it in 2012. The two countries are also expected to sign a series of agreements on road, rail and port connectivity and energy cooperation. Also, according to media reports, the Indian Prime Minister and his Bangladeshi counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, will flag off a Kolkata-Dhaka-Tripura bus service. Though it seems that the visit is going to boost relationship between India and Bangladesh, it is naïve to make a lot of expectations from it because of differences on a few issues between the two countries. However, LBA has acted as a catalyst for a harmonious and improved bilateral tie between them.

India-Bangladesh Border Disputes

Disputes over demarcation of boundary were prelude to India-Bangladesh tensions. This is going to be legally resolved after the implementation of the LBA. After its implementation, the borders between the two countries will be demarcated, but what about the movement of borderland people? Is their movement going to stop? What will be the reaction of people from Border States, when they interact and engage with new citizens from the enclaves?

These questions have become more significant because of opposition to the LBA in Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal.

Historically, the seeds of India-Bangladesh land boundary disputes were sown during the partition of India in 1947. The Boundary Commission (BC) was set up to demarcate territory between India and Pakistan. This Commission was headed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had no prior experience of the work and also, for the first time, he was in the Indian sub-continent. The other members of the BC were representatives of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League.¹ Although the demand was to carve away a country for Muslims, the partition line was drawn not only on the basis of religion, but “other factors” like water canals, railways communication lines, etc too were taken into consideration by Sir Cyril Radcliffe.² In Bengal the “other factors” made Radcliffe to recommend the transfer of almost 6000 square miles area from east to west Bengal, and the districts of Murshidabad, Nadia, Jessore, Malda and Dinajpur were accordingly demarcated. ³ The Radcliffe line bore a certain resemblance to Curzon’s line of 1905, which covered 28,000 square miles and had a population of just over 21 million people, and East Bengal, a territory of 49,000 square miles with a population of 39 million people.⁴ In Sylhet entire district was given to Pakistan with the exception of three thanas of Badarpur (47 square miles), Ratabari (240 square miles), Patharkandi (277 square miles) and a portion of Karimganj thana (145 square miles).⁵ Also, 197 enclaves became the cause of contention between the two countries.⁶

In 1971, when Bangladesh came into an existence, it inherited all these disputes. To resolve it, on 16 May 1974, India and Bangladesh signed an agreement on Land Boundary where the two sides presented their arguments and proposed solution to various border related disputes like : Mizoram-Bangladesh sector, Tripura, Sylhet, Bhagalpur Railway line, Sibpur-Gaurangala sector, Muhuri (Belonia) sector, Remaining portion of the Tripura-Noakhali /Comila sector, Fenny River, Rest of Tripura-Chitagong Hill Tract, Beani bazar-Karimganj sector, Hakar Khal, Baikari Khal, Enclaves , Hilli, Berubari, Lathitilla-Dumabari.⁷ Under it was decided that the two sides would exchange land to provide corridor to each other. Bangladesh handed over 7.39 sq km south Berubari corridor to India to which India did not reciprocate. India transferred the land on 26 June 1992.

The 1510 square meters of land near 'Tin Bigha' enabled Bangladesh to have access to Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves. But a major step to resolve all border demarcation disputes was taken by India and Bangladesh in 2011 when they signed the LBA. To ratify the agreement, hundredth amendment was passed by the Indian Parliament on 7 May 2015.

After the LBA was ratified by the Indian Parliament, in Assam, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which is against it, called a protest, which disrupted normal life in Guwahati. In Meghalaya, the Coordination Committee on International Border and a conglomerate of organizations including the Khasi Students Union; Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People; the Hynniewtre National Youth Front; and the village councils falling under the Khasi-Jaintia Hills have been formed to resist the implementation of the agreement. They allege that a major chunk of tribal land from Meghalaya – almost 559.7 acres – would be swapped to gain a mere 52.15 acres from Bangladesh.⁸ In West Bengal, there is a group called Nikhil Banga Nagrik Sangha (All Bengal Citizen's Committee), which opposes all forms of interaction with Bangladesh. Calming down these groups and managing religious-cum-ethnic tensions in India's northeast is going to remain a challenge, even when the border between India and Bangladesh is demarcated.

Related to the border, is the issue of migrants. In the absence of accurate data on the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India, different agencies use different data, which is not reliable also. If one relies on the United Nations data, then, according to its 2013 report, the number is about 3.2 million. In the past, violence was triggered over the presence of migrants in India's north-eastern states.

Other Significant Issues

An issue, which is going to be discussed during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh, is sharing of water from river Teesta. This depends on the West Bengal Chief Minister, Ms Mamata Banerjee's concurrence, though the union government has the constitutional power to implement treaties without consulting the state government. Any step towards its implementation will cause a political reaction in West Bengal.

At present, India and Bangladesh are deliberating on the issue of improving connectivity, which is going to be discussed during the Indian Prime Minister's visit. India's only connectivity with its north-eastern states is through the chicken neck or Siliguri corridor (narrow stretch of land in West Bengal connecting India with its northeastern states). In order to open more roads, for many years, India has been demanding transit facility via Tetulia in Panchgarh district of Bangladesh. If opened, this corridor will reduce the road travel to and from northeast to mainland India by over 85 kms.

On connectivity, the two Prime Ministers are likely to discuss the fate of gas pipelines from Myanmar via Bangladesh to India. The pipeline was first proposed in 1997. It is 900 kilometre long, and was set to deliver 5 billion cubic metres of gas from the Swe gas field in southern Myanmar to east and northeast India.⁹

The two-way trade between India and Bangladesh in 2012-2013 was US \$ 5.34 billion with India's exports to Bangladesh accounting for US \$ 4.776 billion and imports US \$ 0.564 billion with duty free access given by India to Bangladesh for all items except 25.¹⁰ This is expected to rise up to \$ 10 billion by 2018.¹¹ At present, two border *haats* are already operational with a few more on the anvil along the India-Bangladesh border.¹² To improve the bilateral trade relationship, the two countries have to take steps to make trading easier at Integrated Check Post (ICP) which was inaugurated at Akhura-Agartala border on India-Bangladesh. When the two Prime Ministers will meet, they may announce steps to facilitate trade between two countries.

At present the Indian companies have been engaged in a joint venture in 13 important sectors which include: Agro Processing, Automobiles, Ceramics, Chemicals, Gems and Jewellery, Light Engineering, Information and Communication Technology, Hospital and Medical Equipment, Pharmaceuticals, Plastics, Professional Services, Tourism, Textiles (including home textile) etc to attract foreign investments in the country.¹³ Independently also, a large number of Indian firms from both public and private sectors have been working on different projects in Bangladesh. The sectors include power, transmission lines, telecom, textiles, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, glass, plastics and engineering.¹⁴ During the Indian

Prime Minister's visit, India is also expected to explore a possibility to invest in the development of Payra sea port in Patuakhali in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

With his visit to Bangladesh, the Indian Prime Minister will complete a visit to India's important neighbours: Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, in his first year in office. It is too early to predict the outcome of the visit, but it is satisfying that it is taking place. While meeting, the two leaders have to keep in mind a political adage-cum-caveat: It is not easy to address all the existing or forthcoming socio-political challenges in such a short span of time, but a road map can be roughly sketched out for future.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ Chakrabarty, Bidyut (2004) *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: Contour of Freedom* London & New York Routledge Curzon, p. 156.

² Chester, Lucy P. (2009) *Borders and conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe boundary commission and the partition of Punjab*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, p. 77.

³ Chakrabarty, Bidyut (2004) *Op cit* 168.

⁴ Chatterjee, Joya (2007) *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, New York, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, p 57

⁵ Chakrabarty, Bidyut (2004) *Op cit* 196

⁶ Schendel, Willem Van (2009) *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge, New York, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, p 97

⁷ Bhasin, Avtar Singh (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents-1971-2002 Volume 4*, New Delhi: Geetika Press, p.1891.

⁸ Natrajan, Sukanya 'Land Swap: can a deal be clinched?' *The Hindu* 26 March 2015.

⁹ Damman Thandi 'The Myanmar Pipedream: Myanmar-India-Bangladesh pipeline. Retrieved from <http://www.irgamag.com/analysis/terms-of-engagement/item/6622-the-myanmar-pipedream-myanmar-bangladesh-india-pipeline> Accessed on 26 May 2015.

¹⁰ India Bangladesh Relations Retrieved from www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bangladesh_July_2014_.pdf Accessed on 26 May 2015.

¹¹ India-Bangladesh Trade May Almost Double by 2018:CII ' Retrieved from http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-24/news/50825908_1_h-mahmood-ali-bangladesh-exports-industry-body-cii-today. Accessed on 26 May 2015.

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¹⁴ Ibid