



The Impact of Recent High Level Visits on India-Bangladesh Relations

*Dr Ashish Shukla**

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has historically been based on shared socio-cultural heritage, mutual respect and meaningful cooperation in every feasible arena. Bangladesh figures prominently in India's Neighbourhood First policy. It is also India's biggest trading partner in South Asia. The two countries have often worked together to cope with the common challenges and never shied away from taking measures to address each-others genuine concerns. India on her part never shies away from occasionally taking asymmetrical responsibilities and providing necessary assistance to her friendly neighbour. In the wake of the recent refugee crisis, India was among the first countries to reach out to Bangladesh in the time of need. It launched "Operation *Insaniyat*" to supply relief materials for 300,000 people that consisted of rice, pulses, sugar, salt, cooking oil, tea, ready to eat noodles, biscuits, mosquito nets etc. Since then India has been actively helping Bangladesh to deal with the situation.

The goodwill and warmth of this special relationship is often showcased during high-level visits. Indian Minister of External Affairs Ms. Sushma Swaraj, during her Dhaka Visit in October 2017, had categorically underlined the importance India attaches to Bangladesh. Speaking on the recent influx of "Rohingya" in Bangladesh she stated that "I may add that India is deeply concerned at the spate of violence in Rakhine State of Myanmar. We have urged that the situation be handled with restraint, keeping in mind the welfare of the population."¹ Putting forward India's view and position on the issue she stated that "In our view, the only long term solution to the situation in Rakhine State is rapid socio-economic and infrastructure development that would have a positive impact on all the communities living in the State."²

Less than six months later, Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Keshav Gokhale embarked on a three day visit (April 8-10) to Bangladesh on an invitation from his Bangladeshi Counterpart Md. Shahidul Haque. During his stay in Dhaka, Foreign Secretary held high level meetings to review bilateral ties and discuss issues of mutual interests with officials and leaders in Bangladesh

including Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.³ The Indian Foreign Secretary also interacted with a select group of media persons and members of civil society. He congratulated Bangladesh for making steady progress in a number of areas and especially for moving towards graduating from Least Developed Country (LDC) status and entering the category of developing countries. He went on further to term Bangladesh as “Sonar Bangla” and argued that India, as a development partner, was fully committed to play a useful role in Bangladesh’s achieving the status of middle income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041.⁴

Foreign Secretaries of India and Bangladesh utilised this opportunity to extensively review and assess the bilateral cooperation between the two countries and exchanged views on a number of issues of common concern. The two sides were satisfied with the progress in the implementation of various decisions and initiatives taken during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India in April 2017.⁵ They also discussed the issue of displaced persons from Rakhine State of Myanmar and Bangladesh’s efforts to deal with the ongoing crisis. Md. Shahidul Haque recognised India’s valuable contribution and stated that “We are happy with the way our friends from India are looking at this issue, and at peacefully resolving this issue.”⁶

Given the complexity of the issue and threats posed by the crisis, a section in Bangladesh is not happy with Indian stance. It wants India to adopt a clear approach and stand strongly with her friendly neighbour the way China has been doing with Myanmar.

Indian Foreign Secretary, on his part, lauded Bangladesh’s humanitarian gesture of supporting a large number of displaced persons from neighbouring Rakhine state of Myanmar. Based on the requirements projected by the Bangladesh government, he also announced the second phase of Indian assistance for the relief camps in Cox’s Bazar. Under this phase, there are plans to establish full-fledged medical field hospitals so that timely help could be provided to the displaced persons, especially to women and children. As per the reports available in the media, additional relief materials that will be sent to Bangladesh will include *inter alia* cooking stoves, cooking fuels, dried fish, baby food, milk powder, raincoats and gumboots.⁷

India has been a trustworthy and reliable development partner of Bangladesh. In the past seven years, India has extended lines of credit to Bangladesh to the tune of over US \$8 billion. It is also the biggest amount offered by India to any one country. At the end of the bilateral meeting, the two Foreign Secretaries witnessed the signing of six documents at the state guesthouse in *Padma* that in coming years would most certainly further strengthen the development cooperation between India and Bangladesh. The most important amongst them is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding construction of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline between Siliguri (India) and Parbatipur (Bangladesh).⁸ This particular MoU aims to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the hydrocarbon sector. Through this proposed 129.5 Km long friendship pipeline, Bangladesh is expected to get 1 million tonnes of diesel every year.

The other MoUs focus on a range of issues such as the cooperation between India's Prasar Bharti and Bangladesh Betar, establishing Rabindro Chair for Urdu Language for which Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and University of Dhaka (DU) entered into an understanding. An addendum to an Inter-Agency Agreement between India's Department of Atomic Energy's Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP) and Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) was also signed under which the two agencies would cooperate regarding Nuclear Power Plant Projects in Bangladesh. Indian High Commission in Dhaka, Bangladesh's Economic Relations Division of Ministry of Finance, and Directorate of Primary Education signed a MoU under which both sides would establish computer and language labs in 509 schools in Bangladesh. Another MoU, which was signed between Indian High Commission in Dhaka, Economic Relations Division of Bangladesh Finance Ministry and Rangpur City Corporation, focuses on rehabilitation and improvement of road connectivity within the Rangpur City Corporation.

On April 9, Gokhale also met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her *Sangsad Bhaban* office where the latter urged India to put more pressure on Myanmar for taking back close to one million people of Rakhine state who have been living in her country. She reportedly told the Indian Foreign Secretary that "We want India to put more pressure on Myanmar."⁹

Shiekh Hasina's Visit to West Bengal

On an invitation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sheikh Hasina embarked on a two-day official but "informal visit" to Indian state of West Bengal on May 25, 2018. During her visit, she attended the third convocation of Kazi Nazrul University and received honorary D. Litt degree.¹⁰ The two Prime Ministers along with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee attended the special convocation ceremony of the Visva-Bharti University at Shantiniketan too. During his address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also touched upon the special relationship between India and Bangladesh and stated that *Bharat aur Bangladesh do rashtra hain lekin hamare hit ek-doose ke saath samanvaya aur sahyog se jude hue hain* (India and Bangladesh are two states, but our interests are linked by cooperation and coordination).¹¹

After this, the two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated Bangladesh Bhavan in Shantiniketan where Modi underlined that Bangladesh Bhavan was the symbol of cultural brotherhood between the two countries. He reflected happiness and satisfaction with the strengthening of the Indo-Bangladesh friendship and cooperation in recent years when he stated that *Pichhle kuchh varshon se Bharat aur Bangladesh ke sambandhon ka swarnim adhyaya likha jaraha hai...Chahe sadak ho, rel ho ya antardeshiya jalmarg hon, ya fir coastal shipping, hum connectivity ke kshetra me bhi teji se aage badh rahe hain* (India and Bangladesh have been writing golden chapter in their relationship...Be it roads, railways or inland waterways, or coastal shipping, we are proceeding rapidly in the area of connectivity).¹²

Speaking on the supply of electricity to Bangladesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that *Bharat se Bangladesh ko bijli ki aaporti nirantar ho rahi hai. Abhi yah 600 megawatt hai. Is*

saal isko badhakar 1100 megawatt karne ka lakshya hai (India has been supplying electricity to Bangladesh. As of now, it is 600 megawatt and we have aimed it to increase up to 1100 megawatt). Then, he went on to underline the common challenges and stated that *Hamari aashayen aur aakankshayen jitni saman hain utni hi hamari chunautiyan bhi hain. Jalvayu parivartan ka sankat hamare saamne hai. Lekin agar dahakta hua suraj hmare liye chunautiyan lane vala hai, vahin avsar bhi usi ki roshni se paida hote hain* (Our hopes and aspirations are same, so are the challenges before us. But, if the hot sun brings challenges before us, the opportunities also emerge from his light.¹³

Besides having meeting with her Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also held a closed-door meeting with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee.¹⁴ The two leaders discussed a number of issues including education, trade and economic ties. Interacting with the media later Mamata Banerjee stated that “We have discussed several things in the meeting as we share same relation, same culture and same tradition...We discussed our education, culture, business, for the well-being of the people of both the countries.”¹⁵

Disappointment over Teesta

Every time a high level visit takes place, certain sections in both the countries including media and civil society hope to see some progress on Teesta water sharing arrangement. All the recent visits were no exceptions in this regard. Although, there was no direct reference to Teesta during Indian Foreign Secretary’s visit to Bangladesh, he was quite forthcoming in highlighting the fact that India was working hard internally to resolve the outstanding issues with Bangladesh.¹⁶ Later his Bangladeshi counterpart Md. Shahidul Haque had claimed that the issue was discussed in the official meeting and he was happy to announce that India reiterated its commitment and they (India) were looking at resolving the issue at the earliest.¹⁷ This time, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina surprised everyone by not saying a word about Teesta publicly.

At the inauguration event of Bangladesh Bhavan, she stated that “We have sorted out many bilateral issues. There are still some pending ones but I don’t want to spoil the beautiful occasion by referring to them. We want to settle all issues in a friendly ambience.”¹⁸ This was an obvious reference to Teesta. She sought Indian support in dealing with the Rohingya crisis, but did not openly talk about Teesta. Bangladeshi media termed it as a master class by Sheikh Hasina. The English daily *The Daily Star* wrote “But in the end, silence spoke the loudest...It was a master class on how to send out a message without saying a word. Teesta, unspoken, message sent.”¹⁹

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as usual, came down heavily on the Awami League leader for government’s failure to seal the deal on Teesta. BNP leader Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir accused Sheikh Hasina of ignoring Teesta water-sharing issue to maintain cordial relations with India. He categorically stated that “We also want friendly relations with India and that has to be based on mutual interests. But it’s not our duty to protect others’ interest sacrificing our ones. People won’t accept if you ignore our problems only to maintain warm relations.”²⁰

Apart from being a water sharing arrangement, Teesta is also an emotional issue in Bangladesh. People in general and civil society in particular are disappointed with the non-conclusion of the agreement. Opposition parties have often criticised the two governments over the issue. Although, the opposition has been focusing entirely on the continuing political deadlock in the country and upcoming general elections, the non-conclusion of Teesta gave them one more reason to whip up public sentiments to get political mileage.

Conclusion

The recent high-level bilateral visits have so far had a positive impact on the overall India-Bangladesh relationship. All these visits have not only helped strengthen the friendship and bilateral cooperation between the two countries, but also taken the relationship to a new level. This very fact has time and again been dully acknowledged by both the parties. After the conclusion of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's West Bengal visit, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, Mr. Syed Muazzem Ali remarked that the visit was quite successful in further strengthening the historical, cultural and people-to-people relationship.²¹ Bangladesh government appreciates and values Indian friendship and its continued assistance towards the socio-economic development of the people of Bangladesh. However, certain quarters in the country feel let down due to the inordinate delay in resolving the much talked about issue of water sharing. The non-conclusion of some of the outstanding issues between the two countries have the potential the negatively affect the bilateral relations. Hence, it is in the interest of both the nations to resolve those issues at the earliest.

** Dr Ashish Shukla, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Press Statement by External Affairs Minister during her visit to Bangladesh, October 22, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ "Visit of Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh (8-10 April, 2018)," *Press Release*, April 9, 2018, http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29802/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_810_April_2018, accessed on April 9, 2018.

⁴ "India: Working hard to resolve outstanding issues with Bangladesh," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 9, 2018, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/04/09/india-working-hard-resolve-outstanding-issues-bangladesh/>, accessed on April 9, 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Visit of Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh (8-10 April, 2018)," *Press Release*, April 9, 2018, http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29802/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_810_April_2018, accessed on April 9, 2018.

⁹ "PM Hasina to India: Put more pressure on Myanmar to take back Rohingyas," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 8, 2018, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/04/10/pm-hasina-india-put-pressure-myanmar-take-back-rohingyas/>, accessed on April 8, 2018.

¹⁰ "PM Hasina receives honorary D.Litt from Kazi Nazrul University," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/05/26/pm-hasina-receives-honorary-d-litt-from-kazi-nazrul-university>, accessed on May 26, 2018.

¹¹ "Text of PM's Address at the convocation of Visva Bharti University at Shantiniketan in West Bengal," *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, May 25, 2018.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Silence on Teesta," *The Daily Star*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/silence-teesta-1582186>, accessed on May 27, 2018.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Indian FS discusses Rohingya, but no progress on Teesta," *Prothom Alo*, April 11, 2018, <http://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/173901/Indian-FS-discusses-Rohingya-but-no-progress-on>, accessed on April 11, 2018.

¹⁷ "India: Working hard to resolve outstanding issues with Bangladesh," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 9, 2018, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/04/09/india-working-hard-resolve-outstanding-issues-bangladesh/>, accessed on April 9, 2018.

¹⁸ Singh, Shiv Sahay and Suvojit Bagchi (2018), "Want to settle all issues in a friendly ambience: Hasina," *The Hindu*, May 26, 2018, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/want-to-settle-all-issues-in-a-friendly-ambience-hasina/article23994739.ece>, accessed on May 27, 2018.

¹⁹ "Silence on Teesta," *The Daily Star*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/silence-teesta-1582186>, accessed on May 27, 2018.

²⁰ "AL govt ignoring Teesta, says BNP's Fakhrul," *Prothom Alo*, May 27, 2018, <http://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/176362/AL-govt-ignoring-Teesta-says-BNP's-Fakhrul>, accessed on May 27, 2018.

²¹ "Envoy: PM Hasina's India visit very successful in boosting ties," *Dhaka Tribune*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/06/01/envoy-pm-hasina-s-india-visit-very-successful-in-boosting-ties>, accessed on June 2, 2018.