



## **A fresh 'beginning' to the India- Bangladesh relationship**

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At the invitation of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a visit to Bangladesh on 6-7 June 2015. The decisions taken and agreements signed then, at Dhaka, have further strengthened the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh.

### **LBA, Agreements and MoUs**

During the visit Indian Prime Minister exchanged the ratified documents on the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This has legally concluded the demarcation related sixty eight years old (before 1971 it was with Pakistan) boundary disputes between the two countries; although a few irritations and tensions remain over the ancillary issues like cross border movement of people, migrations, human trafficking and smuggling etc. According to the agreed texts of the LBA, 162 out of 197 enclaves have been exchanged and about 5,000 acres of adverse land territories have been swapped between India and Bangladesh. India has received 51 (7,110.02 acres land) enclaves while Bangladesh has 111(17,160.63 acres land). The demarcation of boundaries based on strip maps between the two countries is expected to be completed by 30 June 2016.<sup>i</sup>

After the exchange of enclaves completed on July 31, 2015, to assess the post-LBA situation and discuss the measures needed to address the problems at India-Bangladesh

borders, representatives of the Border Guards of Bangladesh (BGB) and Border Security Force (BSF) held their forty first annual meeting from 2-6 August 2015, in New Delhi. In post-meeting joint statement, the officials informed that 'quick-reaction team' comprising personals from both sides would be formed to control crimes on the India-Bangladesh border.<sup>ii</sup>

Aside, LBA the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh also witnessed inking twenty two agreements and Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) between the two countries. In this category the stress was to extend monetary assistance and increase economic cooperation with Bangladesh. In the fiscal year 2013-14 Bangladesh's imports from India was recorded at \$6.03 (including informal trade) billion which has increased from \$4.78 billion in 2013-14; and its exports to India were worth \$456.63 million in 2013-14 compared to \$563.97 million in the previous year. To encourage their bilateral trade, the two Prime Ministers stressed on the urgent need for up-gradation of infrastructure of the Land Customs Stations (LCSs)/Land Ports/Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) in a coordinated manner. They expressed satisfaction that the work of opening immigration facilities at Phulbari (opposite Banglabandha) has been completed and that the immigration post would be operationalized soon.<sup>iii</sup> Also, a bilateral cooperation agreement was signed between Bangladesh Standards & Testing Institution (BSTI) and Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). The two agreed to accept the other's mark on standardization of goods.

To assist Bangladesh in construction of infrastructure to support demands of modern economy, in 2010, India provided \$ 1 billion of Line of Credit (LoC) to Bangladesh. During the visit, India extended a new LoC of \$ 2 billion.<sup>iv</sup> Tapping energy has always been a problem for Bangladesh, despite having an efficient reservoir of natural gas. It lacks technology to produce energy to satisfy the needs of its people and industries. In past India has supplied power to it from its transmissions in Tripura and other north eastern states. Increasing India's assistance to Bangladesh, in this field, during the Prime Minister's visit in 2015, deals were seal by the Indian private sectors: Adani group sealed a deal for two plants –one in Bangladesh and other in India and; Reliance group inked a deal to set up a 3,000 Mega Watt project in Bangladesh. Together the two projects are expected to help

Bangladesh achieve its 20,000-MW target by 2020. Bangladesh also agreed to allocate land at Mongla and Bheramara for setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for India.

As a measure to curb malpractices and economic crimes, the two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction at the conclusion of the MoUs on Prevention of Smuggling of Fake Currency Notes. In this regard, on 12 August 2015 a new MoU has been signed between the concerned agencies of India and Bangladesh. They have agreed cooperate to curb the smuggling of counterfeit currency notes, posing a threat to national security.<sup>v</sup>

To improve connectivity between the two countries and boost trade and commerce, India and Bangladesh signed a MoU on the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports. Both the ports are important because of economic and strategic purposes. The two countries also renewed the 1972 Protocol on Inland Waterways Transit and Trade (PIWTT) for using their waterways for commerce. According to the agreement, the two Bangladesh ports can be used by India to ship goods to its landlocked states in the northeast - to Agartala in Tripura, to Dawki in Meghalaya or to Sutarkandi in Assam-either through waterways, rail or road. Earlier, the shipping cargo between the two countries had to take the long route - reaching ports in either country through Colombo, Singapore or Klang, in Malaysia.<sup>vi</sup> By this agreement, Bangladesh too got an access to Nepal and Bhutan. Strategically, Chittagong port has been a part of what Booz Allen Hamilton report terms “string of pearls’ in the Indian ocean. It has been used by China, specially, for carrying out energy trade from Myanmar.

The two Prime Minister reaffirmed their unequivocal and uncompromising position against extremism and terrorism in all forms and manifestations, as well as their commitment to cooperate with each other by sharing information about groups and persons indulging in terrorism.<sup>vii</sup> They reiterated their commitment that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activity inimical to the other. They stressed the need for effective implementation of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) for better border management so as to prevent cross border criminal activities, irregular movement, incidents of violence and tragic loss of lives.<sup>viii</sup> To check the criminal activities on the India-Bangladesh border both Prime Ministers welcomed the finalisation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for allowing usage of Indian border

roads for construction and maintenance of Border Out Posts (BOPs) of Border Guards Bangladesh as well as use of Indian medical facilities in difficult areas in the border area by Bangladeshi personnel, who are deployed in vicinity. They also welcomed the holding of 1<sup>st</sup> round of meetings of DCs/DMs of clusters of bordering districts and put emphasis on regular holding of meetings.<sup>ix</sup>

### **'Hanging' Leftover**

Water sharing from 414 kilometres long Teesta river (123 kms flow in West Bengal, 121 kms in Bangladesh, and rest is in Indian state of Sikkim) is a cause of tension between India and Bangladesh since 1972. Bangladesh has been insisting on share of fifty percent of its water to fulfil its water requirements. In 1983 an ad hoc arrangement<sup>x</sup> was made by the Joint River Commission (JRC) because it needed more time to study details of the water flow. According to that arrangement Bangladesh would get a share of 36 percent and India 39 percent, while the remaining 25 percent would remain unallocated. In 2011, during the visit to Bangladesh then Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh agreed to sign an agreement on Teesta waters, which would have increased the water share of Bangladesh from 36 percent to 50 percent but he was stopped from doing so by his coalition partner and the Chief Minister of West Bengal - Ms Mamta Banerjee.

Like 2011, in 2015 also a deal over the Teesta river water could not be agreed because Ms Mamta Banerjee has, though vacillated, not relented on her position on the issue. On tangle over the Teesta waters in March 2015, after her visit to Dhaka, Ms Banerjee in a letter to the Prime Minister wrote that the issue can only be resolved through talks. She also joined the Prime Minister at Dhaka but remained taciturn on the issue of Teesta. Defending the state's position, the irrigation minister of West Bengal Rajib Banerjee said "We need to irrigate around 1.20 lakh hectares during the lean period, between October and May. The Chief Minister wants to protect the interest of the farmers in the area".<sup>xi</sup> The West Bengal government demands nearly Rs 10,000 crore along with decentralisation of the rain water harvesting system in North Bengal to rejuvenate the riverines in the area.<sup>xii</sup>

Economically, waters from Teesta are important for the irrigation in the five districts of the north Bengal - Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, South and North Dinajpur, and

Darjeeling- which constitute some of the poorest blocks in the state. With viable irrigation system these areas have capability to produce three crops in a season. The demand for water has further increased in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts because of the proliferation of tea plantation industry.

As deal over Teesta is still hanging, no further discussions took place between the two Prime Minister's over sharing of waters from Rivers Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar. The technical team of the Joint River Commission (JRC) is engaged on formulating an acceptable water sharing ratio.

## Conclusions

The bilateral agreements and MoUs are certainly going to bring some freshness in the relationship between India and Bangladesh. The economic development and social progress of Bangladesh is in interest of India. They will certainly address many borderland problems, which create tensions between the two countries.

Also, the visit by the Indian Prime Minister and follow up actions is a sign to the other neighbouring countries that India is not a 'big brother'; rather it is an 'elder brother'. Of course certain caveats are always attached with these sorts of forward steps.

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

## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 'Text of Exchange of Letters on Modalities for Implementation of India-Bangladesh Boundary Agreement 1974 and Protocol of 2011 to the Land Boundary Agreement' Retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?53/Bilateral/Multilateral\\_Documents](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?53/Bilateral/Multilateral_Documents) on 28 June 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> 'BGB-BSF conference in New Delhi: Felani issue not discussed 'officially' (August 6, 2015) *Prothom Alo* Retrieved from <http://primenews.com.bd/en/?p=16521> on 13 August 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 'List of Agreements, MoUs and other Documents concluded during the visit of Prime Minister to Dhaka' Retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?53/Bilateral/Multilateral\\_Documents](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?53/Bilateral/Multilateral_Documents) on 28 June 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Pandey, Devesh K (August 17, 2015) 'India, Bangladesh to fight fake currency' *The Hindu* August.

<sup>vi</sup> Narayn, Ranjana (June,2,2015) 'India, Bangladesh business set to grow through ports, waterways' *Economic Times* Retrieved from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/india-bangladesh-business-set-to-grow-through-ports-waterways/articleshow/47599967.cms> on 10 August 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 'Joint Declaration between Bangladesh and India during visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh "Nutun Projonmo-Nayi Disha" Retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25346/Joint\\_Declaration\\_between\\_Bangladesh\\_and\\_India\\_during\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_India\\_to\\_Bangladesh\\_uot\\_N](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25346/Joint_Declaration_between_Bangladesh_and_India_during_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_Bangladesh_uot_N) on 17 August 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> Bhasin ,Avtar Singh (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations Documents -1971-2002. Volume II.* New Delhi Geetika Publishers p. 682. MA Salman &Kishor Uprety (2002) *Conflicts and Cooperation on south Asia's International Rivers;A Legal Perspective* Washington D.C.; The World Bank p.163.

<sup>xi</sup> Das, Madhuparna (June 13, 2015) 'Teesta Accord : West Bengal CM Mamta Banerjee may be eyeing bigger compensation' *The Economic Times* . Retrieved from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/teesta-accord-west-bengal-cm-mamata-banerjee-may-be-eyeing-bigger-compensation/articleshow/47650472.cms> on 13 August 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid