



Setting the Future Trajectory of India-Bangladesh Relationship

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After coming into power in May 2014, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in India has started a process of constructive engagement with Bangladesh. The road map to it was prepared during India's External Affairs Minister, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj's first stand-alone visit to Dhaka from 25 to 27 June 2014. During her 'good will visit' Mrs Swaraj interacted with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the opposition, Begum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Begum Raushan Ershad, leader of the Jatiya Party et al and attended a few public functions. Addressing a public gathering at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), the Minister expressed her government's commitment to strengthen India-Bangladesh relationship.

India and Bangladesh cannot move ahead without addressing or managing a few contentious issues between them. This message was conveyed to the new Indian establishment by Bangladesh's speaker Ms Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, who attended the swearing-in-ceremony of the NDA government on 26 May 2014. She hoped that the new Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi would take steps to ratify Land Border Agreement (LBA) and implement India-Bangladesh treaty on sharing of waters from river Teesta. Another issue is disagreement over migration from Bangladesh to India.

India and Bangladesh share 4096 kilometers of land border. To address the land border related disputes, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government signed the LBA with Bangladesh in 2011. This agreement includes exchange of enclaves, involving 51,000 people spread over 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India. This agreement could not come into effect because, according to amended Article 3 of the Indian Constitution and Supreme Court's advisory opinion in 1959, after Nehru-Noon agreement to transfer lands to Pakistan, any agreement to transfer land by the Union government has to be ratified by the Parliament. In light of this, the UPA government introduced a constitutional amendment bill on LBA in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) just before the winter session which came to an end in December 2013. Once this bill is passed by the both Houses of the Parliament, then only enclaves will be exchanged and lands will be transferred to Bangladesh. Related to LBA is the issue of India's demand for transit facility via Tetulia (Bangladesh) to its northeast states. If opened, this corridor will reduce the road travel to and from northeast to mainland India by over 85 kms. On transborder Teesta river water sharing issue, the External Affairs Minister said that the government would take a decision after 'national consensus'.

During her visit, as Ambassador Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty on *South Asia Monitor* writes, the Minister spoke about bringing cross-border movement of people into a mutually discussed and agreed paradigm. This issue is not as easy as spoken about. Antara Datta, in her book *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971*, maintains that the border between India and Bangladesh is not only an 'effective' but also an 'affective' territory. These two types of territorial relationship give many reasons to people to cross the borders, even at cost of their lives. It is also very difficult to recognise who is a migrant and who is not because there is a disagreement over the cut-off point for entry. The pact between Mrs Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman marked 25 March 1971 as cut-off point, while local groups like All Assam Students Union (AASU) etal demanded the cut-off date should be 1951. Due to this disagreement citizen for one is a migrant for other. Migration from Bangladesh is a serious issue because it affects the existing demographic composition, and is one of the causes for intermittent communal violence in northeast India. The political leadership in Bangladesh agrees that their citizens cross into Indian borders, but it counters the number of migrants. In an interview to

Indian Express on 1 July 2014, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh and leader of opposition Begum Khaleda Zia said that not many Bangladeshis go to India....they are all doing quite well here.

According to media reports, during Mrs Swaraj's visit to Dhaka, the government of India agreed to relax visa restrictions for Bangladeshi nationals above the age of sixty five and below the age of thirteen years. The two governments agreed on increasing the frequency of the Dhaka-Kolkata Maitree Express, and proposed a Dhaka-Shilong-Guwhati bus service. India also confirmed the offer of enhancing power supply on the newly opened power-grid connection between both countries by 100 megawatts from the Palatana project in Tripura.

Although Indian and Bangladeshi governments maintain that the visit by Mrs Swaraj was satisfactory, to revitalize bilateral relationship the political leadership from both countries have to take certain decisive steps to address their disputes and disagreements.

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