

Bangladesh Foreign Policy vis-a-vis India

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Abstract

Foreign policy of a country is primarily a projection of its socio-economic and political compulsions in international politics. Apart from other determinants, the foreign policy of Bangladesh was always guided by its core factors, where India occupies centrestage. Bangladesh, pursues its foreign policy based on its geographical surroundings, historical legacy, and more importantly, persistence of a number of outstanding bilateral issues, which are vital to its existence. Mujib's policies of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, close friendship with India at international level and secularism, democracy and nationalism at national level underwent a tremendous change under the military regime. To some extent the islamisation of Bangladesh based on anti-Indian sentiment affected the relations between the two countries. The regime's interest in the security of its authority made it difficult for Bangladeshi rulers to take some positive and rational steps in improving their relations with India.

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Introduction

In the general election of October 2001, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia scored a landslide victory, capturing an absolute majority of 192 seats by itself and 215 with its hardliner allies Jamaat-e-Islami and Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ). The alliance has a two-third majority in parliament, enough to pass any constitutional amendment. Many moderate Muslims, minorities and also India were concerned that with the BNP's accession to power, the Islamic component of Bangladesh nationalism would acquire higher salience, which would not only adversely affect bilateral relations but may also pose problems for India and its own pluralistic society. These Islamic components of the ruling alliance represent the forces of 1947 and the same components played an anti-liberation role in 1971.

Since the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1990, the present ruling party is following the policies of its military regimes which were mostly based on pro-Islam, pro-West determinants and were almost anti-Indian. As facts show, a moderate democratic and secular nationalist government of Mujibur Rahman was replaced by the undemocratic forces in August 1975 and his policies of anti-

imperialism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and close friendship with India at the regional level underwent a tremendous change under these military regimes. On the other side, the Awami League, though it re-emerged as a major influence in Bangladeshi politics, it still has not re-acquired its pre-eminent position in the interplay of political forces in the country and has failed to reinstate the ethos and ideology of the liberation movement. Also, the socio-economic dynamics of both the society and the power structure of Bangladesh have changed profoundly compared to the period between mid-1950s and 1975. Therefore, the secularist forces are apprehensive that the BNP has come to power with its hardliners and also their speeches before the election indicate the chances to re-open the major issues viz., Ganga Water Treaty, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs), and others to settle old scores.

The BNP leader and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has always been opposing renewal of the treaty (Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace with India, that was concluded on March 19, 1972 for 25 years) and she pledged “to free Bangladesh from the shackles of Indian domination and the limitations of Bangladesh’s sovereignty which the treaty imposes due to the lack of foresight of the late Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.”¹ These statements, if compared with what Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed soon after the independence of Bangladesh, refer to how the emotions and sentiments of people changed with time. In 1972, framing the foreign policy of Bangladesh, Mujib told the newly independent nation, “Friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh”.² Even in India, the same mood prevailed then, which could be well understood from Indira Gandhi’s speech in the Lok Sabha in 1972 when she stated, “In future, the governments and people of India and Bangladesh, who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit”³. Ever since these sentimental proclamations were made by the premiers of both India and Bangladesh, Indo-Bangladesh relations have been witness to many ups and downs.

Here, many questions arise for a lay observer and even for an experienced analyst of Bangladesh foreign policy towards India. What made them become so hostile towards India? Did they just forget that it was India, which brought them independence when the entire Western World was against Indian intervention in erstwhile East Pakistan? Instead of being thankful to India for what it did, how could they be so hostile? These questions can never have a simple answer. The roots of discontent are widespread and manifold. In fact, they are intermingled. One can find answers to these issues or questions in the determinants of more than 30 years, history of the relationship between the two countries. These can be analysed based on the perceptions of foreign policy makers and the people of Bangladesh.

Determinants

In the present world of interdependency, no country, however large or powerful it might be, can afford to live in isolation. In the course of interaction, a nation's behaviour is constantly changed and influenced by others. All states, therefore, participate in the interplay of the international political activities with the aim of achieving their objectives. Through such interactions, each state pursues a broad range of policies in order to create an environment in which its interests can be served. Such a practice to operationalise their objectives in the international arena is known as foreign policy of a state.⁴ The foreign policy of Bangladesh, like that of any other state is also primarily a projection of the country's socio-economic and political compulsions in international politics. Thus, the domestic and international environment determines the foreign policies of the nations. Bangladesh's foreign policy is also determined by certain basic factors such as the geographical realities of the region, its search for security, historical backgrounds, and cultural affinities, etc.⁵ In this paradigm, India, a regional power, occupies centrestage in the foreign policy of Bangladesh, which it pursues by virtue of its geographical surroundings, historical and cultural legacies, and more importantly, persistence of a number of outstanding bilateral issues, which are vital to its existence. These determinants have been dealt below in detail.

History is the first and leading determinant of the foreign policy of Bangladesh towards India. One major misperception in the minds of some scholars in the field has been that, Indo-Bangladesh relations were formalised only since 1971. In other words, many scholars in India believe that the history of Bangladesh begins with its struggle against West Pakistan in general and with its independence in particular. But there are wide gaps in the perceptions; the Bangladeshis do not perceive their relations with India as such. For them, the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was the culmination of the struggle of Bengali nationalism, launched in the mid-1930s, to establish a separate identity of their own; not only distinct from the Hindu majority of the province but also from their co-religionists of the other regions of India.⁶ Thus, for the Bangladeshis their relations with India did not just start with India's role in the liberation struggle but much before that. These writers do not also agree that Hindu-Muslim differences had come into being because of the 'divide-and-rule' policy of the British. For them, there were fundamental cultural, religious dissimilarities and a confluence of the two civilisations of India—of the Hindus and the Muslims—has never taken place.⁷ According to them, the Muslims of Bengal enthusiastically supported the cause of Pakistan, but even at the height of Muslim nationalism, the Bengali Muslims were apprehensive, as A.K.Fuzlul Haq called for more than one state for the Muslims of India, thereby seeking rights and interests for

the Bengali Muslims in Bengal.⁸ Basically, it was the two-nation theory, which Fazlul Haq was made to present and was known as the 1940 Lahore Resolution of the All-India Muslim League, that gave the Bangladeshi people the concrete framework or a base in which they developed or built anti-Indianism/anti-Hinduism; although, his two nations were based on the Pakistan proposal, which was originally plural in nature and hence the term 'States' has been used rather than 'State'. Later, this concept was not pursued strongly and in 1946 it was accepted as a mere grammatical error.

The facts could be analysed from the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the partition of India in 1947. A section of Bengali Muslims regarded the unification of Bengal in 1911 as a victory of Indian nationalism or Hindu dominance over Bengali Muslims. During the British period, Bengal was dominated by the Hindu landlords, zamindars, and businessmen, although the Muslims (55 per cent) were in the majority. The same section of East Bengal later supported the concept of the two-nation theory and accepted Muslim nationalism in 1947. It is also true, that after the partition, the expectations and dilemmas of East Pakistan were suppressed when Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared 'Urdu' as a state language in January, 1948. Since February 21, 1952, the language movement revived the cause of Bengali nationalism. This got further intensified when the Pakistan government banned the poems of Rabindranath Tagore. Therefore, between the mid-1950s and 1975, East Pakistan was led by a secular and democratic section of the society under the leadership of Mujibur Rahman.

Later, when Bangladesh got independence, and when the honeymoon was over after a very short period between the two governments—those of Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—these legacies of the past started growing with enormous vigour. Even during the liberation war and immediately after, these tendencies were present but were lying dormant because of India's intervention that saved them from near extermination and India's continued economic assistance that helped the recently independent state to march ahead. Once India stopped its aid owing to her own economic position, this anti-Indian sentiment came back to the fore. Thus, historically the anti-Indian feeling became an important determinant of the foreign policy of Bangladesh towards India; for many Indian scholars it was not just anti-Indianism but anti-Hinduism. Therefore, in the post-Mujib era, the leaders of Bangladesh, coined these sentiments for political gains, particularly the military regimes, to legitimise their military rule in Bangladesh.

The second major determinant of Bangladesh's foreign policy towards India is the *geographical position* of Bangladesh. This includes physical, social, economic and political geography. First, physically, Bangladesh shares more than 90 per cent of its international border with India alone. It also has a common border with Myanmar

in the South-East, which is very limited and insignificant. Bangladesh is surrounded by West Bengal in the West, Assam and Meghalaya in the North and Tripura and Mizoram in the East. Thus, more than a major portion of Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian states. It is this *physical geography*, which makes the Bangladeshis feel 'India Locked'.⁹ It is this physical proximity that acts as a major determinant, in its relations with India.

The *social geography* includes the sociological components of the society. In a strict sociological sense, even though Bangladesh is considered to be more homogeneous than any other South-Asian country, this represents a significant number of other communities, that have been identified by the majority community of Bangladesh as pro-Indian and anti-Bangladesh. A significant number of Hindus in the plains and a good number of tribals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) come under this category. Again, the presence of these communities is not imposed but inherent. Much before the partition of India, this sociological conglomeration was present, and this poses a problem for Bangladeshis, for they do not consider these communities as belonging to their nation. The military regimes of Bangladesh like those of Gen. Ziaur Rahman tried to change the demographic composition by settling a large number of Bangladeshi Muslim peasants and landless labourers in the CHTs by distributing agricultural land among the non-tribals from the plains. Consequently, the policies adopted by Gen. Ziaur Rahman and Gen. H.M. Ershad gave the feeling to the tribals that the government was deliberately marginalising them in their own land and these policies have posed a threat to the cultural identity of the indigenous population.¹⁰

The final factor among the geographical factors is *political geography*. The 'India locked' position of Bangladesh makes the Bangladeshis feel that their political stability is greatly dependant on India. In other words, the Bangladeshis fear that it is easy for India to alter the political situation in Bangladesh, through its states bordering Bangladesh. Hence, Bangladeshis not only fear India's intentions, but also criticise it for all its 'misdemeanours' as they perceive them. Although, the CHT policy of the Bangladesh government resulted in a large-scale migration of CHT tribals to India, it has had an adverse impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations due to allegations that the Indian government encouraged the insurgents particularly the Shanti Bahini, and Chakma refugees who fled to India to escape torture and repression in Bangladesh, to fight for their cause. Their rehabilitation in the CHT simultaneously had the spillover effect of insurgency in the Indian north-eastern territories.

The nature of leadership too has decidedly played an increasingly important role in determining the relations between India and Bangladesh ever since the beginning of this century. The policies and programmes of Fazlul Haq in undivided India and

later by S. Suhrawardy, Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Bhasani, and the military and democratic regimes played a decisive role in determining its relations with India. In particular, the policies of Sheikh Mujib and Maulana Bhasani should be understood in proper context because, it is the perceptions and misperceptions of these leaders in the early 1970s that greatly altered the mindset of the Bangladeshis in general and the successive regimes in particular.

Mujib adopted the policies of democracy, nationalism and secularism whereas Maulana Bhasani followed a very narrow strain of policies which had an anti-Indian base. When Mujib signed the friendship treaty with India, Bhasani criticised Mujib for having traded the political and economic sovereignty of Bangladesh to India. While Mujib wanted to follow a policy of friendship with everyone, Bhasani wanted to identify more with the Islamic world. Bangladesh was never recognised by many of the Islamic states during the Mujib regime.

Maulana Bhasani's policies were based on 'Islamic Socialism.' In one of his meetings, he declared that he would "trample the Constitution underfoot, if it is not based on the Quran and the practices of the Prophet"¹¹ According to Bhasani, 14 per cent of the Hindus were exploiting 86 per cent of the Muslims of Bangladesh. He criticised Mujib for making Bangladesh a satellite of India and tried to forge a united front of the Right and Left extremists, against the secular parties like Awami League. In addition, Bhasani's policies were aimed at the creation of a new sovereign state *Bangassam*, comprising the Bengali speaking areas of Eastern India and Bangladesh.¹² His idea was that, if such a state was formed, it would be a Muslim dominated state and such a state would make India weak. This concept of *Bangassam* must be understood not as mere hysterical claims of a crazy political leader, but for its deeper implications. This concept is alive even now in Bangladesh; much of which Bhasani initiated 30 years ago. With the entire North-East under the threat of insurgencies, such a concept assumes significance. It may be possible that the contemporary leaders do not advocate such a concept openly but the moral, material and other support for the insurgency movements in the North-East based on this concept is of significance to the security of the North-East. The clandestine and nefarious designs of Chinese adventurism and the Pakistani patronage too, had an important role in essaying the insecurity, which finally forced the Indian government to intervene in the Bangladesh war of liberation in order to secure its precariously placed chicken neck pass, which, if compromised, can lead to a severance of the Indian mainland from the north-eastern part of the country. In fact, as a containment manoeuvre, the US even envisaged a foul meaning scheme in the name of Project Brahmaputra¹³ so as to cut off the Indian North-East and facilitate creation of a dubious United States of Assam which was to include all the north-eastern states.

The assassination of Sheikh Mujib marked a qualitative change in Bangladesh's attitude towards India. The successive regimes followed the policies of Maulana Bhasani. For their security, they used Islam, which became a solid support base of the regimes. They could be sustained on the anti-Indian sentiment, and every one of these regimes, from its very inception, embarked upon a tirade against India.¹⁴

Another major determinant of Indo-Bangladesh relations has been the *religious factor*. It has already been discussed that anti-Indian feelings of Bangladeshis has been the legacy of the anti-Hindu feelings. In the post-independence period, particularly in the post-Mujib period, Islam has become a vital feature in the relations. With the rise of religious revivalist parties both in India and Bangladesh, the religious factor started affecting the relationship between the two to a greater extent. The Babri Masjid demolition in India and the riots that followed in Bangladesh show how deep-rooted this factor is in the minds of the people in Bangladesh. Khaleda Zia, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, proclaimed, "The situation arising out of the demolition of the Babri mosque is fraught with a possibility of an adverse impact on Indo-Bangladeshi relations"¹⁵ and Mumbu Rahman Mizami, the secretary of Jamaat-e-Islami, called upon the Muslim world to boycott India economically unless the Babri Mosque was built.¹⁶ Leading newspapers of Bangladesh wrote in their editorials, "As far as Bangladesh and other SAARC members are concerned, it is time they got together, put all their grievances down on paper and let the world know how the Indians have behaved, to crush each of them culturally, economically and politically. India, the bully of the subcontinent, has at last exposed itself to be nothing but a crude Hindu State."¹⁷ The Jamaat-e-Islami observed that the Babri Masjid incident showed that India could not accept the existence of an independent Bangladesh. India wanted to see Bangladesh as subservient to it. According to these extremists, only Islamic values could help their independence and sovereignty.¹⁸

Last but not the least is the *Security Posture* which has created anti-India feelings and threat perceptions not only in Bangladesh but in all other small South-Asian countries. The Indian involvement in the domestic affairs of its neighbours on grounds of maintaining a stable regional political system, created serious mistrust and suspicion. Being a promoter of peace and stability in the region, India's relations with her neighbours deteriorated as the neighbours considered these as a manifestation of Indian hegemony in the region.¹⁹ The cause of distrust is India's role in Sri Lanka and Maldives and its nuclear posture in the region. This was reflected clearly by the comments made by a leading Indian strategic analyst, K. Subrahmanyam. In 1971 he wrote, "There is not the same risk of the Chinese cutting off Assam as there was in 1962, since in the course of hostilities, the northern Bangladeshis are likely to be overrun by the Indian forces and the communication lines with Assam will be

broadened rather than narrowed down or closed.”²⁰ The problem was compounded with the signing of the Bangladesh-India Friendship Treaty (which is not extended). Article 10 of the Treaty stipulated that in case of an attack and threat of an attack “the high contracting parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultation in order to take appropriate effective measures to eliminate the threat.”²¹ In view of India’s relationship with China, it could ask the right of passage through Bangladeshi territory in case of a Chinese attack. On the other hand, since Bangladesh had earned the friendship of China in post-August 1975, it would not have been in its national interest to help India against China.²² Thus, Bangladesh became skeptical of Indian domination.

First Democratic Government

Bangladesh, just after independence adopted the political system prevailing in India. It was a direct outcome of Mujibur Rahman’s attraction towards the paramount principles India believed in, and also of India’s influence and its role in the independence of Bangladesh. Immediately after his return from Pakistan in January 1972, Mujib had declared that Bangladesh was to have special ties with India. In his speech at Kolkata on February 16, 1972 he said, “I have no doubt that India, our next door neighbour, will proudly march on as the largest democracy, with secularism and socialism at home and non-alignment in international relations.”²³ The Awami League government officially announced that “friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh.”²⁴ The secular spirit of the language movement that culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh, enshrined ‘secularism’ as one of the four principles in the Bangladeshi Constitution. The Mujib government banned all the political parties that had played an anti-Bangladesh role in 1971. As a result of this tilt towards India, Bangladesh followed many ideals of Indian foreign policy. For example, it endorsed the principle of non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, and opposition to colonialism, racism and imperialism in any form although these principles were reflected in Mujib’s six-point formula of 1966 for autonomy. Besides, Bangladesh was deeply committed to anti-imperialism as it had already experienced the selfish motives of the powers that had provided military and political support to Pakistan in its exploitation.

Since the emergence of Bangladesh, the Prime Ministers of the two countries have made regular contacts and signed a number of agreements from time to time particularly the 25-year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace, on March 19, 1972.²⁵ So, it was obvious that the forces against the liberation war of Bangladesh, the US, China and the Islamic world in general and Pakistan in particular could not find their place in the foreign policy of Bangladesh immediately after independence, although the Mujib government tried to normalise its relations with the US and the

West to receive aid and assistance to stabilise its war-torn economy. However, at the same time he did not want to jeopardise Bangladesh's relationship with its allies, India and the USSR.

India-Bangladesh relations that started on such a euphoric note began to show a downward trend even during the lifetime of Mujibur Rahman. The over-dependence on India and the Soviet Union fueled anti-Indian and anti-Soviet sentiments which created pressure on the Mujib government. India was blamed by these sections of the society for the deteriorating economic conditions of the country. Indian manufacturers and old trade agreements between India and Bangladesh were considered as more beneficial to India rather than to Bangladesh. The hardliners came up with new slogans, which proclaimed that food scarcity in Bangladesh was due to India, that India was taking everything from their country and that after Pakistan it was Indian imperialism, which was hitting the country hard. This changing environment was noted by an Indian journalist, "Complaints that the Indian army had demanded Bangladeshi factories and had taken with them all valuables can be heard even in the posh drawing rooms and when prices soar, India is blamed squarely for it, suggesting that the border smuggling is responsible for these sudden and sporadic spurts."²⁶ In June 1973 the Indian trade delegation to Dhaka was disturbed by Maulana Bhasani, who organised a *hartal* and went on a fast, demanding an end of the 25-year Friendship Treaty, which was under suspicion.²⁷

The Military Regimes

In August 1975, the anti-Indian and anti-Soviet forces assassinated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and took over power under Gen. Ziaur Rahman. This military-civil bureaucratic government, knowing the domestic and international environment, began to be viewed as anti-Indian, anti-Soviet, and pro-US, pro-West and pro-Pakistan or pro-Islamic in its foreign policy. Gen Zia was also known for his anti-Indian, pro-West and pro-Islamic attitude. Therefore, the assassination of Sheikh Mujib marked a qualitative change in Bangladesh's approach towards India. The policies adopted by Mujibur Rahman underwent a tremendous change. The successive regimes established good relations with Pakistan and other Islamic countries at the cost of its good relations with India. Countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia that were reluctant to open trade with Bangladesh, now established both diplomatic and trade relations. This anti-Indian posture attracted China very much and it became a close friend of Bangladesh. All of a sudden, Bangladesh's foreign policy became 'outward looking' and was based on a new pragmatism.²⁸ At the domestic front Zia dropped secularism from the Constitution in favour of Islam. The new provision that was incorporated placed full faith in *Almighty Allah*. Socialism was redesigned to conform to the Islamic idea of social justice. Even in the foreign policy of Bangladesh, the Islamic

ideals were called upon to endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity.²⁹ Through his policy of upholding Islamic principles, Zia secured the support of the Islamic revivalist section with whom the Awami League was at loggerheads. The President was praised for introducing Islam in the Bangladesh Constitution. In the 1979 parliamentary elections, many candidates from the Muslim League fought the election under the banner of BNP with the slogan 'defeat Awami League and keep Islam safe in the hands of President Zia'.³⁰ Restoration of Islam had even been popular with the army. Thus, with religious sentiments 'forces of 47' being predominant in the country, Islam became a useful instrument for rallying majority support for the new regime.³¹

On the other hand, the tension over border disputes and sharing of Ganga waters gave new realities to the vision of a deeper friendship and cooperation, shared by the two countries during the Mujib period. Ziaur Rehman's regime tried to internationalise bilateral issues like the Ganga Water dispute. He took the Farakka issue to the OIC Foreign Ministers' Conference in Istanbul in May 1976.³² This issue was raised again in August and November 1976 at the Colombo Summit of the non-aligned countries³³ and in the 31st session of the UN General Assembly respectively.³⁴ In his regime, the free trade zone which had provided for a ten-mile strip on either side of the border in the trade agreement, was widely looked upon as India's manoeuvre to smuggle valuable goods of Bangladesh to India. Resentment was also voiced against the 25-year Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty, which was viewed as being 'imposed' on Mujib. This meant that this regime followed a policy, which was quite contrary to the policy that had been followed since 1971. Although in the last years of his regime, Zia tried to develop cooperation among all South-Asian nations, but his assassination in 1981 derailed this process.

After Zia's assassination, the second military regime under Gen.H.M. Ershad came to power. However, the foreign policy under Ershad did not significantly deviate from what it was under Ziaur Rahman's dispensation and the anti-India and anti-Soviet plank was maintained. In his regime, Ershad declared Islam as a state religion. During his regime also, the water-sharing issue continued to dominate Indo-Bangladesh relations, although Ershad's government took new initiatives which came to be considered as a favourable solution to its seminal foreign policy dilemma towards India. The two memoranda of understanding on Ganga water sharing were signed in 1982 and 1985. The short-term allocation schedules of both MoUs were identical.³⁵ These initiatives were based on a fundamental re-evaluation of the diplomatic and technical possibilities concerning the development of the Brahmaputra and the Ganga. But, due to the failure of Ershad to gain support for these proposals within the Bangladesh cabinet, no progress could be achieved in bilateral relations with India.

Therefore, being military regimes, their security had remained the main plank in the formation of their foreign as well as domestic policies.

The Democratic Governments

The restoration of democracy by overthrowing Gen. H.M. Ershad was a result of a mass movement launched by Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia. In the beginning of the 1990s, the BNP, founded by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, came to power on the anti-India plank, under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of Gen. Ziaur Rahman. In the wave of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation Bangladesh also moved towards enhancing trade and investment for the economic development of the country. These developments added extensive economic content to the foreign policy of Bangladesh. More importance was given to trade, and a roving trade representative of the country was appointed.³⁶ It was expected that in the economic interest of the nation, the policymakers of Bangladesh would come closer to India for regional and bilateral economic cooperation.

Apart from the angle of the country's economic interest the foreign policy of Bangladesh during Khaleda Zia seemed to resemble the policies of the previous military regimes. She and her party nevertheless represented the post-Awami League dynamics in Bangladesh politics. Even the transition to democracy in 1991 did not bring about any change in this trend. The Khaleda Zia government strengthened its power-base in collusion and cooperation with the religious political elements who had a clear anti-people role in 1971 and who up to 1977 had been banned from politics.³⁷ Therefore, the shared vision based on the ideals of secularism and democracy between the two countries had no chance of revival. Moreover, in her regime, bilateral relations came under strain due to violent reactions in Bangladesh as repercussions to the Ayodhya incident of December 6, 1992.³⁸ The BNP always used the anti-India stand as a major election plank and Begum Khaleda Zia proved to be a failure in her foreign policy towards India.³⁹ In spite of this anti-India posture, one positive step was taken when Bangladesh recognised the sovereignty of India over Tin Bigha; at the same time India handed over the Tin Bigha on a lease and opened it for use by Bangladeshi passengers and vehicular traffic on June 26, 1992.⁴⁰

In the next general elections held in 1996, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina came to power. The relationship between the two countries seemed to be improving during her premiership. Close and regular interaction with the new government began with the visit of Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan to New Delhi in August 1996, and it signified the revival of meaningful contacts between India and Bangladesh after a gap of nearly four years. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid an official visit to India and a landmark treaty on sharing of the Ganga waters was

signed with the Prime Minister of India.⁴¹ The second major step was the signing of a historical agreement with Shanti Bahini. On the other hand, India continued to facilitate the repatriation of Chakma refugees from Tripura to Bangladesh and about 12,000 refugees voluntarily returned to Bangladesh.⁴² In continuation, the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, accompanied by a delegation, which included the External Affairs Minister, visited Dhaka on the occasion of the inaugural run of the bus service from Kolkata to Dhaka.⁴³ The people of the two countries welcomed the bus service with great joy. It heralded a new dimension to the bilateral relations and represented a significant step in facilitating people-to-people interaction between the two countries, although some of the key issues had been left unresolved viz., economic imbalances and border disputes.

Bangladesh has hugely imbalanced trade, which is highly in favour of India. The deficit grew most visibly in the 1990s when India and Bangladesh started to liberalise at a rapid pace with the deficit in formal trade rising from Rs 200 million to about Rs 1 billion within the last ten years. A study by Mustafizur Rahman, Research Director, CPD, shows that the yearly trade gap between the two countries has increased 9.5 times while import from India has increased 15 times over the last ten years. Therefore, Bangladesh's trade imbalance with India in 10 years (1990-91 to 1999-2000) stood at about \$ 6.5 billion.⁴⁴ However, such deficits are largely market-driven. As analysed by Zaki Eusufzai, the fundamental determinants of the deficit are; the role of real exchange rate, productivity differentials between the two countries and differential pace of liberalisation between the two countries.⁴⁵

In the last year of Hasina's government, the military confrontation between India's Border Security Force and Bangladesh Rifles between April 15 and 19 2001, gave a critical twist to Indo-Bangladesh relations. Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina, who inherited the Awami League tradition and its leadership, came back to power after a prolonged struggle but she could not reinstate the ethos and ideals of the freedom struggle during her tenure. Why?

The fact, as J.N. Dixit has rightly pointed out, was that her party had to get the support of President Ershad's party and other political parties including sections of the Muslim orthodoxy. This reflects two trends. First, the Awami League, though it re-emerged as a major influence in Bangladeshi politics, has not re-acquired its pre-eminent position in the interplay of political forces in the country. Second, Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP and President Ershad's Jatiya Party coming into parliament in sufficient numbers indicates that these political parties, despite being created by military leaders, have acquired *democratic credibility* and *political legitimacy*.

The socio-economic dynamics of both the society and the power structure of Bangladesh have changed profoundly compared to the period between 1956 and 1975. The characteristics of this change, as one perceives them, are: the ethos and the ideology of the movement for autonomy and the liberation struggle are no longer relevant to Bangladesh politics; second, there is a re-emergence of Islam as a factor which is considered necessary to consolidate Bangladesh's separate national identity.⁴⁶ The increasing influence of the Jamaat and other religious groups confirms this assessment. This was clearly reflected in the October 2001 general election. Even the Awami League, which considered secularism as a significant element in its political ideology, could not proceed in this direction. There is general consensus in Bangladesh about the country's consolidation and survival being dependent on Bangladesh being a part of the Pan-Islamic movement.⁴⁷

The case of Bangladesh thus is quite interesting. There are strong secular and orthodox trends occurring simultaneously. In spite of rising Islamic fundamentalism, the Islamic ideologue's (Jamaat-e-Islam) share of the popular vote has declined continuously from 12.13 per cent in 1991 to 8.61 per cent in 1996 and to just 4.31 per cent in the 2001 election. On the other hand, the liberal Bengali spectrum of Bangladeshi nationalism have been demanding changes in the Muslim Personal Law, which reflects the presence of secular forces with a strong voice in Bangladesh society and polity.⁴⁸ These trends in Bangladesh's politics have had an inevitable impact on Bangladesh foreign policy generally and on its policies towards India in particular.

Conclusion

A detailed appraisal of history and other factors impacting Indo-Bangladesh relations indicates the need to avoid jumping to stereotyped assumptions about political realities. The assumption in India that the Awami League is pro-India and BNP is anti-India is fallacious. It is an inward-looking approach to international relations. The fact is that both of them espouse neither pro-Indian nor anti-Indian machinations. Their attitude towards India is governed by domestic compulsions and tactics to secure a modicum of regime security.

Democracy in Bangladesh is in a nascent state and is passing through a consolidation phase. It is yet to mature. So, mobilisation of the masses for political purposes based on ties of kinship, religion and language are bound to take place. The occasional flaring up of anti-India sentiments, based on the question of Islamic identity, is to be expected. In the longer run, with maturing of democracy, secular forces will come to play a greater and well-defined role in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The framework of cooperation which had been built-up during the Mujib period has left a vision for both countries.

Both the countries do and should, share a common vision for economic, social and political development. They should resolve bilateral issues by peaceful negotiations and avoid bickering sideshows.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions on the paper.

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