

CAN LBA UNTANGLE THE TANGLED?

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An unfinished agenda of Partition was punctuated with the ratification of land Boundary Agreement (LBA) on 6th June 2015, signed between Indian Prime minister Shri Narendra Modi and Bangladesh Premier Sheik Hasina on behalf of their respective nations.

The agreement that stood a limbo for years is expected to settle, India's porous border on eastern front, an unresolved issue, lingering for over four decades, now promise to change the political and economic landscape of South Asia. India's foreign policy demands that she strengthens her neighbors on the conviction that until neighborhood develops, the region shall continue lagging, making it vulnerable to inimical forces. Therefore, the hour is ripe to boost up one another, essential to build a cohesive and integrated regional strength to command its interests in the belt.

The agreement is a landmark in the history of political conundrums, for the affected on either sides of the fragile boundary. It initiated a settlement for India's 4,096Km long land border with Bangladesh and conferment of citizenship rights on enclave residents and also settle the maritime boundary with the nation. As a part of 'Act East' policy the Indian prime minister seeks to strengthen SAARC, ASEAN and other regional blocs in the neighborhood through bilateral trade relations, cultural exchanges and extending political friendship. Anchored to false ego, bickering over trifle issues and mindless insinuation peppered with innuendos not only kept good relations between nations at bay but weakened it economically too.

The undefined enclaves located in India and Bangladesh purported series of socio-economic and political problems that inundated normal bilateral relation between the two nations for years.

The Chits or Enclaves, had remained a contentious issue, between India and Bangladesh, for nearly 41 years. These were initially part of former Coochbehar Kingdom which ceded pockets of territory to Mughals and British. Later when Coochbehar (a princely state) was

acceded to India, a part of which was in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) became part of India except for a technicality, of them lying in another country.

Folklore, says that enclaves resulted from chess game played between Maharaja of Coochbehar and Nawab of Rangpur, who used villages as wagers and wrote names of villages on a small piece of paper or Chit and exchanged them when they lost or won the game. That is how these strips of land became Chits or paper palaces, according to locals. The residents are stateless and lack access to public service of any kind.

The India-Bangladesh accord of 1974, determined the length of land border to a whopping 3286Km, upon which no defense structure could be constructed within 150yards of line zero. In 1986 the border fencing began, after the Assam accord signed on 15th August 1985 and the deadline was pitted to March 2012. This accord aimed at sealing the border to prevent infiltration from Bangladesh to India and smuggling in both directions. Between 1986 and 2010 more than 1,60,000 Bangladeshis were identified in Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram and Bihar who immigrated secretly to India. Five Indian states share border with Bangladesh: Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, naturally the effect spilled and spread in the terrain affecting the lives of many. Around 90,000 Indians were displaced due to fencing on the Indo Bangladesh border. A stretch of 95 Km registers as the length of border, that Karimganj district shares with Bangladesh, with 269(approx) families from karimganj district live beyond the border. The National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy 2007 were not applicable for fencing out Indians, even though Article 300A notified that none shall be deprived of his property, save by law. Actually by fencing 150 yards India disowned around 149 villages with a population of about 100,000. At places the fence has divided the homesteads, fish ponds and village markets rendering a deplorable situation, for many living there.

Documents reveal that the Assam Government made few attempts to address the issue. In 1989 the state Government, initiated to rehabilitate the fencing affected inhabitants and asked officers to submit a survey report, done on this line later.

In 1994 the Guwahati High court ordered the authorities to identify the Indian citizens who had been affected by the creation of no-mans land. But here too the Government did little to

take required measures and the people continued to live a life of non entity. Caught in the quagmire, people made illegal movements to and from their Chits, in search of benefits found elsewhere. Moreover a communal overtone prevailing in the area whips up an ambience of animosity that aggravates challenges, in their lives. During fencing every single Hindu village on the west Bengal border suo moto shifted to this side (India) because they wished to avert problems on the other side(Bangladesh).But Muslim villages demanded compensation for moving away from India to Bangladesh, though average Muslims wished to house themselves in areas densely inhabited by their community. What ever is the price, the moot point is villages should be resettled immediately after fencing to stop reckless movements across the porous border. One can ill afford to forget the recent macabre between indigenous Bodos and Muslim migrants from Bangladesh in 2012.The illegal flow of migrants have changed the demography of north east beyond imagination. But the Assam Government did little to check the constant influx, vying for votes.

Adjacent to Mekhliganj in West Bengal(India) lies one of 51 Bangladesh enclaves. Similarly some areas of our country remain under Bangladesh, because of unresolved disputes. Such enclave areas were inhabited, by unfortunate people caught in the quagmire and forced to remain hostage to unfavorable and inhuman conditions, for no fault of their own. They were in prisons with no basic facilities or administrative assistance. Items like salt, sugar, cumin or baby food powder were expensive in Bangladesh, hence they often risked to trespass, to purchase the said commodities from Indian enclaves. This exercise often landed them to deep trouble. They were chased as thieves, branded as criminals and trespassers. Enclaves were inhabited by people but utter lawlessness that prevailed in the strips made life absolutely difficult. Criminals, mostly Indians used these enclaves for their illegal activities. Rampant atrocities of the strong, often claimed lives of men and women and there was no law to redress the woes of the victims. Complaints to police authorities were rare because that could land them to even greater problems. Criminals abound the land, terrorizing the innocent. They rob the people in the enclaves of cattle, crops and what ever they lay their hands on.

A plot under Mashaldanga enclave was taken on lease for few months by a local quack in lieu of Rupees 15000,which he later used for cultivating poppy. This upset the owner, yet he had no option but to wait for the lease period to be over. The Bakalichara enclave had a similar story

to tell. Rich Indians who have a clout and living in the vicinity often take lands inside enclaves on lease, to suit their purpose, while owners dare not refute the offer lest they lose their shelter and security. Their plight doesn't end here. Many daily wagers in such enclaves were often forced to part with the major share of their income as tax. Any refusal could lead them to unfavorable consequences, they generally prefer to avoid.

Land Boundary Agreement offers a package of good will to be exchanged between the two countries. The residents of these no mans land, wish to smell the whiff of better days, to follow soon. With citizenship rights conferred to them, fresh air is expected to breeze into their nearly non-existent lives. The agreement has promised to ensure free movement of enclave people; the residents would be permitted to exchange enclaves, allowed to return home; the border would be re-demarcated, and measures be undertaken to check violation of border line by Indian civilians and BSF; Bengali speaking Indian nationals would no longer be pushed to Bangladesh. All kinds of illicit trade would cease; A date with better future has been fixed, but what transpires and reaches the trapped people of such enclaves, is yet to be seen.

Amid jubilations and celebrations, a pall of gloom befell Dohogram and Angaripota corridor whose status, remained unchanged. These two areas are actually Bangladeshi enclaves located in India. To connect these with mainland of Bangladesh an accord was signed and Teen Bigha Corridor was evolved. This patch of Indian land over 'Teen Bigha' corridor was established for people from both sides to move; the villagers of Angrapota and Dohogram use the corridor frequently to travel to and from Bangladesh, taking advantage of the lack of administrative maneuver; the reason it gradually transformed into a haven of smugglers. Besides, people of Kuchlibari enclave feels (now in Coochbehar district) alienated and left out, after the agreement and redefinition of the border.

Report, of Zealots, launching protest movements, spark violence sporadically at Dinhat, Moshaldanga etc demanding the ouster of Bangladeshi nationals from Indian soil. In Teen Bigha Corridor 10km away from Mekhliganj, a Muslim resident of Bhaskata an Indian enclave in Bangladesh is also upbeat about gaining Bangladeshi nationality. He claims to own 40 Bighas of land there and refuses to budge an inch, in exchange to any offer made to him. Regarding few Hindu families in his village he said he was unsure of their stance. The transfer of enclaves for Mirgipur residents, however meant freedom from fraudulently obtaining Indian identity proof.

The decision of exchange of enclaves between the two nations, have aroused doubt, of losing territory on both sides. But the point is, even if, we loose enclaves, we shall do so, over which, we neither have access nor govern or enjoy right to use it in any way, without the prior permission of Bangladesh. The Indian enclaves located in Bangladesh, were never in our agenda of development. However, the proposed transfer, requires, efficient administration and consideration for welfare of those residing the no mans land. It is assumed, that both the countries would absorb enclaves, inside its land and confer citizenship right gradually, according to law.

Many residents of such enclaves, possess voter ID cards and NREGA cards but no jobs. It is difficult to admit children to schools or get health aids in Indian enclaves because of Bangladesh nationality; the reason they need to buy lands outside their enclaves and register them in India. At times pregnant mothers fake names of their husband(give names of acquaintances living in Indian land) to get admitted to hospitals in India. The children hold birth certificates with names of fake fathers scribbled. The scenario is same for the children who aspire for education on the other side of their village. Added to it villagers in these enclaves need to travel to the gate bordering the mainland and enclave to receive visitors from other side of the land, which is not always plausible.

The river Icchamati divides India and Bangladesh with an imaginary border in the middle of the water. This necessitates guard on the water basin too. But unfortunately the requisite infrastructure to secure the regions could not be provided adequately, easing the infiltration of migrants.

Moreover, the banks on the Indian border is dotted with brick kilns stretching from Bashirhat to Hingalganj the real hub of illegal immigration from Bangladesh.80% of workers in these kilns are Bangladeshi nationals, who arrive with families on their job destination, only to chance and disappear into the mainland of our country; once able to mingle in the crowd it is arduous to trace and file them back. A host of rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, Malda, Noida in Delhi comprise of these trespassers.

Border Security Forces, have now taken measures to build deep ditches to check rampant smuggling of cattle, livestock other necessities and criminal activities across Indo-Bangladesh

border. The border guarding force, over last five months has plugged some of the most vulnerable patches of this 4,096 Km border by not only increasing troop strength but also providing them with more weapons and fast attack motorboats to patrol river areas. Border security officers say it is difficult to improve relations and situation on the border, as the people refuse to cooperate. Any measures undertaken to check smuggling or immigration is meted out by pelting stones at BSF officers.

Close to Bakalichara enclave, the Government is carrying out a survey on 100 bigha of vested land where residents from Indian enclaves who cross over from Bangladesh is proposed to be settled. A good number of people now seek to cross over to India from enclaves located in Bangladesh finding no future back home. Will the exchange process be smooth as it promises to be? With property Rights still to be settled, wouldn't the hope of a better life remain elusive? Can we call off the possibilities of a communal frenzy while the process of resettlement begins? But primarily the forces on the border post would have to maintain the inviolability and integrity of the zero line boundaries, following the parameters of their respective legal systems to affirm trust and confidence between the two nations.

As a measure of restoring connectivity Sheik Hasina, Narendra Modi and CM of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee flagged off buses from Dhaka to Guwahati and Agartala. It is believed that transit through Bangladesh will help India, improve relation with north east while Bangladesh gains access through India to market in Bhutan and Nepal. India seeks to bus its way linking Dhaka with Meghalaya and Assam, while Bangladesh has approved a five year extension of water transit protocol. The proposed motor vehicle agreement between Bangladesh, Bhutan India and Nepal might be the maiden step for four countries to get onto ASEAN style of cooperation in lieu of the SAARC ones.

Bangladesh has been importing 500MW from India and transmission lines are set up to import additional 600MW by 2017. Indo-Bangla joint collaboration of Rampal power plant is proceeding fast while Adani group plans to install 1600MW coal power plant and Reliance plan to set up an LNG fuelled 3000MW power plants signal growing private sector involvement.

Besides, the Ambanis aim to invest in power plant that shall reduce scarcity in energy in future. In return Bangladesh shall raise two Special Economic Zone for Indian industry. If this

happens it will be the first time a neighboring country will have a designated economic zone just for Indian companies. Signing for India specific SEZ would encourage Indian investment and give countries a way to address the yawning trade deficit. With a host of promising packages on the anvil Bangladesh has possibility of becoming a bridge to South East Asia, while moribund economies of India's eastern and north eastern states can be renewed. Besides Indian cargo ships will now, be able to unload their cargoes at Chittagong and Mongola ports which were so long denied by Bangladesh Government. It is expected that such vistas of opportunities would not only speed up movement of goods and people but also make it cheaper. The construction of Akhura-Agartala rail linkage is underway, while several other rail links are under consideration. Besides new ports of calls have been added in Bangladesh Inland water transport and Transit agreement and some more additional ports along with coastal shipping agreement are under consideration. Also trade between north east and rest of world could get a boost. All that India, now need to do is tow lines of genuine friendship with Bangladesh.

That LBA might boost Indo-Bangla ties but challenges to enhanced transport links are formidable and if not maneuvered diplomatically might, generate problems more than gains. Regarding possibilities and challenges some experts, hold that political insensitiveness, bureaucratic inertia, fossilized mindset and a nonchalant attitude to issues have hobbled improvement of bilateral relationship. It is urgent that inertia of development that took off, continue unabated, no matter who comes to power. History unfolds that in the past, before 2010, Awami League leaders rejected India's intention of help in many projects and when Bhutan wanted to export power to Bangladesh, India refused to play ball. Such bitterness should be buried for good unleashing a fresh start.

Land Boundary Agreement is definitely a positive move to build strong ties with Bangladesh but numerous problems, adhering to it should be addressed to ensure a sustainable development between the nations. It would be folly to refuse to acknowledge burning issues like arresting illegal immigration from Bangladesh and random cattle smuggling through Assam. Prof Anindya jyoti Majumdar (JU) opinioned, that it is essential to build favorable constituencies on both sides. Seamless connectivity would be of no use until subsidiary issues addressed. Just people to people ties would not enhance any change in official policies and attitudes. It would

further be dangerous if State heads of any of the two nations, seek to play their own power game independently, ignoring the bait of the Indian foreign policy.

The most sticky issue between India and Bangladesh is the sharing water of river Teesta on 50:50 basis is yet to be resolved. According to Teesta Barrage irrigation scheme Bangladesh needs at least 4500 cusecs of water for 60,500 hectares of crop land in the northern strip of the country. But not more than 500 cusecs reach them. If this implies that India has shut the gates at Gajoldoba Barrage to check the flow of Teesta water, Bangladesh too have constructed a dam over Atrayee a tributary of Teesta . The export of Hilsa cultivated in River Padma is also arrested by Bangladesh depriving Indians, from the delicacy of the fish. Sharing of Ganga water has always remained a bone of contention between the two nations(India and Bangladesh).Conflict emerged with the construction of the Farraka Barrage to divert water from Ganga to Hoogly in India. This was done to provide steady supply of water to Bhagirathi and Hoogly in India during lean period, but unfortunately Bangladesh suffered due to the decision. Bangladesh was forced to make excessive use of ground water, have already led to depletion of the water table, by about two feet in northern region. In most areas farmers ought to dig at least ten feet before installing pumps. Bangladesh is miffed at the reduced flow of water in their land, responsible for causing damage to their crops ,industry and ecology due to the barrage. Thus it can well be assumed that, until the impasse of water shortage is resolved the operation and safety of the first nuclear power plant built upon Padma River is sure to be jeopardized. Besides, Livelihood of about nine million who depend upon the river water would continue to be at stake, forcing them opt for alternate jobs.

The proposed Tipaimukh hydro electric dam in Manipur on the Barak river, whose water Bangladesh shares, is yet another reason that the country is left bickering, governed by suspicion and ambiguity against India, even if the later assures of her sincerity to promises made.

The Teesta catchment area is more in India than what is in Bangladesh. Above all the total amount of water resources in West Bengal is not plenty enough to show liberalism on the issue. Still if New Delhi concedes, North Bengal would suffer and the Teesta Barrage project would be impaired. No matter how much positivism India displays, is it rational to benefit others at the behest of ones own interest. Water is crucial for Bangladesh and perhaps India should initiate in resolving it on humanitarian ground but national interests and foreign policies never

ride on empathy. The Indian premier Modi, may be temporarily successful in convincing Bangladesh of its benefit in pairing and cooperating with India. His overtures and loads of economic and political packages showered upon Hasina Government might encourage Pakistan to extend their hand of cooperation towards India, in her endeavor to cluster the south Asian nations to ensure an integrated regional development.

Amid a series of issues waiting to be addressed by Bangladesh government, they have recently embarked upon the mission to crack down upon growing militancy in the land. The terrorist outfits like Jamat e Islami still engineer communal frenzy, claiming lives of innocent at their whims proves failure of the Government to check its growing prowess. The fundamentalists are at a prowl against the liberals living in Bangladesh. The recent murder of Bangladeshi nationals for expressing their animus against Islamic fundamentalism has been targeted not only condemned by India and the world but also pitted ignominy.

Problems are complex and too many to handle them with one go riding on LBA. Step to reconfigure the relationship from one of distrust to mutually beneficial cooperation will help foster a better future for both India and Bangladesh. But striking out a political Map with well defined lines of demarcation, backed by required legislation is primordial. Above all genuine intention to forge a relationship of peace and harmony must be evident on both fronts to make matters viable. Decades elapsed, bickering over issues, that found no concrete solution. The LBA certainly, appears to flick hope to those awaiting salvation from the fuzzy zone.

It is high time, we strike a diplomatic and sustainable partnership with Bangladesh, expand the vistas of cooperation by setting itself a viable framework of sub regional cooperation to ensure real growth in the region. Bangladesh is no longer a dependent nation yet she needs financial aids to augment her growth. India has already promised an aid of \$1USmillion for its development projects. They are in urgent need of technology to augment their export capacities too. She is frantically trying to expand her market in the neighborhood, increase her investment credentials and mitigate challenges in cooperation with WTO. It is expected that a slowly expanding growth of symbiotic interdependence will eventually emerge interlocking the growing cooperation between the two nations. A settlement long over due, perhaps sought salvation through the accord signed off recently, with high hopes on the anvil, but what, actually transpires

in future is yet to be seen. Beset with an array of problems, both India and Bangladesh ; must seek respite and untangle the tangled, diligently and diplomatically.

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