

Unravelling the Indo-Bangladesh ‘Samparka’: One Promise or Turbulence?

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Introduction

India and Bangladesh have shared ties of warmth and friendship since times after India as the first country recognized Bangladesh as an independent state and relations took their turn between the two countries after the latter’s independence in 1971. Both the nations possess a shared bond of historical, cultural, secular and democratic linkages to name a few all required for a strengthened partnership between both.

As against this backdrop, comes the Indian government’s special emphasis upon foreign policy under the management of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy aimed for rejuvenating old ties through expansion of affairs with its neighbours primarily for reaching out to the Indians living abroad all to fortify India’s subtle efforts. The implementation of ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy got visible in Prime Minister Modi’s invitation to all the SAARC country leaders for attending his oath-taking ceremony in 2014. In keeping with the attempts to maintain India’s affinity with its neighbours, connectivity has emerged as one of the cardinal principles within the country’s agenda which has held a huge responsibility for a progressive country.

Affinity on ‘Wheels’: The ‘Rail’ Glance

India’s commitment towards connectivity has been highlighted in Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy. This finds expression in his words at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018. According to him, *“Connectivity is vital. It does more than [just] enhance trade and prosperity. It unites a region. India has been at the crossroads for centuries. We understand the benefits of connectivity. There are many connectivity initiatives in the region. If these have to succeed, we must not only build infrastructure, we must also*

build bridges of trust". The sphere of rail connectivity between New Delhi and Dhaka can be traced post-partition where 7 operational rail links are evident between India and the then East Pakistan. The Haldibari-Chilahati rail link stands as an example which had been there till 1965. Although with the passage of time the current number of working rail routes between the 2 neighbours has reduced to 4 which are Petrapole-Benapole, Gede-Darshana, Singhabad-Rohanpur and Radhikapur-Birol respectively. Notable in this context remains the link restoration project between Haldibari and Chilahati during December 2020 after the former's joint inauguration by the Prime Ministers of both India and Bangladesh. The 5th rail association between the 2 neighbours, primarily targeted towards the movement of passenger and freight trains this route was meant for exporting foodgrains, fresh fruits, lime, clay, fly ash, timber, wood, stone and such other exportable goods from India to Bangladesh and vice versa. Besides this, the link was to foster an easy port accessibility accompanied by adequate transit facilities between Assam, Bangladesh and West Bengal thereby leading to a prosperous economic growth on part of New Delhi and Dhaka.

As against this milieu, Prime Minister Modi's call for 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas and Sabka Vishwas' that had been illustrated in the projects between the two countries. As asserted by him, "*Bangladesh is presenting a strong example of development and change in front of the world and India is your co-passenger in these efforts.*" India and Bangladesh are Saath-Saath, this had been hugely evident in the Agartala-Akhaura rail line, a connector between India's North-East and Bangladesh which is expected to finish in 2022. This project of 2013 proved to be an outcome of the memorandum between New Delhi and Dhaka termed as 'Northeast Frontier Railways'. This was essentially designed for smoother services of goods and the people both coupled with the motive of linking Gangasagar under Bangladesh's Akhaura subdivision of the Brahmanbaria district with India's Nischintapur to the Agartala railway station. Adding the above, one cannot forget the railway linkages between New Delhi and Dhaka referring to a passenger train linking Dhaka with New Jalpaiguri. The third initiative after Maitree Express (Dhaka-Kolkata) and Bandhan Express (Khulna-Kolkata) referred to as the 'Mitali Express' this was jointly unveiled by the Prime Ministers of the two countries virtually. As against the environment, an adequate facilitation of goods and passengers shall open up newer avenues for development.

Notable within this context, has been the attempts on part of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) regarding the implementation of the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) signed in 2015 for smoother progress of passenger and cargo traffic. The Agreement stressed upon creating functional transport corridors that shall strengthen the making of value chains. Nevertheless in this regard, a crucial role has been played by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) through its monetary and scientific support that forms a part of the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) enterprise. Apart from the above, the recent times have witnessed an agreement signed between Bangladesh Railway and an Indian joint venture company regarding the construction of Bogura-Sirajgunj rail connection. The former signalled launching of bridges, stations, facilitate passengers along with operationalizing the Broad Gauge and Meter Gauge trains. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's consideration of Bangladesh being India's 'Shohojatri' (co-passenger) has been extensively perceptible in their joint projects that are surely to promote evolution on part of both the countries. This finds expression in Prime Minister Modi's words. As asserted by him, "*Both India and Bangladesh want to see the world progressing through their own development. Both the countries want to see stability, love, and peace instead of instability, terror, and unrest in the world.*"

The 'Avenue' Tie: A Glimpse

The Indo-Bangladesh connectivity finds its extension even within the spectrum of roads. This acquaintance between the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina had been one of huge potential in various spheres as for example the road connectivity. As against this milieu, comes the 'Maitri Setu' (Friendship Bridge) mutually inaugurated by the 2 Prime Ministers over the Feni river in 2021 the chief connector between Sabroom in Tripura (Gateway of Northeast) and Bangladesh's Ramgarh. This bridge meant for stronger connectivity between the 2 neighbours also focussed upon an enhanced linkage among Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram with Bangladesh. This got highlighted in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's words where she asserted, *"We're creating a new era in South Asia, providing connectivity to India. I think the Maitri Setu will connect the two nations and play a significant role in business, trade and economic development."*

Adding to the above, connectivity through roads had been accelerated through the accessible bus services namely the Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati relating West Bengal with 3 Northeastern states via Dhaka. Apart from the above, the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project proved to be a vital facet for Bangladesh. This initiative of 2002 holding high hopes of transport linkages is scheduled to connect Moreh (India) with Bagan (Myanmar) and Mae Sot (Thailand). This IMT trilateral highway project had cropped up often in discussions more specifically after Prime Minister Modi's visit to his neighbouring country in 2021. The former got reciprocated in Indian Prime Minister's wish to his Bangladeshi counterpart regarding permission to connect Hilli (West Bengal) with Mahendraganj (Meghalaya) through Bangladesh. The northeastern states would grab limelight on the one hand whereas on the other hand these endeavours would surely leave enough scope for development for all ASEAN countries involved in the project. This became observable in India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's words where he says, *"Much of India's interests and relationships now lie to its East, a testimony of its ties with Asean."*

The 'Aqua' Pursuit: An Examination

Connectivity through waters has been of utmost priority on part of both New Delhi and Dhaka. Noteworthy in this perspective, has been the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade renewed in 2015 aimed to connect Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal for effective trading opportunities. As against this scenery, comes the further course of Sonamura-Daudkhandi stretch of Gumti river to enhance Tripura's linkages with India and Bangladesh. This had been illustrated in Abdul Matlub Ahmad, President of India Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bangladesh assertion where he says, *"Waterways is the cheapest mode of transportation with minimal maintenance cost and thus the new riverine movement of cargo vessels under the Protocol route will be a game-changer carrying both the transit cargo to North East region of India and vice-versa and export-cargo to Bangladesh."*

Adding to the above, Chattogram and Mongla ports have served as the passage routes for goods accessibility between the 2 neighbours. Routine dialogues between them have culminated in the insertion of Rupnarayan river (National Waterways-86) from Geonkhali to Kolaghat within the protocol besides considering the latter and Chilmari as the new ports of call. Therefore, it can be said that though the inland water routes had been crucial since the earlier times certain major initiatives in the current times have led to major developments in the field of connectivity through waters all paving the way for success of the two countries. Both the countries have been making all attempts to enrich their relations. This has been clearly articulated in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's statement, *"Our bonds and friendship have been further strengthened, diversified, expanded in recent years due to high-level political exchanges. The core of the bilateral relationships now needs to concentrate on people to people*

contact, trade, business and connectivity which has become increasingly important for both sides. Despite the restriction imposed by COVID-19, the relationship at all levels has remained strong and stable. This was evident in our excellent cooperation and collaboration with the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The ‘Vaccine’ Punch: A Novel Task

The term ‘connectivity’ symbolizes ‘being connected’ this had been visualized earlier and even during this period of Covid-19. India had exported 10 crore doses of vaccines to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Iran under the former’s ‘Vaccine Maitri’ venture. India’s gift of 3.2 million vaccines to Bangladesh had been remarkable as a mark of its ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy. Bangladesh’s deal with the Serum Institute of India for 30 million Astra Zeneca vaccines have made enough progress through its receipt of 9 million doses within a short time. Bangladesh had been equally imperative in this situation for being one among the 40 countries to send Covid relief twice during the when India was combating its second wave. This finds place in the Ministry of Defence statement which says, *“India and Bangladesh have a close, long-standing relationship covering a wide spectrum of activities and interactions, which has strengthened over the years. The people of India and Bangladesh also share close cultural bonds and a shared vision of democratic society and a rule-based order.”*

India and Bangladesh have tried to maintain genial ties since the very beginning inspite of having it own sharing share of challenges. These might vary with a range of issues although it depends upon the regimes handling the countries to chalk out strategies which shall effectively deal with them. The year 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Keeping the former in mind, one cannot forget Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to this neighbouring country, the first post Covid. Both the leaders agreed upon celebrating December 6 as ‘Maitri Diwas’ (Friendship Day) each year. This had been an extremely collaborative approach on both sides which was emphasized by the foreign office spokesman Arindam Bagchi. According to him, *“The holding of Maitri Diwas is a reflection of the deep and abiding friendship between the peoples of India and Bangladesh that has been forged in blood and shared sacrifices.”*

In a nutshell, establishing connectivity among countries has been a challenge in itself. The bonding between the two countries India and Bangladesh has and shall continue to evolve with time. Neighbours are chief indicators for well-executed foreign policies and subsequently their dealings require a customary upgradation of skills which can only pave the way of affluence for them within the globe.

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