

Bilateralism between India and Bangladesh Post West Bengal Assembly Elections 2021

-Sreerupa Saha*

Abstract:

The assembly elections in West Bengal significantly influence the future of India-Bangladesh relations. Policymakers in both New Delhi and Dhaka closely observed the electoral competition between the centre-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) led by Mamata Banerjee, which has been in power in West Bengal since 2011. Bilateral socio-economic ties, especially in economic cooperation and disaster management, strengthened under Bangladesh's Awami League government, which came to power in 2009. Since then, migration, water distribution, terrorism, and radicalization have guided bilateral discourse and policy preferences. This paper tries to bring out the impact of West Bengal politics in Indo-Bangladesh relations. It mainly deals with the aftermath of state election 2021. It also argues the role played by the states that can often add value to foreign policy making and might actually prevent the centre from jeopardising local interests, thereby protecting national interests as well.

Key Words: bilateral, politics, national interest, state, centre, West Bengal.

Introduction:

The federal government of India has the authority to handle foreign relations and is in charge of commercial, diplomatic, and consular representation. The central government is empowered to make treaties and agreements with foreign nations and to carry out treaties, agreements, and conventions with foreign nations. Article 257, which gives the federal government the authority to instruct the states in specific circumstances, makes apparent the unitary nature of the Indian constitution by placing the states under the federal government's control in those circumstances. Therefore, it would seem on the surface that governments have little to no influence over international issues, but the truth is a little bit different. Indian states have historically had a big impact on international politics. Treaties ratified by the central government typically include politico-security issues, although some also touch on topics like international trade, foreign nationals' taxes, and external credit. The constitution gives the centre the authority to sign such treaties, and states have typically not shown excessive concern about them. However, there have been instances where states have expressed anxiety when such treaties were anticipated to deal with issues that were specifically state-related. States have also expressed unease when they believed the treaties would have a significant impact on them and they felt they hadn't been properly consulted.

Although domestic politics and foreign policy are frequently intertwined, it is challenging to explain these connections using just one theory. It is widely acknowledged that nations with various political systems and arrangements respond to the limitations of the international system in ways that differ from one another in terms of their foreign policy approaches. It has also been noted that India's pursuit for a grand strategy in the post-Cold War era has been impeded by the states and provinces becoming significant players in the formulation of foreign policy. Arijit

Mazumdar thinks that ‘the emergence of coalition governments at the national level since the early 1990s, the country’s federal structure, weaknesses in India’s foreign policy institutions and the lack of a strategic culture within the country together constrain India’s search for a post-Cold War foreign policy’. (Kumar, 2014)

The influence of states and provinces on the formulation of foreign policy in India is progressively growing. This is mostly due to a shift in the center-states power dynamic. There is a dynamic equilibrium between the two. States with a politically weak centre begin to exert themselves more in international affairs. In a coalition government, this claim is strengthened even further. A more decentralised federal structure has been demanded by the regional parties in India as a result of the collapse of the country's major party system over the past 20 years. India-Bangladesh ties have always been impacted by regional state politics. In fact, it wouldn't be overstating things to claim that local politics had a role in the founding of Bangladesh.

The presence of approximately 10 million Bangladeshi refugees in India was a major factor in India's participation in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. (Datta, 2020) States like Tripura, Assam, and West Bengal lobbied the government to take an active role in the independence of Bangladesh as a result of their existence. However, the problem of Bangladeshi migration did not end with the country's liberation and later became a significant problem in the Indian state of Assam, sparking a protracted violent movement. It continues to have an impact on relations between India and Bangladesh. Unlawful Bangladeshis living in India is a significant bilateral issue.

Some anecdotes and sketches of the bilateral relation that exists between the two highlighting the impact of West Bengal politics:

The official Indian government narrative on Bangladesh has influenced political developments in the neighbouring states of Assam and West Bengal since Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971. In the relationship between India and Bangladesh, West Bengal has sway over matters of national strategic importance, particularly those pertaining to border politics, immigration, and water sharing. As a result, rival political parties in these states frequently try to influence New Delhi's preferred policies by bringing up these federal trans-boundary issues. With its anti-immigration rhetoric, the BJP has gained support in 2019 in the West Bengal region ruled by the AITC, where it is taking on the left's political and ideological establishment.

After 34 years of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led state governments between 1977 and 2011, the AITC led by Mamata Banerjee gained power in West Bengal and has governed the state since. The BJP started consolidating in West Bengal during the 2016 assembly elections. Benefiting from allegations of corruption against the AITC, the BJP increased its vote-share in West Bengal by ten-fold from four percent in 2011 to nearly 40 percent in the 2019 national elections. In 2021, the BJP has emerged as a major force in West Bengal politics. The Indian National Congress and the left-aligned parties in West Bengal, unlike the BJP, do not seem to mount enough of a challenge to the incumbent AITC government.

India’s federal characteristics, along with its cultural diversity, often force central governments to accommodate its policies according to state conditions. Thus, despite the BJP’s desire to implement its central-level electoral agenda in West Bengal, New Delhi has to incentivize the state government to act in a rational and restrained manner in the interest of maintaining cordial relations with Bangladesh. The lack of alignment between New Delhi and West Bengal,

regardless of the victor, coupled with interstate political rivalry over state assembly elections, could push both the BJP and the AITC to deadlock over important policies concerning Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations.

The political rhetoric of West Bengal will continue to shape the strategic priorities of New Delhi vis-à-vis Dhaka. Maintaining closer Indo-Bangladesh relations is in the strategic interests of both nations. With both countries eyeing the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, a free trade agreement between India and other sovereign nations, New Delhi needs to ensure domestic political considerations do not adversely impact this relationship.

On April 13, 2021 Indian Home Minister Amit Shah claimed that Bangladeshis ‘infiltrate’ into India because they don’t get food back home. Shah’s comments were part of an Anandabazaar Patrika interview, given on the campaign trail in West Bengal, where both the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) had neck-to-neck in state elections, poised for a seemingly dramatic finish on May 2, 2021.

In reply the Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen, on April 14, 2021 responded by saying the comment was “sad, unacceptable” behaviour on Shah’s part. “There are many wise people in the world who do not see even after looking, and do not understand, even after knowing,” Momen told Prothom Alo. “But if he (Shah) has said something like that, I would say his knowledge about Bangladesh is very limited,” the foreign minister added.

Shah’s April 13, 2021 comments only added to a backdrop of threats and abuses hurled at Bangladesh by BJP politicians in the past few years. At a public rally in February 2021 at Bongaon, the Indian home minister asserted that even a bird would not be able to enter India from Bangladesh if the BJP is voted into power in West Bengal. Further, Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs G. Kishan Reddy claimed that Bangladesh would be half empty if India allowed everyone who entered the country illegally to claim citizenship; his ministry has, however, claimed that illegal trespassing dropped by half to 955 between 2016 and 2019. The current government in India has also conceded they do not have accurate data regarding illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Even further back on April 11, 2019, referring to illegal migrants from Bangladesh as “termites,” Shah said the BJP would throw them out after coming to power in nationwide elections that year.

The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) won the election due to a number of factors, including Banerjee's portrayal of herself as Bengal's own daughter defending her pristine maati (motherland) from outsiders like the BJP and the party's welfare initiatives that helped them gain the support of female voters. Collectively, several Bengali media sources praised Banerjee. Surprisingly, media sources in Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Modi, acknowledged that Banerjee's standing has increased following the victory that she may be the country's leader in the 2024 General Elections. While praising her efforts, a large portion of the Hindi media expressed surprise at the outcomes and backed the BJP's ideological campaign, while the Bangladeshi media instead paid attention to how Banerjee's triumph would affect relations between India and Bangladesh.

Given that West Bengal and Bangladesh share a border and that its internal political dynamics have a direct bearing on the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, the BJP's defeat and the AITC's triumph have significant ramifications for national and regional politics. For instance, the BJP

supports the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register for Citizens (NRC), which when combined could revoke the citizenship of some foreign nationals, resulting in a massive eviction of West Bengal's population and a decline in both countries' economies. The BJP has been obliged to consider how its national policies affect state and bilateral political dynamics as a result of Banerjee, who passionately opposes CAA and NRC. Given the AITC victory and Banerjee's rising popularity, the BJP is likely to consult West Bengal leadership when determining the direction of the state going forward.

Since the TMC led by Mamata Banerjee entered office in 2011 and the West Bengal elections began, Bangladesh has consistently been a major topic of conversation. West Bengal makes up about 2,216 kilometres of the two countries' border. (Kumar, 2014) West Bengal and Bangladesh have similar climates, languages, and cultures.

But in the last state election, in an effort to win over Hindu votes in the state, the BJP has mostly concentrated on portraying Bangladesh as poorly as possible. The majority of the BJP election campaign video "Didi you do not love us" was made up of newspaper clippings, photos, and news footage of reports on the persecution of minorities in Bangladesh, police actions against Islamic organisations there, Middle Eastern guerilla fighters fighting for the Islamic State, and cattle smuggling. In a January 23, 2021 program marking the 124th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose – attended by both Banerjee and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – the incumbent West Bengal chief minister left the stage chanting “Joy Bangla, Jai Hind” in protest, as a response to BJP men shouting “Jai Shri Ram” slogans from the audience. BJP’s West Bengal chapter President Dilip Ghosh immediately wrote on his Facebook page, “Honourable (Mamata) is fighting for greater Bangladesh,” with multiple BJP wings referring to “Joy Bangla” as a “Muslim Bengal” slogan.

Modi’s visit to Dhaka to celebrate Bangladesh’s 50 years of independence couldn’t be more politically poignant and symbolically charged. On the second day of the visit, Modi traveled to the birthplace shrine of Harichand Thakur – the founder of the Matua sect – in Orakandi, Gopalganj, making him the first Indian Prime Minister to ever do so. The highly political move sought to paint the BJP in a favorable light for the 15 million voters of the politically active Matua community in West Bengal, according to Biswanath Chakraborty, Professor of Political Science at Rabindra Bharati University in India.

Being one of the final opposition strongholds where the BJP has never won an election, West Bengal would have served as more evidence for the BJP that Hindu majoritarian politics had gained support among the Indian people. Due to its contempt for Bengali culture and inability to communicate with the Bengali people in their own language, the BJP failed to win over Bengali audiences, which revealed its Achilles' heel. The BJP's campaign against the female-led AITC fell flat, despite last-minute attempts to emphasise women's issues. The BJP fielded only 36 women candidates, compared to the AITC's 50 candidates. Contrary to the BJP, which depended on its core leadership to win the elections, the AITC mobilised female voters by introducing female campaigners. By making derogatory remarks against Banerjee, Modi further alienated female supporters. The BJP's poor handling of the pandemic is another factor in the party's defeat in West Bengal. The BJP declined to address these concerns, further complicating matters, despite a spike in cases connected to political rallies in West Bengal and a scarcity of vaccines in the state. Banerjee’s charisma and the BJP’s lackluster response to the pandemic secured the AITC victory in West Bengal, enabling Indians to recognize that a plausible alternative to the

BJP's Hindutva politics at the centre could be a real possibility in 2024. Though Indian voters prefer Modi at the centre, perhaps due to a lack of alternatives, their preferences have changed at the regional level as seen in recent state elections.

M. Humayun Kabir, a career diplomat who served as Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Kolkata between 1999 and 2001, believed before election took place in 2021 a BJP-run West Bengal would have brought overwhelming problems for Bangladesh. The country is already surrounded by BJP governments in Tripura and Assam. The addition of West Bengal would risk the rise of Hindu nationalism around the borders, which would likely snowball into communal violence in the Bangladeshi areas near the borders.

He further added that a BJP government would likely implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC), de-registering a large population in West Bengal who migrated from Bangladesh after 1947 and leaving them with no choice but to flee West Bengal as refugees. These were the thoughts which occurred before the election took place in 2021.

Despite Modi's outreach to Bangladesh, his attempts to resolve domestic and foreign policy issues during his visit to Bangladesh in March 2021 backfired. Modi decided to visit the town of Orakandi in Bangladesh to attract the Matua vote in the West Bengal elections. The Matua community maintains a low profile within Bangladesh due to enduring fears of religious violence. Although the BJP ended up winning the Matua vote in the assembly elections, Modi's stopover in the town may have strained relations with Bangladesh. Even though Dhaka did not officially respond to Modi's visit to Orakandi, the birthplace of the founder of the Matua community, the visit led to the tacit polarization of Orakandi. In all probability, Dhaka did not appreciate such meddling in its domestic affairs by a foreign actor.

The BJP's backing of the NRC, which detects and expels illegal immigrants from Assam and may result in the expulsion of millions of refugees to Bangladesh, is another important strain on relations between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh's resources will already be stretched thin by hosting more than a million Myanmarese refugees, making this potential migration a threat to the country's national security.

Although Modi claims that India and Bangladesh are witnessing a golden era in their friendship, the afore-mentioned bilateral issues signal otherwise. Furthermore, the killing of Bangladeshi nationals along the Indo-Bangladesh border by Indian forces amid suspicions of illegal border-crossing coupled with the rise of anti-Bangladesh rhetoric within India and anti-India rhetoric within Bangladesh continue to strain ties.

However, the Teesta water dispute, involving the distribution of the Teesta River waters between India and Bangladesh, is an issue that BJP and Bangladesh have traditionally agreed upon. In 2011, the Indian government consented to Bangladesh's request to share the river's water. In any case, AITC is against sharing the waters. The Indian government cannot proceed without West Bengal's consent, despite the fact that the BJP is in favour of signing the water deal and that Dhaka has repeatedly asked for access to river resources. So, it is anticipated that the AITC's victory will not improve the tense Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Much of the success was possible because of the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of Awami League led government that came to power through the delayed 9th Jatiya Sangsad election of December 2008. Under the capable guidance of Prime Minister Hasina, India and Bangladesh started to sincerely cooperate to resolve each other's unresolved concerns. The signing of a joint communiqué between India and Bangladesh in 2010 marked the beginning of the actual turn around. This broadened the scope of bilateral cooperation and paved the way

for extensive regional collaboration. For the sake of facilitating their respective countries' commerce, investment, and energy cooperation, India and Bangladesh resolved to open their borders. In order to give India greater access to its northeast, Bangladesh first opened up its land and water borders. In exchange, India acceded to Bangladesh's long-standing demand for passage through Nepal and Bhutan. (Datta, 2020)

The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in September 2011 was supposed to mark a turning point in India-Bangladesh ties, but it was clouded by disagreements over water sharing between the two nations. Due to Mamata Banerjee's last-minute absence from the prime minister's entourage, the deal over Teesta water sharing, which was touted as the biggest deliverable, was unable to be completed. On the eve of the prime minister's visit—the first by an Indian prime minister in 12 years—this embarrassing situation led some in India to accuse Mamata of sabotaging India-Bangladesh relations. They claimed that Mr. Manmohan Singh was prohibited from advancing this relationship because "capricious" Mamata threw a wrench in the plans. However, did West Bengal's authorities obstruct the achievement of a significant foreign policy goal for political motives, or were they only defending their state interests, which the centre may not have been completely able to appreciate given its distance from the region? Without a doubt, the Awami League government's election resulted in a noticeable improvement in the atmosphere of India-Bangladesh ties. The fact that Bangladesh worked with India on security matters, resulting in the arrest and transfer of several key northeast insurgent leaders, also gave it some substance. For groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), this was a death blow. In addition, when Bangladesh took action against Islamist terrorists inside its borders, it dismantled a number of terror organisation modules, some of which had their headquarters in Pakistan.

When Sheikh Hasina visited India in January 2010 and signed various agreements, the goodwill created was further enhanced. The removal of obstacles from the majority of unresolved bilateral issues has begun. This was intended to forge various connections between Bangladesh and India. Many people on both sides of the border hoped that something equally remarkable would occur during the Indian prime minister's visit to Bangladesh in September 2011 that would change the two countries' relationship. Dramatic events did occur, but they only managed to make the federal government seem bad. (Kumar, 2014)

India sees Bangladesh as one of the chief pillars in its "neighbourhood first" policy and aims to benefit from its resurging economy. However, the BJP government's desire to implement its electoral manifesto, which includes stringent border control and immigration policies, is bound to empower anti-India factions in Bangladesh. Simultaneously, the emergence of hardline Islamist groups in Bangladesh poses a new challenge to closer and sustainable bilateral relations. Similarly, the AITC's inability to strike a Teesta Water deal gives space to increasing Chinese involvement in Bangladesh's river management projects. The central government will have to convince West Bengal to finalize an amicable and mutually beneficial water-sharing agreement. It should emphasize that the deal is not a zero-sum game as politically perceived but creates a win-win situation that will further contribute to mutual economic development.

Evaluation:

There is no doubt that Bangladesh was able to improve its internal security situation due to its partnership with India. It caused the northeast insurgency to falter and curb the terrorist activities of religious fanatics. India has concentrated more on security-related concerns because it is located in a volatile area. Bangladesh, on the other hand, places more emphasis on territory and

water issues. Unfortunately, before delving into the details of the situation, both sides attempted to go too far, too quickly. The impression given by the Bangladeshi side in India was that because Bangladesh had cooperated with India on security-related issues, it should be amply compensated so that Sheikh Hasina's critics, who are constantly accusing her of selling out to India, would be hushed. A section in India wanted the country to follow the Gujral doctrine as a model, hoping that unilateral concessions would lead to strategic advantage for the country, as it would befriend its eastern neighbour. This would have been a major achievement for India, which faces a difficult neighbourhood in South Asia.

However, it turned out to be challenging to make concessions in other areas and receive concessions in exchange. Teesta water sharing, land boundaries, and transit proved to be difficult problems that required time to resolve. Before suggesting that these treaties be signed, it seemed as though no due diligence had been done. Intriguingly, Bangladesh persisted in exerting pressure on India to ratify the Teesta deal, which has come to be seen as a sign of improved ties between the two countries.

India and Bangladesh should collaborate more. The question of how to make agreements sustainable, however, is crucial. It is true that treaties are occasionally made as political agreements with the country's geopolitical interests in mind; in these situations, the central government is better suited to determine the national interest. If the agreements take into account the interests of all significant stakeholders, they will have a better chance of being upheld.

The idea of not reciprocating with smaller neighbours in an effort to win their favour has fundamental problems. It is assumed that if India acts kind to its smaller neighbours, this will inspire similar sentiments, creating a welcoming atmosphere throughout the neighbourhood. Many worry that without Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh may follow suit. Additionally, it must be understood that good will frequently proves to be effervescent. Therefore, before signing any treaties, it is crucial to thoroughly negotiate them. Agreements can only be upheld if they provide equal benefits to both parties. The bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh are most negatively impacted by our agreement to things we cannot deliver. It is anticipated that measures will be durable if both sides take a strong but practical approach.

The BJP will need to exercise caution and heed the preferences of its constituents in West Bengal in light of the results of the West Bengal elections. The BJP is anticipated to give the NRC and CAA in West Bengal lip service in order to preserve its core constituencies, notably the Matua group, and sustain diplomatic connections with Bangladesh. Similar to this, the AITC is anticipated to maintain its position on the divisive Teesta river conflict while maintaining cordial relations with Bangladesh in order to please its supporters. Bangladesh may try to strengthen its ties with West Bengal by maintaining the lifting of the export prohibition on essential fish trade. Additionally, given that the AITC is sympathetic to the cause, West Bengal might assist in mediating between Delhi and Dhaka on the Rohingya issue.

For India-Bangladesh relations over the past several decades, local state politics yields an outsized influence on the broader bilateral relationship. Greater Indo-Bangladesh cooperation is desirable to both the center and West Bengal governments. To achieve this, New Delhi will need to find a middle ground to incentivize state governments to act in a rational and restrained

manner without giving way to short-sighted and narrowly conceived political agendas to negotiate mutually beneficial bilateral policies.

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*Assistant Professor, Shirakole Mahavidyalaya, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal.