Some Reflections on the Dynamics of Bangladesh India Relations

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Introduction

No country merits greater consideration in the conduct of Bangladesh's foreign policy than India. A complex web of reasons could be held responsible for such a situation. Geographical location has rendered Bangladesh virtually India-locked. Barring a small border with Myanmar over a highly difficult terrain in the south-east of the country, Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides. Its sea-routes through the Bay of Bengal are guarded by the Indian Navy with no parallel in the region. Bangladesh and India are common co-basin states in the Ganges and the Brahmaputra river basins importance of which for the very survival of Bangladesh could hardly be exaggerated.

Historically, relations between the peoples of these two countries were characterized by numerous ups and downs. They have common ethno-linguistic origin. They are common heirs to one of the greatest ancient civilizations. They have lived for centuries within the same political entity. The list could be enlarged further. Nonetheless, the relations between the people of the territory what constitutes now Bangladesh on the one hand and that of India on the other, over a long historical period have also been characterized by a struggle for the survival of the former and the supremacy of the later. It has deeply influenced the formation of the collective personality of the people of Bangladesh creating an adversary self-image vis-a-vis India. Even the experience of 1971 proved to be insufficient to break such a self-image.
Very recently, relations between Bangladesh and India are characterized by the existence of two opposite trends. On the one hand, sharp differences between them continue to persist over India's regional security posture, and a number of bilateral issues. On the other hand, efforts are being employed by both the sides, albeit with varied degree of sincerity, to bridge the differences. Simultaneously, both the countries are committed to regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC.

For Bangladesh, the settlement of some of the issues involved in her relations with India are of crucial importance. In the long-term perspective, given the congenial atmosphere in bilateral politico-economic relations, Bangladesh-India cooperation could play a vital role in the socio-economic development of the country. No less important, friendly relations with India would reduce the external security concern of the country to the minimum. Thus, the importance of Bangladesh's relations with India overshadow any other foreign policy issue.

It is in this backdrop, that an attempt would be made below to study Bangladesh-India relations in some of their ramifications. The paper would begin with an assessment of divergent perceptions and priorities of the two countries in their bilateral relations. Then, recent developments with regard to outstanding bilateral issues would be analyzed. Finally, an attempt would be made to identifying the major directions in Bangladesh-India relations.

Divergent Perceptions and Priorities

Independent Bangladesh’s relations with India have traversed through a chequered process. From an apogee of very close ties in the aftermath of Bangladesh’s independence in 1971 it plummeted into a nadir of mutual mistrust and suspicion. For understandable reasons, the change of government in Bangladesh in 1975 is identified as the turning point. In reality, however, serious perceptual gap and divergence in their priorities persisted from the very beginning of their relations. India was the first country to come out in support of the cause of Bangladesh following the military adventure of Pakistan army on 25 March 1971 which unleashed the worst genocide and exodus in the Post-War history. Its humanitarian, moral,
diplomatic, and finally, military assistance have played a crucial role in the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistani yoke. All these are well-known and well-recognized. However, when discussions center on why India has spent money and shaded the blood of its soldiers for Bangladesh and what the later should do in exchange the parties fall apart. A significant part of the Indians usually tends to emphasize the humanitarian aspects of their policy putting less or even no emphasis on the strategic considerations. In this regard, the single-most important point missed by them is the coincidence of the cause of Bangladesh’s independence with India’s long-standing strategic objectives vis-a-vis the region. For Bangladesh, it was a black-and-white issue of survival, to put it in Shakespearean terms, ‘to be or not to be’. For India, it was a combination of political expediency and self-interest. The situation offered India with a unique opportunity to cut to size its arch-rival, Pakistan, and thus, emerge as the unchallenged regional power in South Asia. India made the best use of the ‘historic opportunity’.1

Nonetheless, influential circles in India want Bangladesh be in eternal indebtedness to her for the assistance rendered in 1971. As one Indian analyst puts it bluntly, "The Government of Bangladesh should never forget the efforts made by the Indian Government and the people in saving the honor and dignity of her people at the cost of sacrificing hundreds of Indian soldiers and millions of rupees". 2 In this regard, they failed to appreciate the fact that while India played a crucial role in the independence of Bangladesh, the later also played, on its part, a similar role in making India the unchallenged regional power in South Asia. Therefore, gratefulness should have been reciprocal, instead of unilateral, as expected by them. Indian position on this and a host of related issues has not been acceptable to Bangladesh even during the euphoric period of Indo-Bangladesh friendship. Contrary to common perceptions, a careful and well-documented study of Bangladesh-India Relations of the period during 1972-1975 reveals that notwithstanding his friendly attitude towards India and a sense of indebtedness to the later, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was quite resistant to Indian pressures and displayed independence whenever he judged it necessary or expedient.3

Following the change of government in Bangladesh in 1975,
domestic politics in Bangladesh experienced a u-turn, so did its foreign policy. The strategic consensus between the two countries achieved in 1971 fell apart. The new Bangladeshi leadership began to assert more independence and freedom of action on a wide range of regional and international issues.

India used the post-1975 change in Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policy as a pretext to harden its stand on bilateral issues. In the long run, it has not only demonstrated intransigence on the contentious issues of mutual concern, but also refrained from obliging to a number of treaty obligations. Being in overwhelmingly advantageous position via-a-vis Bangladesh in terms of geo-strategic location, military strength, the level of socio-economic and political development as well as international standing, India persistently tended to deal with Bangladesh from the position of strength. For the same reasons, New Delhi often demonstrated a benign negligence to the sensitivities of Bangladesh. Consequently, both the countries became bogged down in a number of protracted disputes which we would discuss elsewhere in the paper.

Meanwhile, during post-1971 period, Indian strategic thinking on South Asia underwent a radical transformation. Taking into account its historical heritage, geo-strategic position, economic and military potentials as well as international standing, Indian strategists developed a series of well connected foreign policy and security perceptions with regard to its role in determining the destiny of South Asia which are widely known as India Doctrine. To a significant extent it is the South Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine, wherein India views the entire region as a single strategic unit and herself as the sole custodian of security and stability in the region.

During the late-Indira period, and particularly under Rajiv Gandhi, this doctrinaire precept was put into action. As judged by the policy makers in New Delhi, over the four decades of its existence as an independent state, India has prepared herself to embark upon such a policy. Economically, politically and geo-strategically, it has emerged as the single-most dominant power in South Asia overwhelming all its neighbors taken together. In size, it is the largest country, even larger than all its neighbors taken together. It is one of the ten largest industrial powers of
the world. As a land power, it is only next to the super powers and China. It has the world's sixth largest navy and eighth largest air force. Despite recurrent crises, its political system proved to be more stable than that of any South Asian country. In the international arena, it emerged as a factor that should be reckoned with by all the great powers.

Another important development by which India has been encouraged is that the super powers and great powers have significantly reduced and even minimized their competitive involvement in South Asia and have shown a distinct unwillingness to be involved in disputes and conflicts in the region. In this regard, their unwillingness to challenge India within the region has been remarkable. During the entire post-independent period, smaller South Asian countries either directly or indirectly welcomed external great power involvement in the region with a view to counterbalancing otherwise unchallenged might of India. In this regard, China and the US have been readily available. On the other hand, India's policy was to keep the great powers - friends and adversaries alike - out of intra-regional affairs, so that it could exert its power and influence to bear upon the countries of the region.

In the circumstances, with the withdrawal of super and great power involvement from South Asia a vacuum is created, setting the stage for India to fulfill its objectives envisaged in the India Doctrine and to emerge as the self-appointed custodian of peace and security of the entire region. While such a situation has been envisioned by India's founding fathers, Nehru in particular, in terms of the method of its implementation, Rajiv's policy was an anti-thesis to Gandhian non-violence and Nehruvian peaceful coexistence. It was highly heavy handed and dependent on the use of or the threat to use force in dealing with the neighbors. Indian policy towards the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and the stationing of IPKF in that country under a controversial treaty, its intervention in the Maldives to suppress an attempted coup and the deadlock in its relations with Nepal are the most illustrated manifestations of this policy. 5

India's role of self-appointed custodian of peace and stability in the region has generated deep mistrust and suspicion in the
region. Bangladesh as well as other South Asian neighbors of India are aware of and do recognize India's pre-eminence in the region. What they resist is India's attempts to transform this natural pre-eminence into an imposed pre-dominance. They have developed a sense of being intimidated. They are deeply concerned that what happened with Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal could be repeated with any other country of the region. As a consequence, India's relations with its neighbors deteriorated severely. Its authority in the region reached the lowest ebb. Bangladesh-India relations reached a near-deadlock over almost all the contentious issues. The worst victim of such an unhealthy atmosphere in the region became the emerging process of cooperation within the framework of SAARC.

However, India's experience as a regional hegemon is not encouraging for itself. The reasons are primarily of domestic and regional nature. Enormous costs incurred by India in terms of material and human resources to sustain Sri Lankan adventure, unhappy experience of deadlock in its relations with Nepal have brought, even during Rajiv Gandhi's rule, a change in Indian mind. Influential circles in India came to realize that the prevailing situation of mistrust and suspicion can not be congenial for the long-standing interests of the country in the region. They became aware that Indian diplomacy has failed to display the wisdom, sophistication and caution as displayed by the previous generation of its leaders. In concrete terms, they have clearly realized that it is necessary to devise more sophisticated methods of exerting influence on the neighbors than employed against Srilanka or even Nepal. The crisis in Kashmir, while deteriorated Indo-Pak relations, also vividly demonstrated the need for shifting emphasis from foreign adventures to domestic politics. During V. P. Singh, Indian regional posture underwent a process of change. The withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka, a comparatively conciliatory approach towards Nepal and to a lesser extent towards Bangladesh were indicative of the new trend in Indian thinking. The crisis over Babri Mosque issue and subsequent developments, including the change of government, have reinvigorated the shift in Indian policy away from foreign adventure to domestic problems. Sharp division of the society along ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious as well as ideological
lines coupled with the development of events prior to and following the tragic death of Rajiv Gandhi painfully reiterated the fact that India is literally at war with itself. Any dramatic improvement in the domestic situation is unlikely and it would serve as a powerful restraint against foreign adventure.

Another important related development is the declining role of regional powers. Third world regional powers had consolidated their positions in their respective regions in the environment of fierce rivalry between the two power blocs and rough parity between the two superpowers in terms of military might. These regional powers have prospered during the First Detente. During the Second Cold War, and particularly, during the early stage of the Second Detente, third world regional powers reached the zenith of their power and influence. As indicated earlier, with the relative withdrawal of great powers, regional powers like India could be in a position of maintaining an independence of will and capacity which became singularly important in the context of regional balance of power. The replacement of the bipolar world with a unipolar one resulted in the establishment of unprecedented control over the international system by the US and its allies. The great powers - virtually united in a single bloc - have embarked upon a policy of curbing the power and influence of the regional powers. In the Gulf, they have already demonstrated their firmness vis-a-vis hostile designs of a regional power. The Gulf War and the fate of Iraq would put severe restraint on the ambitions of regional hegemons particularly, when such ambitions are confronted with the collective designs of the great powers. As evident by Indian policy, it has clearly received the message and adjusting its policy to the current realities of international politics.

In the circumstances, security threats to smaller South Asian neighbors of India - as posed by Indian regional security posture during the 1980s - have significantly reduced. Without any dramatic change in the domestic, regional as well as international situation - which is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future - no realistic politician in power in New Delhi could or would revert to the foreign and security policies of the 1980s.
Outstanding Issues in Bilateral Relations

Bangladesh-India relations are characterized by the existence of a number of contentious issues which proved to be too difficult to resolve. While some of them are rooted in the historical past, others are in the current dynamics of bilateral as well as intra-state relations. The list of such issues would be long enough:

1. the sharing of the water resources of common rivers, including that of the Ganges;
2. implementation of the 1974 Land Border Agreement in general, and accord on the leasing of Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh in particular;
3. India's policy towards ethnic insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts,
4. demarcation of maritime boundaries and the ownership of South Talpatty Island;
5. trade imbalances in favor of India; and
6. smuggling, illegal cross-border activities and a number of other issues.

For the convenience of our analysis, we would concentrate only on some of the vital issues on the settlement of which prospects for friendly relations and more fruitful cooperation are dependent. In this regard, our objective would be to study the nature of the dispute, pattern of behavior of the two parties and the directions they are moving in.

Sharing of Common Water Resources

Bangladesh and India share two international river basins viz., the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Both are successive international rivers which empty into the Bay of Bengal. International character of any basin entails interdependence among the co-riparian states. Cooperation among them for the efficient utilization and proper management of water resources is crucial to their interests. The task, however, often proves to be difficult due to the whims of nature and/or the activities of the states sharing the same basin.

In case of common Bangladesh-India river basins both types of problem are equally operative. Both the basins exhibit a two-fold natural problem: too little water during the dry season and too much flood water during the monsoon. The average
discharge of the Ganges is in excess of a million cusecs, which rises to two million cusecs in monsoons often creating severe flood problem for Bangladesh. In crucial dry season, i.e., January to May, particularly during mid-March to mid-May, the flow reduces to mere 55,000 cusecs creating a severe shortage of water. In the circumstances, while cooperation between the two countries with a view to devising a plan for the whole year covering both dry and monsoon seasons was indispensable, India constructed the Farakka Barrage with a view to diverting 40,000 cusecs of water from the Ganges to the Bhagirathi-Hoogli river through a feeder canal during leanest period leaving Bangladesh with only 15,000 cusecs of water. Thus, the problems on the sharing of Ganges water was created which in course of time turned to be the most stumbling block in the way of cooperation between the two countries.

During the initial period of the emergence of Bangladesh, both the countries displayed a degree of sincerity as well as sensitivity to each others interests. Both the sides agreed that any withdrawal of water has to be subject to an agreement. Pursuant to this decision, before the test-run of the feeder canal, the two sides reached in April 1975 a limited agreement on water-sharing during the lean season under which India agreed to limit its withdrawal from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs.

Subsequently, however, Indian policy took a u-turn. With the approach of 1976 dry season Bangladesh suggested that the 1975 formula be continued and a joint study of the problem, as stipulated in the April 1975 agreement, be carried out. India was totally non-responsive which compelled Bangladesh to take the issue to the UN and other international forums. Nothing changed until the change of government in New Delhi in 1977. Even with the Janata Government agreement was reached only after nearly doubling India’s withdrawal authority from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs range to 20,500 to 26,500 cusecs range. It was, however, agreed that in case of exceptionally low level of flows, Bangladesh would be guaranteed a minimum of 80 per cent of the volume earmarked for it in the schedule of allocation. With the return of Congress to power in New Delhi, Indian attitude once again stiffened significantly. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was signed in October 1982, dropped the 80 per cent guarantee clause leaving Bangladesh at
the whim of India.\textsuperscript{10}

All these arrangements are of temporary nature. With regard to a permanent solution of the problem through augmentation of water flow during the lean season so that the need of both the countries could be meet, mainly two concrete proposals are being debated. First one mooted by Bangladesh envisages the building up of reservoirs in Nepal with a view to storing water during the monsoons to meet the need of dry season. Thus, Bangladesh suggested a regional settlement to a basically regional problem. India has vehemently opposed the idea. In this regard, her insistence on bilateralism in dealing with the neighbors have shaped her stand on the issue. India intends to negotiate with the neighbors on its own terms and certainly on the basis of bilateralism. It is apprehensive that the neighbors with whom New Delhi has specific bilateral problems might 'gang up' against her and make attempts to bargain collectively. More important, Bangladesh's attempts to bring China and the donor agencies into the picture have seriously irritated India, as it would dilute her influence on the issue.\textsuperscript{11}

India, on its part, mooted a counter proposal, to build two water reservoirs in Arunachal Pradesh and to make a link canal from Jogighopa of Assam to a point near Farakka. Such a proposal could not be acceptable to Bangladesh for obvious reasons. First of all, with the barrages at both ends of the link canal lying in India, it would retain absolute control over the canal. Should India decide to divert increasingly more water from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges to meet its own needs, those areas of Bangladesh which depend on the Brahmaputra water would face the same problems as the southwest areas of the country were facing because of the Farakka Barrage. Once again Bangladesh would be at the mercy of India. No less important, the construction of the 320 kilometer canal across the northwest Bangladesh would mean the loss of valuable agricultural lands, which Bangladesh cannot afford in view of its overpopulation and insufficient food production. A combination of these reasons are sustaining Bangladesh's intransigence on the issue.\textsuperscript{12}

Since the proposals were mooted in late-1970s, India and Bangladesh underwent a long process of negotiation with no breakthrough in sight. India, being the upper riparian state
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held the key to the settlement. However, as seen from New Delhi, India has very little stake in an early solution of the problem. Thus, India found herself in a position wherein it could stick to its maximalist demands. Bangladesh, on the other hand, is in a difficult dilemma. Her need for an early solution of the problem could hardly be exaggerated. Annually recurring devastating floods following no less devastating droughts have already put the very survival of the nation at stake. However, accepting a solution on Indian terms would mean that the 'life arteries' of Bangladesh would fall under New Delhi's control. As a consequence, both the parties persistently repeated their old stereo-typed arguments in the negotiation table with least or no preparedness to compromise with each other's positions.

Of late, however, the approach of both the parties have suffered varied degree of changes with regard to a permanent solution of the problem. Under the previous regime, Bangladesh wanted a 'permanent system' of sharing of Ganges water on the basis of the MOU of 1982. After BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) came to power, Bangladesh's position has shifted from that policy. Now, Bangladesh insists that a guarantee clause be included in the agreement which will fix the amount of water Bangladesh is to receive. In other words, Bangladesh wants an agreement based on that of 1977.

India has never been enthusiastic about a permanent agreement on the Ganges issue alone. As in the past, it continues to insist that a settlement be made not only over the Ganges but over all the common rivers. Bangladesh, on its part, continue to insist that the Ganges issue should not be tagged to other issues. A series of negotiations that took place between the two countries following the recent political changes could not bridge the prevailing gap on the issue. As the Bangladesh-India Joint Communiqué of May 28, 1992 suggest there has been an attempt to reconcile the divergent position of the two countries. In the Communiqué it was stated that the two Prime Ministers agreed that an equitable, long-term and comprehensive arrangement for sharing the flows of the Ganges, Tista and other major rivers "evolved through mutual discussions would serve the best interest of the people of the two countries". Similarly, the Communiqué also mentioned the need for the interim arrangements for sharing the dry season flows on the Ganges.
Bangladesh has highly valued Indian assurance that "every possible effort will be made to avoid undue hardships to Bangladesh by sharing the flows in the Ganga/Ganges at Farakka on an equitable basis".  

Recent parleys between the two countries did very little, if anything at all, to resolve Bangladesh-India dispute over the sharing of Ganges water. Nonetheless, the beginning of a new round of negotiations on the issue and recent Indian preparedness to share the Ganges water on an equitable basis coupled with the settlement of Tin Bigha issue have generated certain degree of cautious optimism in Bangladesh with regard to the solution of the problem. However, in the past as well there has been similar or even more optimism which proved to be unjustified. Therefore, skepticism still overweigh the renewed optimism.

The Tin Bigha Corridor

Bangladesh and India inherited some territorial problems in the form of enclaves in each others territory as well as vaguely demarcated land boundary. Most crucial among them to Bangladesh was Tin Bigha Corridor issue. Dahagram and Angorpota, the two enclaves of Bangladesh, are separated from Lalmonirhat District of Bangladesh by a small patch of an acre of Indian territory. This patch known as the Tin Bigha Corridor is the nearest point between Bangladesh mainland and her Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves.

During the initial period of Bangladesh's independence, this and other problems were discussed between the two countries in an atmosphere of sensitivity to each other's interests with a view to finding out mutually acceptable solution. In this regard, their success has been remarkable. The problems which could not be resolved by India and Pakistan for more than two and a half decades, found their solution in the Border Agreement signed between Bangladesh and India within less than two and half years, on May 14, 1974. According to the Agreement, India was to receive the whole of Berubari whereas Bangladesh was to receive the possession of Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves. Additionally, India was to lease in perpetuity to Bangladesh, the Tin Bigha Corridor to connect Dahagram with Panbari Mauza in Bangladesh.
As per the terms of the agreement, India got the possession of Berubari but did not deliver the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh. Even the agreement was not been ratified by the Indian Parliament, while Bangladesh did it within six months of its signing. The official policy of non-ratification of the agreement and non-transfer of the Corridor have been supplemented by more worrisome activities on the part of Indian citizens of the region under discussion. Armed Indian personnel imposed occasional blockade on the two enclaves, occasionally, even with the assistance of the Indian Border Security Forces. The problem became acute in 1981, when the enclaves were totally besieged. However, persistent efforts on the part of Bangladesh, led to the signing of another agreement in 1982 which in addition to confirming permanent lease of Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh to enable her to exercise sovereignty over the two enclaves, also envisages detailed modalities about terms and conditions of the lease.

The 1982 agreement involved substantial compromise on the part of Bangladesh as the agreement also guaranteed India's right of passage through the Corridor. The agreement raised high hopes in Bangladesh with regard to the prospects for the early settlement of the issue, but in vain. A number of citizens of the region under question in a petition to Calcutta High Court appealed against the leasing of Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh. As a consequence, the Indian government decided to suspend all further actions on the issue until the final decision to be taken by the Indian Supreme Court. Thus, the Tin Bigha issue got bogged down in a protracted legal battle which was to continue until May 5, 1990 when a five member constitution bench of the Supreme Court headed by the Chief Justice ruled that there was no legal or constitutional barriers for the Indian government to lease out the Tin Bigha Corridor. The judges upheld the findings of the Calcutta High Court that there was no cessation of territory in the lease in perpetuity. They held that the agreement should have been implemented fully and hoped that it will be done for the restoration of friendly relations between the two countries. Thus, the Indian Supreme Court verdict not only removed the legal barrier, but also in an unequivocal language suggested the transfer of Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh with a view to restoring friendly
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relations between Dhaka and New Delhi.

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court verdict, Indian elite became sharply divided over the Tin Bigha Corridor issue with the mainstream being in favor of giving Bangladesh the right of passage through the Corridor. Such assurances were formally given to Bangladesh by Janata Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral and West Bengal’s Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. On the issue, Congress was as well favorably disposed to Bangladesh. Nonetheless, virtually no action followed until the recent change of government in both the countries. Two reasons could be singled out for such a situation. First, both Bangladesh and India have gone through a period of difficult internal developments before present stability was achieved. Second, the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) which represents Hindu chauvinism almost exclusively directed against the Muslims emerged as the second largest force in Indian politics next only to Congress. The BJP has already made clear its hostility towards Bangladesh. Uproar over a fabricated story that a commando group was sent from Bangladesh to kill the BJP leadership is just a manifestation of the Party’s approach towards Bangladesh. Soon after the May 1990 verdict of Indian Supreme Court BJP and some other chauvinist elements, including a faction of Forward Block, initiated a well-organized campaign against the implementation of the verdict. As a consequence, deadlock over the Tin Bigha issue continued.

The situation, however, began to change following the establishment of a more or less stable government in New Delhi under P. V. Narasimha Rao and the fall of autocracy in Bangladesh and the formation of a democratically elected government under Khaleda Zia. During 1991-92, a series of talks took place between the two countries over Tin Bigha Corridor issue. The outcome of the talks has been an eleven-point agreement signed between two countries on March 26, 1992 further detailing modalities of the use of transit facilities through the Tin Bigha Corridor by Bangladesh. The agreement also fixed June 26, 1992 as the date for the implementation of the agreement. During the period in between the signing of the agreement and its implementation, BJP, its allies and a number of their clandestine organizations concentrated all their efforts aimed at resisting the transfer of the Corridor to Bangladesh.
This time, however, both central government as well as the West Bengal government acted decisively. On the one hand, they have explained to the local people that the agreement neither compromised Indian sovereignty over the territory nor it sacrificed the interests of the local people and that the BJP campaigned in this regard is ill-motivated. On the other hand, they have completed all necessary preparation for the implementation of the agreement. Thanks to all these, the agreement was implemented duly on June 26, 1992 while BJP and its allies could offer little resistance.

The Tin Bigha issue by itself is not a very significant one, particularly when it is compared with other issues of mutual discord between Bangladesh and India like the sharing of the waters of common rivers. Nonetheless, the settlement of the dispute over the Tin Bigha issue is a remarkable development in Bangladesh-India relations. The reason is obvious. It is for the first time since mid-1970s, when Bangladesh and India became bogged down in a protracted conflict over a number of issues, that any issue of mutual discord was resolved amicably. Whether it is the result of a deliberate policy change on the part of New Delhi or whether it would influence the settlement of other disputes remain open to question. But the settlement of Tin Bigha issue generated cautious optimism in Bangladesh with regard to the prospects for the settlement of other contentious issues as well.

Demarcation of Maritime Boundaries and the South Talpatty Issue

The maritime boundary between Bangladesh and India has not yet been demarcated. It already gave rise to a number of complex problems in their bilateral relations and the potential problems are beyond anybody's imagination. The first such dispute arose when Bangladesh Government in 1974 entered into agreements with six foreign oil companies granting them oil and natural gas exploration rights in the coastal area of the Bay of Bengal. India objected to the venture. Position of the parties with regard to defining their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) diverge sharply. Bangladesh line moved southward from the edge of its land boundary, while the Indian line took a southeasterly direction, thus, creating an angle within which lie
thousands of square miles of the Bay of Bengal claimed by both the countries as their EEZ. 26

Negotiations between Bangladesh and India have been going on since 1974 to resolve the problem arising from overlapping claims. It may be pertinent to mention that there is no binding international covenant for apportionment of sea bed. In the process of negotiations, it appeared that the parties sharply differ on the base lines on which the rectangles are to be drawn to cover 200-miles EEZs of each country. In delimiting the maritime boundary, India insists on equidistance principle wherein the coasts of the concerned countries should be regarded as the base line. The principle could not be acceptable to Bangladesh. It is primarily because of the fact that Bangladesh is in a disadvantageous position. Its coast is of concave nature, while Indian one is of convex configuration. Moreover, with respect to the continental shelf/margin, Bangladesh requires to fix the boundary with India as an opposite state as well taking into account the Andamans and Nicobar Islands. Current Bangladeshi position is that her base lines should be demarcated by a straight line or series of straight lines connecting appropriate points on adjacent coastal waters. In this regard, Bangladesh often refers to the solution of a similar problem among Federal Republic of Germany, Netherlands and Denmark on the basis of equity rather than equidistance. 27 A series of negotiations between the two countries could not bridge the differences.

Failure by Bangladesh and India to settle the maritime boundary issue gave rise to a number of disputes in their bilateral relations. Foremost among them is the conflicting claims over the ownership of a new-born island in the estuary of the Haribhanga River on the border between the two countries. The island in Bangladesh is known as South Talpatty whereas in India as New Moore/Purbasha. Both the countries are bogged down in a protracted dispute over the ownership of the island since late-1970s. Over times particularly during 1980-1981, the island came to be the focal point of tension between the two countries, when India disregarding its previous commitment to conduct joint survey began to do it unilaterally.

Negotiations on this issue also revealed sharp differences between the two countries. India justifies its claim on South
Talpatty on the ground of Median Line Principle. According to this principle, an equidistant line is drawn on plotted points on the sea from the nearest shores of the contending countries. Using this principle, India could bring the island to its territorial waters. The island is, however, in the estuary of the border river Haribhanga and the Bangladeshi internal river Raimangal. The southern most boundary between Bangladesh and India is the mid-stream of Haribhanga river. Therefore, it is only natural that the trench of river Haribhanga should be the boundary between the two countries and ownership of the island should be determined on the basis of main channel flow of this river. However, being aware of the fact that this principle, if applied, would bring the island into the territorial waters of Bangladesh, India has vehemently and persistently refused to accept the mid-stream of Haribhanga river as boundary between the two countries beyond their land borders.

As it was indicated earlier, there is no universally acceptable international law which could be applied to this or any other maritime dispute between the two countries. On the other hand, during a series of negotiations, neither Bangladesh nor India demonstrated any degree of preparedness to budge from their respective positions. As a consequence, the parties remain far from a solution.

Ethnic Problems in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

In terms of ethnic composition, Bangladesh is the most homogenous of the states of South Asia. Almost 98 per cent of the population is made up of Bangalees. Nonetheless, since its independence in 1971, the country was facing considerable problems in integrating its ethnic minorities to the national mainstream. These minorities, primarily, but not exclusively, Chakmas, constitute less than 1 per cent of the total population and are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) - a hilly, sylvan territory covering about 9 per cent of the total area of Bangladesh. For centuries, these tribal peoples were living in isolation in the CHT area.

However, a complex web of reasons, like, relative exposure of the tribal people to education, modernization and political turmoil during the last years of Pakistani rule, their failure to support the Liberation War en masse and its aftermath.
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Disturbance in the traditional mode of agricultural production, and the fear of loss of identity generated an upsurge in their political consciousness and the sense of deprivation. They gradually developed a sense of being alienated from the national mainstream and finally, appeared to the political arena with socio-political demands that would end their century old backwardness, thus, giving rise to an ethnic problem in the country.

Lack of mutual understanding, sensitivity to each other's interests and moderation between the tribal people and the central government coupled with intransigence on the part of both the sides transformed an usual problem of nation building into an ethnic conflict. Since late-1970s, sporadic armed clashes with varied degree of intensity are taking place between government troops and the members of Shanti Bahini (Peace Corps) - the armed wing of the movement called Pahari Jana Sanghaty Samity (PJSS). The problem is very much similar to most other ethnic conflicts in South Asian countries 'emanating from the assertion of ethnic identity by the tribal people. It has, however, never been as serious as those suffered by India, Srilanka and Pakistan.

While it is true that the mechanism of conflict management and conflict resolution has not been very much effective and serious miscalculations and gross mistakes were committed by both the parties involved in the conflict, it is also equally true that Bangladesh's quest for finding out a solution to its ethnic problem has been seriously complicated by overt and covert involvement of India in the problem. Indian involvement in the ethnic turmoil in CHT has largely been clandestine. Ethnic people who fled to India found shelter in the officially sponsored refugee camps. While providing the Shanti Bahini insurgents with sanctuary, training and military assistance, India did it covertly. In her official pronouncements, New Delhi confessed only its 'humanitarian' assistance to the refugees, while persistently denying any assistance rendered to the insurgents. Nonetheless, trained and armed insurgents were infiltrating into Bangladesh from Indian territory, getting involved in sporadic clashes with the members of law enforcing agencies and terrorizing the civilian population including the part of tribal people. As a consequence, ethnic problem in the CHT area,
right from its violent manifestation, has been a serious bone of contention in Bangladesh-India relations. The issue has been raised in almost every meeting between the two countries at various levels where contentious bilateral issues were included in the agenda. The opportunity of candid discussion on the problem and a sincere quest for its resolution have always been restrained due to the clandestine nature of Indian involvement.

Both the Bangalees and the tribal people have undergone a rather agonizing period of trial and error. Previous failures to bring any positive change in the situation in the CHT generated a rethinking in Dhaka on the whole issue. During late 1980s, it was realized that to bring peace in the area, it was necessary to involve a significant part of the tribal people in the process and find out a compromise solution. After about two years of negotiations between the government and some representatives of tribal communities an agreement was reached. Accordingly, four bills, commonly known as CHT District Council Bills, were passed by the Jatio Sangsad (Parliament) on 26 February 1989. These bills envisage substantial administrative autonomy and the excluded area status of the CHT Districts. Accordingly, District Council Elections were held on 25 June 1989. While, certain degree of confusion still persisted, participation of the tribal peoples in the Elections has been both spontaneous and large scale, particularly if it is judged in the context of prevailing situation in the CHT. It was also reported that an understanding between Bangladesh and India was reached on the CHT issue and that India would not only discontinue assistance to the tribal insurgents but also cooperate with Dhaka in resolving the problem.

All these have generated high hopes, particularly among the Bangalees, that we are nearing somewhere to a solution of the ethnic conflict in the country. Such optimism, however, did not prove to be justified. The situation in the CHT witnessed a temporary improvement soon to be deteriorated further. What is being increasingly realized in Bangladesh is that the CHT has gradually transformed itself into a kind of bleeding wound for the country. Nothing is going to be changed easily or within a short time. In the circumstances, finding out a solution to the ethnic conflict in the CHT became one of the cardinal tasks of our nation building process. The problem is the product of a
historical period. Therefore, it would take some time before the feuding communities could get rid of ethno-racial prejudices and reorient their psychological as well as practical approach towards each other. To this, concerted efforts on the part of all the feuding parties concerned have no alternative. In this regard, cooperation on the part of India would remain as indispensable as ever.

Concluding Observation

Over the years, Bangladesh-India relations underwent a complex process marked by numerous ups and downs. Neither the initial euphoria of friendship nor the immediate post-1975 nadir of suspicion and mistrust could survive as a permanent phenomenon of the relationship. It is primarily due to the fact that the relations between them have been shaped under the influence of a host of historical, geographical, ecological, socio-economic and politico-cultural factors highly contradictory in nature. While some of them warranted close ties others dictated a distant approach. In addition, some factors while, creating high degree of interdependence between the two countries also generate almost irreconcilable conflict of interests. In the circumstance, the emergence of disputes between Bangladesh and India could be viewed as natural or even inevitable. Nonetheless, the persistence of all these disputes creating such a crisis of confidence in bilateral relations for so many years and with no solution in sight looks certainly bizarre.

Answer to the questions why and how it happened is difficult to find out and could very well be controversial. However, in order to look at the future, answer to such questions are indispensable. When responsibility for something done is difficult to establish, it is better to investigate along the question: who benefits from that? Here we could get a more or less clear picture. In comparative perspective, the degree of adverse consequences for Bangladesh and India resulting from the procrastination of the settlement of contentious bilateral issues very widely leaving the former in a much disadvantageous position. It is particularly true when one looks at the matter from strictly bilateral perspectives. For Bangladesh, economic and ecological consequences of the deadlock over the sharing of water of the Ganges alone is so
critical that the very survival of the nation has, over times, been at stake. Other issues are also of considerable concern to her. For her, there is no option other than the early settlement of the disputes. On the other hand, India’s stake in the early settlement of the disputes is insignificant if it is to be compared with that of Bangladesh. The tragedy is that Bangladesh remains in the receiving end of almost all of the issues, while India held the key to the solution. Such a situation molded India’s long-standing policy toward the contentious issues in general and her overall approach toward Bangladesh in particular. Over a period of time, it has developed a policy which could be summarized as follows:

i. procrastination of the settlement of the disputes with the assumption that time would work in favor of her;
ii. creating occasional pressures on Bangladesh with a view to weakening her moral;
iii. when pressure fails, displaying benign indifference to the sensitivities of Bangladesh.

It is a comprehensive policy approach with the ultimate objective of compelling Bangladesh to come to terms with New Delhi on the terms offered by the latter.

Lacking any viable leverage on India, Bangladesh had to depend on the goodwill of the latter which it persistently failed to demonstrate. Constrained by its predicaments, Bangladesh neither could afford confrontation with India nor it could submit to the will of the latter. In the circumstances, it had to find out a gray area between confrontation and submission which let her to avoid major crises in bilateral relations that Bangladesh could hardly afford. However, from such a gray area Bangladesh neither could compel India to find out a compromise solution of the disputes nor could it generate any concession from New Delhi. Bangladesh’s options appear to be severely circumscribed.

Thus, as seen from bilateral perspective, the dynamics of Bangladesh-India relations reveal a bleak picture for the former. However, in a highly interdependent world, these relations could not be assessed isolating them from either the inter-state relations in the region or the contemporary
international politics. If the complexity of Bangladesh-India relations are judged from a regional perspective, New Delhi stands nowhere better than Dhaka does. Reasons are obvious. India is engaged in similar or even more serious disputes and conflicts with almost all of her neighbors, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in particular. If Indian leadership assesses the magnitude of all these disputes taken together, their consequences for the long-standing interest of India in the region, it could hardly avoid disappointment.

India's realization of the consequences of protracted disputes with the neighbors and the replacement of its regional security posture of the 1980s by a much more moderate one coupled with the gigantic tasks of nation building that India is facing are gradually bringing certain degree of positive change in New Delhi's approach as well as practical policy towards Bangladesh with regard to bilateral disputes. The settlement of the dispute over Tin Bigha Corridor is an encouraging sign. Its implications for both, the settlement of other disputes as well as the improvement of overall atmosphere in bilateral relations, deserve to be observed carefully.

All along highly vigilant Bangladesh needs to be visionary. So far it has considered its relations with India only in terms of that with government in power in New Delhi. Such approach needs to be revised. India is a vast country with diverse regions and interest groups. It leaves Bangladesh enough room for maneuverability vis-a-vis the center and opportunity of influencing the center through them. A Bangladeshi researcher has put forward a set of interesting proposals that could be initiated with a view to creating favorable lobbies, primarily in the border states. It is not as impossible a task as an average Bangladeshi perceives. West Bengal Chief Minister Joyti Basu has played a crucial role in resolving the dispute over Tin Bigha corridor issue. It has, once again, reminded us that the unidimensional India policy of Bangladesh, aimed at influencing only the government in power at the center, needs to be replaced with a multi-dimensional one which would also be aimed at influencing border states and different lobbies operating in socio-economic and political life of India.

As evident from our preceding discussions, the scenario of inter-state relations in South Asia and more so that of
Bangladesh-India relations appears to be highly paradoxical when it is viewed in the context of contemporary international politics. South Asia is miserably failing to respond to the radical changes in international arena and remains unprepared to face the challenges of the future. The region remains bogged down in numerous intra- and inter-state conflicts while the world has made a decisive shift away from conflict to a course of cooperation. On the other hand, it has given regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC at best a low-key profile when, in order to fulfilling the gigantic tasks of nation-building and facing the challenges posed by the contemporary international economic relations, closer cooperation among the regional countries became as indispensable as never.

The key-question now is how long can South Asia afford to live with such a state of affairs in the region? Barring drought-suffering black Africa there is not a single geographical region in the world that is as impoverished as South Asia. The region is dependent on external world for its mere survival. More than half of the world's total illiterate people live in South Asia. About half of the region's total population live below the poverty line. Such a region cannot afford to insulate itself from the on-going process of radical change in international arena. The tremendous difficulties suffered by South Asia and the gigantic tasks ahead will create insurmountable pressure on it for making a departure from conflict to a course of meaningful cooperation.
Notes and References

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9. Iftekharuzzaman, op. cit., p.36.

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid., p.89.


15. For details see, Indo-Bangladesh Joint Communiqué issued at the end of the Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia to India, 18 May 1992.

16. For details, see, Chandrika J. Gulati, op. cit., pp.177.

17. Ibid., pp.178-79.


22. The Times of India, August 1, 1991.


25. For details, see, Chandrika J. Gulati, op. cit., pp.172.

33. See, Shaukat Hassan, “India Factor in the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh”, M. G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp.59-60.