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HISTORICAL AND MODERN LINKS BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND MALDIVES: DISTANT NEIGHBOURS WITH NEAR MINDS

Abstract

Bangladesh and Maldives are two distinct neighbours in South Asia. Despite the common geopolitical entity and absence of common border, Maldives is important for Bangladesh due to mental nearness, religious affiliation, deep history and heritage, similar environmental challenges, common regional identity and a host of other commonalities. These commonalities, however, should have enhanced the deep and interactive relationship between the two countries. But in practice, the relationship between the two countries is diverse and distinct owing to lack of connectivity, bilateral trade linkages as well as sea and air connections. Considering the present context, this paper analyses the existing bilateral relationship between the two countries highlighting the historical links and common determinants of Bangladesh-Maldives relations. The paper also suggests different dimensions of connectivity to widen, deepen and strengthen the existing relationship. The paper concludes that comprehensive interaction is required to increase people-to-people contact and governments of both sides should play a decisive role in this regard.

1. Introduction

The US poet Robert Frost in his poem titled “Mending Wall” had this cryptic line: “He only says, *Good fences make good neighbours.*” The neighbours as perceived by the poet are the social ones having their homes side by side and walls in between which make the ownership of homes and precincts distinct and indisputable and thus is bred good neighbourliness. But there is no denying the fact that good neighbourliness is dependent not merely on such mundane factors, but more on how the neighbours perceive each other and neighbourliness is fostered when such a perception is free from dividing and distancing walls of misperception.

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The neighbours we are concerned with in this paper are the two geopolitical entities called Bangladesh and Maldives, which are also inhabited by humans and controlled by human instincts. As it is, they are not separated by any wall of demarcation, but separated by a vast geographical space although sharing a common South Asian political regional identity. Indeed, they are distanced neighbours, but certainly with their minds as near as possible. Such a mental nearness does telescope the geographical distance in a way that puts these two neighbours close to each other.

The paper makes an attempt to map out the present state of bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Maldives with leads on how to deepen, widen and strengthen this relationship. It entwines both the past and the present of this relationship in a broad sweep to make the future discernible.

2. Historical Links between Bangladesh and Maldives

Both Bangladesh and Maldives were historically closely tied through trade and commerce although this has never been properly documented. In an old first hand paraphrase of Arabic account of South East Asia and China in “Akbar al-Sin Wa I-Hind” (dates from 851 BC) the mention of the “archipelago of 1900 islands”, in fact includes the islands of the Maldives. Hundreds of years later, after this Arabic author’s note of fantastic stories, Maldives and its waters were well integrated into the system of Indian Ocean trade route. When the famous traveller, Ibn Battuta visited Maldives in the 14th century, there was a female ruler in the country, Sultana Khadija, who ruled from 1347 to 1362 AD.¹ A granddaughter of a Sultan from Bengal, she established a trading connection for cowry shells which was vitally important as they were used as currency in Bengal. By being the leading exporter of the earliest form of currency - cowries, Maldives and the Bengali queen of Maldives forged this critical link. After six years of stay in Maldives, Ibn Battuta sailed towards China. When his ship was destroyed in a violent storm, he sailed once again only to land in Bengal in the port of Chittagong, thus creating another historical association between the two countries.²

The Maldivians farmed their cowries by floating branches of coconut palms in the sea to which the shells attached themselves. Ibn Battuta gives a vivid description of the harvesting of the shells in his books of travels. Another essential product that Maldives produced was coir, fiber of the dried coconut husk.

Strategic in location, the province of Bengal constituted both the section of the Indo-Gangetic plain with a vast delta region making it a key area for Indian Ocean trade. For a major part of the 16th, 17th and even in the 18th century, the

¹ Ross E. Dunn, *Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, University of California Press, 1986.

² *Ibid.*

ports of Satagaon now called Chittagong and Hooghly maintained significant trading connections with Maldives where Maldivians sent large boats called 'odi' which sailed when the ocean currents and winds were favourable. In Bengal, they bartered cowries for manufactured goods, wooden boxes, textiles, rice, wheat, gram, clarified butter, sugar, opium, tobacco, 'Hookahs', smoking pipes, and many other items. These 'odis' stayed in the ports of Bengal for months as goods were collected from various sources to bring back to Maldives.

This inevitably resulted in the rise of local power dynamics among the traders in both the countries. Bengal needed cowries and Maldives needed their daily essential goods. "Maldives-Bengal cowry trade" can only be understood in terms of interdependency within the wider trade network as cowry was required not only as currency in India from the Gupta period till the 19th century but was also widely used in Africa and in South East Asia for the same purpose.

While the Maldives-Bengal trade further developed as a result of increasing demand for cowry, it impacted on the economy of both the countries. Soon cowry was used as a medium of exchange for slaves thereby incorporating this currency in the slave trade as demand for slaves rose in India. In the late 15th and early 16th century, Maldivian cowries were shipped in bulk to Bengal usually aboard Maldivian vessels and then re-exported in European ships both to the east and west coast of Africa. The empty 'odis' were filled with goods and food products to sail back to Maldives. Bengal was the most lucrative market for cowry shells.

However, in the 19th century, the use of cowry as currency declined and disappeared, but 'odis' continued to sail to Bengal for goods until this trade was controlled initially by the Portuguese followed by the British. The British had already established a foothold in India through the East India Company. A new power base with its multifarious implications on geo-political structure, economy and history of Bengal was about to begin.³

3. Socio-Cultural Impact of the Long Lasting Trade with Bengal on Maldives

There is no historical account of the socio-cultural impact of this trading relationship on the people of Maldives. But, such interchanges, trade and interactions do have social implications. What were they? Did delay in the arrival of 'odis' create difficulties for the local people? It is quite possible that people waited in expectation for the boats to return from Bengal with their much needed goods and news of a boat destroyed in the storms created pains, sorrows and disappointment.

³ Truck and Barker, *Maldives-The Central Banker for Trade in the Ancient World*, 2007.

Perhaps, the consumption of rice, lentil, sugar and tobacco altered the food habits of the Maldivian people. It is a known fact that tobacco and 'hookahs' were used extensively by the locals. Boxes from Bengal were kept as treasured items and may still be found in some households. These imported items, forming an integral part of Maldivian life, would unavoidably influence practices and customs of the local people and thereby their culture.

In Maldives, some of the stories of sorcery and magic that are still prevalent in remote islands might have come from Bengal, a place close to Assam known for its magic, sorcery and demons. Probably, the percussion instruments used in the islands were the result of ideas borrowed from the musical instruments of Bengal. Anecdotal accounts of Bengal should exist among the older generation in Maldives while many must have heard enticing stories of distant Bengal, a place that was far away, yet not so far.⁴

Bangladesh is, therefore, not a strange country to Maldives. The numerous expatriate workers are not the first case when the people of Maldives depended on Bengal. Previously, the relationship was based on trade, now it is dependent on Bangladeshi workers employed in the service sector and in the construction industry. The dependence is still mutual, only the scenario has altered significantly. But, let us not forget our shared history or our trading link of the past which reshapes communities to lay the foundation of a country's future.

4. Establishment of Bilateral Relations

As a Westphalian state entity, Maldives emerged on the political map of the world ahead of Bangladesh. In 1965, the sea-locked and isolated group of island of Maldives freed itself from the British Colonial bondage as a Protectorate; and by 1968, it was a constitutional republic. Bangladesh emerged on the map of the world through a successful nine month long Liberation War in 1971. On 12 April 1972, Maldives was one of the earliest members of the international community to respond to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's clarion call to recognize Bangladesh. But the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries had to wait until 22 September 1978. Bangladesh opened its High Commission in Male on 8 August 1998 and the Maldives High Commission in Dhaka started its operation in June 2008. It appears that at least thirty six years had to elapse after the Maldivian recognition to Bangladesh before full and functional diplomatic relations could start. Such a time consuming process of establishing diplomatic relations is something to be lamented and certainly begs question. Perhaps, the respective governments may have some explanations. Curiously enough, even the common membership of SAARC of both the countries since 1985 could not bring them to establishing full diplomatic relations earlier. It may be argued that this is one of the instances how the

⁴ Old Maps and Expeditions from Google Search.

SAARC spirit of regional solidarity got a snub even at the initial stage of its evolution. It is, however, a fact that this dilatory process of establishing full diplomatic relations did not impede close working relationship between these two countries within the ambit of SAARC. It may also be argued otherwise that the psyche of closeness engendered by SAARC partnership might have induced the countries to go for full diplomatic relationship, and that too despite circumstantially insubstantial base of bilateral relationship. That is the beauty of SAARC, it produces a chemistry of closeness between and among its member countries and their governments. If it be better late than never it behooves Bangladesh and Maldives to work in tandem to make the relationship mutually rewarding.

5. Common Determinants in Bangladesh - Maldives Relations

Both Bangladesh and Maldives share deep history and heritage that elude superficial observation and perfunctory analysis. Both the countries also twine with each other in terms of some determinants that impinge commonly on them, which, if properly perceived and acted upon rightly by policymakers of both the countries would have potentials to bond these two countries more closely.

One historic common heritage shared by these two countries relates to the experience of having lived under the European colonial rule and they also shared the common colonial ruler, that is, Britain. Both had the common fate of having been distinctively attractive for the European colonial desperadoes. The historic Bengal, of which the present day Bangladesh was the eastern half, witnessed colonial rivalry of the European powers. It was this historic Bengal which saw the rise of the English colonial power through its victory at the Battle of Plassey on 23 June 1757 and, by the mid - 19th century the English were dominant all over the Indian subcontinent. But why did the English as well as other Europeans concentrate on Bengal first in their bid to extend their colonial sway over the subcontinent? Skipping a dreary scholarly answer to this question a simple answer may be given by referring to 16th century French saying about Bengal. "Bengal has thousand gates for entry, but not a single for exit." This was a symbolic statement meaning inherent attraction of Bengal in terms of its resources. In the same way, Maldives held attraction for the Europeans, and the extent of which was once put in words succinctly by the past President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, "Let us not forget that the Portuguese invaded us because of our strategic position. Many covetous eyes are focussed on us right now and for the same reason."⁵

⁵ *Maldives News Bulletin* (Male), No. 21, June 1981, Cited in Syed Anwar Husain, *Super Powers and Security in the Indian Ocean: A South Asian Perspectives*, Academic Publishers, Dhaka, 1991, p. 169.

Eighty eight percent citizens of Bangladesh and the entire population of Maldives share the common religion of Islam. Islam came to Bangladesh and Maldives at about the same time. Although there had been earlier contact of Islam with Bengal through the Arab Muslim traders, Islam demonstrated its full proselytizing force only after the Muslim conquest of Bengal in 1204. On the other hand, Islam made its first appearance in 1153 when the Moroccan preacher Abul Barakat Yusuf Al-Barbary converted the then Buddhist King Sri Donei to Islam, who adopted the name Sultan Mohammad Ibn Abdullah.⁶

Mother Languages of Bangladesh and Maldives i.e., Bangla and Dhivehi respectively have partial common roots. Bangla, although not a direct descendant of Sanskrit, belongs generally to the Indo-European group of languages, and contains a good deal of words of Arabic origin. Dhivehi, on the other hand, also belongs to the Indo-European language group having many words of Sanskrit and Arabic origin. There is thus some linguistic affinity between the two countries awaiting to be researched by linguists of both the countries.

Both the countries share common membership of such international bodies as the United Nations, Commonwealth, Nonaligned Movement and the Organization of Islamic Conference. The common experience of working as members of these international bodies plus that of SAARC at the regional level produces enough imperatives to concert policies and actions in many commonly relevant areas.

Both Bangladesh and Maldives share the common record of achieving democracy through people's struggle and both now go through the phenomenon of fledgling democracy but with the firm commitment to institutionalized democratic governance.

Finally, the list of commonalities includes the environmental challenge. The sea - level rise threatens Maldives with extinction while some parts of the lower half of Bangladesh are to go under water in the distant future (of late, there have been some differing expert opinions nullifying such a prognosis). Thus, these two countries have a stake in concerting policies and actions *vis-à-vis* their respective environmental insecurity.

6. Present State of Bilateral Relations

Such commonalities should have preempted deep and interactive bonding between these two countries. But expectations and ground reality mismatch. Why? An ineluctable reply to this poignant question is the pathetic lack of connectivity between these countries. There is no bilateral trade linkage. There is

⁶ Between 1153 and 1968, there were 84 such Sultans ruling over Maldives. See for details, Maldives: A Historical Overview, Department of Information and Broadcasting, Male, Republic of Maldives, 1990.

no sea or air connection. Air travel between Dhaka and Male is *via* airlines of other countries that connect the two capitals through their time and money - consuming round - about routes, and thereby adding to the distance between these two SAARC countries. Connectivity is a loaded and multidimensional term, which is found to be in deficit in the relations between these two countries. SAARC is aged twenty-five at the 16th Summit in Thimpu in April 2010 and by now an intra -SAARC connectivity should have been in place, but, again, this is still an expectation yet to be matched by reality. Thus, both bilaterally and regionally within the SAARC context Bangladesh and Maldives remain literally disconnected and distanced.

7. The Way Ahead

The crux of the problem impinging on Bangladesh - Maldives relations is the lack of connectivity, and consequent upon which the bilateral relations are insubstantial. The following dimensions of connectivity are to be widened and deepened:

- avenues should be explored by both the countries to increase connectivity on Track I, Track II, and Track III levels;
- for promoting infrastructural connectivity both countries should move for establishing sea and air linkages at least for once a week;
- given the will and intensity of purpose, there can be trade interaction, whatever the volume might be. A cursory survey of the products of the two countries reveals that both countries do have something on which to trade with each other. The 16th SAARC Summit adopted an Agreement on Trade in Services. Bangladesh - Maldives trade relations are supposed to benefit out of implementation of this agreement. Dr Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister captured the aspired - for SAARC spirit when he proposed cooperation in a manner to enable free movement of people, goods, services and ideas; and
- for promoting Track II and Track III cooperation there may be academic and cultural exchanges. Following the Bangladesh Festival in Male, Maldives can arrange a similar festival recently held in Dhaka and such festivals should be held regularly at least once a year.

8. Concluding Observations

Bilateral relationship is contingent upon some determinants - common and specific. Common determinants are those in which both countries have their stakes while the specific determinants are specific to the interests of each country, and for realizing which each country goes into bonding with other country/countries. In the case of Bangladesh and Maldives, common determinants do abound, but specific determinants are found to be nearly absent.

Moreover, common determinants acted upon by either side and hence the distanced neighbourliness and insubstantial relationship. Nevertheless, there is found to be enough bonding of minds, and a demonstration of which is the Bangladesh Festival that was held in Male from 25 through 30 May 2010. But interconnecting relationship these days involves comprehensive interaction, the ultimate aim of which is bonding of peoples across the countries. Such a bonding of peoples is, of course, catalyzed and facilitated primarily by governments of respective countries. Bangladesh and Maldives await a turn - around in their relations through such a role of their respective governments.