

BOOK REVIEW

Bangladesh's Neighbours in Indian Northeast: Exploring Opportunities and Mutual Interest, edited by Akmal Hussain, published by Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2017, xvi + 212 pp, ISBN 978-984-93191-0-8.

In Bangladesh foreign policy, very few relations are as important as that of Bangladesh-India. India surrounds Bangladesh from three sides on the border; it has supported Bangladesh throughout its independence struggle and continues to be one of its most important partners in trade, security and bilateral cooperation. The seven states of Northeast India are close to Bangladesh in terms of mutual shared history, culture and geographical nature. Thus, the interest in strengthening the relations between them is nothing new. In fact, at both academic and policy level, increasing the interaction between Bangladesh and Northeast of India, including creating more opportunities for trade, communication and overall connectivity has been one of the central discussions. The book "Bangladesh's Neighbours in Indian Northeast: Exploring Opportunities and Mutual Interest" contributes to that discussion in more than one way. It includes a plethora of issues that concern the topic and tackles some of the trickiest and most important questions regarding Bangladesh-Northeast India relationship.

The book is a collection of academic essays on different aspects of the relations between Bangladesh and Northeast India, published following a seminar of the same title that was held on 12-14 November 2015 by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. The essays included in the book were papers presented in the seminar. The book is edited by Akmal Hussain, a renowned former Professor of Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka. Any person dealing with Northeast India must understand the past to analyze its future and here, Akmal Hussain's background in both History and International Relations gives him unique competence to deal with the theme of the book. The central goal of the book is to explore and analyze the relation between Bangladesh and Northeast India. As mentioned, the book is a collection of eight chapters written by eleven different writers, each of which engages in a different issue. To aid the readers venturing through the book, it organizes itself by dividing the chapters into four major parts, each focusing on a core area of Bangladesh's relations with Northeast India. Part one is concerned with political issues, part two with economic, part three with ecological and part four with historical issues. Here, the inclusion of ecological issues is praiseworthy, since the shared ecology of the region, though playing an important role, is often ignored in the policy discussion that tends to lean more towards political and economic topics.

In the 'Political Imperatives' part, there are two chapters. First one is titled, "Engagement with Northeast India: A New Dimension in Bangladesh-India Relations" by Akmal Hussain and second is "External Influence, Domestic Politics, and Bangladesh Government's Northeast India Policy" authored by ASM Ali Ashraf and Md. Sohel Rana. The political section maintains a good coherence between the chapters as both employ a more realist lens in analyzing Bangladesh-India relations.

Akmal Hussain makes a critical analysis of both India and Bangladesh's interests in the region and explains how they often do not align with each other. He discusses the benefits that Northeast India and Bangladesh can gain from interacting more and notes that the mindset of the ruling circle of both Bangladesh and India has been a barrier to the further flourishing of the relations. Recently though, there have been many changes and now there are more opportunities for extending their partnership. Regarding the changing relations, the author suggests that Bangladesh should think of its Northeast India policy as an extension to its overall India policy. However, although the chapter mentions the discontent between the central government and people of Northeast India, it does not delve into how that plays a role in Bangladesh-Northeast India relationship.

In their chapter titled "External Influence, Domestic Politics, and Bangladesh Government's Northeast India Policy", ASM Ali Ashraf and Md. Sohel Rana focus more on Bangladesh and its foreign policy decision making. Taking a neoclassical realist approach, the authors analyze the influence of various factors—domestic politics, alignment of policy priorities, centralization of power, elite cohesion, interest groups as well as external pressure on foreign policy decision making of Bangladesh. The authors also review major policy decisions taken by Bangladesh regarding Northeast India on economic, connectivity and security issues and how those have influenced overall Bangladesh-India relations. The chapter also mentions the challenges that Bangladesh faces in its Northeast India policy, balancing vision with pragmatism and suggests that a broad-based discussion between Bangladesh government and the civil society regarding Bangladesh's national interest should be held. Though the authors have tried to make a comprehensive analysis, their weakness is the fact that they focus more on Indian central government policies. The influence of Indian provincial state politics as an external factor for Bangladesh foreign policymaking has been left out of the discussion.

The second part of the book is the largest one in terms of the number of chapters. It focusses on economic relations and includes four chapters. In the first chapter of this part, titled "Growth Zone with NEI and Beyond: Bangladesh Perspective", Khondaker Golam Moazzem and Shashish Shami Kamal focus more on the idea of a 'sub-regional growth zone' to enhance connectivity between Bangladesh and Northeast India. They examine different other regional growth zones in other countries, such as South China Growth Triangle (SCGT) and 'Southern Growth Triangle' /SIJORI to determine what factors influence the development of growth zones. They then focus on the current state cooperation between Bangladesh and Northeast India and provide a comparison between the current economic condition of the two economies. They state that Bangladesh and Northeast India can develop a growth zone based on raw material and hydropower energy export. The enhanced connectivity between the two regions can enhance ways for further connectivity throughout India and Southeast Asia. They mention that the poor state of connectivity infrastructure and policy gaps between the two nations are the major challenges for connectivity. Based on the experience of the countries, they claimed that political leadership can play a major role in establishing

the growth zone. However, though the authors have mentioned what factors have influenced the development of other growth zones, they do not explain whether any of those conditions are present in the Bangladesh-Northeast India, making it suitable for similar initiatives.

By contrast, Abul Kalam, in his “Age of Connectivity: Facing the Challenges of Relations between Bangladesh and India’s North-eastern States” takes a different approach in tackling Bangladesh-Northeast India connectivity issue. He begins by tracing the roots of ‘connectivity’ as a concept, stating that the word has classical-theoretical roots and entails interconnection of communication platforms, systems and applications. It also includes joining of ideas and terms and issues to create bonds. In his opinion, the challenge of connectivity is to overcome the asymmetric structure. This chapter focuses on the empirical nature of connectivity around the world and then comes down to Bangladesh-Northeast India connectivity. Underlining the historical connectivity that the two regions share; he points out the disconnecting elements that remain between them. The author names water issues, border-killing, trust deficit and tariff/non-tariff barriers as the disconnecting elements. Though there have been many new initiatives for connectivity in recent years, especially after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Dhaka, challenges remain. The challenges, in his opinion, are substantial and weighty, requiring serious policy reflection. They are also widespread, starting from eco-security concerns and third-party concerns to psychological barriers. He suggests that the issues of connectivity should be taken from top of policymaking to ‘people-to-people’ level, as they are the likely beneficiary of the initiatives. The author also believes that treating the trade imbalance of Bangladesh and Northeast India is of paramount importance. However, the fact that the economy of Northeast India is comparatively smaller and can only absorb a small amount of Bangladeshi export has been ignored by the author.

Syed Rashidul Hasan, in his chapter titled, “Tourism - A bridge of Friendship between Bangladesh and the Seven Sisters of India”, argues that tourism can bring economic benefit and create a bond between nations. He showed that the number of international and national tourists has increased in the seven sister states. Similarly, the Bangladesh tourism industry is also growing. There is an opportunity for Bangladesh and Northeast India to learn from the experience of the East Asian countries to increase revenue from tourism. Easing visa processing and border check posts and introducing health/educational tourism can produce better results for cross-border tourism. In addition, creating a 'Buddhist tourism circuit' covering Bangladesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim can be developed. Nevertheless, the idea of the Buddhist tourism circuit remains vague; the author does not include any detailed plan or provide any example for how the tourism plans he describes can be executed.

Subir Bhaumik in his chapter titled “Tripura: Bangladesh’s gateway to India’s Northeast” talks about how Tripura plays an important role in overall Bangladesh-Northeast India relations. Going back to the shared history between Tripura and

Bangladesh in detail, he states that there is a chance for Tripura to be the main gateway for Bangladesh. He mentions specific examples of Bangladeshi companies working in Tripura and states that Tripura is the most obvious choice for industrial investment for Bangladesh due to the geographical proximity. Bangladesh can import agricultural products, raw materials and energy from Tripura. He suggests that Bangladesh should try to make its Tripura strategy as an example for the rest of the Northeastern states. He believes that enhanced cooperation between the two regions can help in making the seven Northeastern states look at Bangladesh beyond the prism of illegal migration and realize that Bangladesh has much more to offer. However, the author does not shed much light on increasing Bangladeshi exports to Tripura. Inclusion of that issue would have made the discussion more balanced.

The next part of the book focusses on 'Ecological Imperatives'. The authors, M. Anwar Hossen and M. Rafiqul Islam, in their chapter "Ecological Integrity of the Brahmaputra Basin for Community Livelihoods in Bangladesh" talk about the nature and development approach of the local community in the Brahmaputra basin area. They show how unplanned development initiatives can have a severe impact on the environment and create socio-ecological disasters. It describes how the various ongoing project such as the National River Linking Project (NRLP) fails to recognize the ecological integrity of the Brahmaputra basin. It is a unilateral project with some support from Bhutan and Nepal, while the basin is shared between five countries. As a result, the project is predicted to have a damaging effect, including loss of habitat, job displacement and economic disruption, which will affect the marginalized people in India and Bangladesh. The authors also suggest ways on how the basin's development can be done in an eco-centric way, including making alternative navigational canals to ensure water flow.

The last chapter of the book, "Three Bengali Districts and the Making and Unmaking of Assam Bengal Borders, 1874-1947" by Ashfaque Hossain under Part IV titled 'Historical Linkages' deals with one of the most sensitive issues of the Bangladesh-India relations: illegal migration. The author dwells on the history of Bangladesh and India to demonstrate the hard fact that a number of Bengalis have stayed back in Assam as they view that province as the home of their ancestors. The chapter shows how the emergence of tea business contributed to the shifting border of the two nations. He states that historical awareness can help to understand that despite the rise of nationalism and 'identity politics', cultural diversity will continue to shape this region. However, the author does not shed much light on how that long history is influencing the current realities of Northeast India.

The book is vibrant in its selection of authors, how they approach an issue and solutions to the challenges they provide. Each chapter deals with a particular issue of its own and the overarching theme of the book is a realistic discussion of the situation between Bangladesh and Northeast India, including many uncomfortable topics that are often ignored by academics, being considered to be of sensitive nature. While some

chapters focus on Bangladesh and Northeast India issue as a whole (especially in the political and economic part), others focus on the specific problems such as ensuring livelihood for people. Even when approaching the same issue such as connectivity, the authors show how their different backgrounds bring a varied opinion. So, the book does not feel repetitive, a risk that writings focussed on policy issues often suffer from. Even though many suggestions by the authors have been echoed by each other, it only solidifies the fact that those are necessary actions for improving Bangladesh-Northeast India relations. It is also admirable that the book goes through several issues that are uncomfortable but important in discussing the relationship between Northeast India and Bangladesh. It deals with issues such as “illegal population” in Assam, asymmetrical power relations between neighbours and the varied preference of India and Bangladesh in developing external relations. Authors of the chapters have also talked about the internal politics of Bangladesh, external influence and the negative outlook people of Northeast India have about Bangladesh and provided suggestions to tackle those matters.

Nevertheless, several chapters of the book, even those outside the historical part, focus too heavily on the shared history of the region which can distract the reader from the key goal of that chapter. In the economic part, the last two chapters (which focus on Tourism and Bangladesh-Tripura relations) feel completely different from the first two chapters (which focus on connectivity), even though they all are on economic issues. Although the book touches up on issues such as prisoner exchange and border killings, a separate chapter/section focused wholly on security issues would have added value. The biggest criticism of the book is the lack of a concluding chapter which would have helped its readers to take away the key messages. This is important since the book covers many diverse issues, some of them are technical in nature and a concluding chapter was necessary to sum it up. There are also a number of noticeable editorial inconsistencies throughout the book.

Overall, the book “Bangladesh’s Neighbours in Indian Northeast: Exploring Opportunities and Mutual Interest” provides a comprehensive overview of the Bangladesh and Northeast India relations, both in terms of the issues it covers and the debates it discusses. By incorporating the points of disagreements between the two nations, the book stands out from the rest and becomes a useful tool for both policymakers and academics alike. Despite being one of the hot topics in policy discussion, there is hardly any book that covers the Bangladesh-Northeast India relations. This book fills that void quite substantially.

Reviewed by
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