

RELIGIO POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF BANGLADESH

On gaining Independence, secularism was the logical choice of people involved in Bengali nationalistic movement against Pakistani regime. Hence, the constitution of Bangladesh adopted on 04 Nov 1972, in its preamble declared, Nationalism, Socialism, Democracy and Secularism as state principles. Secularism and pro India inclination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman regime was not appreciated by pro-Islamic elements who began spreading the conspiracy theories regarding expansionism of Hindu India. After assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the subsequent regimes in Bangladesh immediately made pro-Islamic and anti India gestures to placate the people and several political parties like Jamaat e Islami and Islami Aiko Jot with radical Islamic inclinations emerged in Bangladesh polity. These parties have financial backing of pro Islamic organizations of some conservative Arab countries.

The Dec 2008 elections in Bangladesh are watershed in its history. In that not only Awami League comprehensively swept the elections second time (first time in Mar 1973 under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) by winning 235 out of 300 seats in the parliament but also unlike previous elections, this election was won not on usual anti India theme but on development plank .A general perception in India that common Bangladeshi has anti India feeling has been negated as political parties which contested on anti India rhetoric failed miserably. Significant aspect was that 18% of the voters were born after the War of Independence. The political environment in the country is presently conducive to build bridges of Indo-Bangladesh relations.

ROLE OF BANGLADESH ARMY

Bangladesh has a history of coup/recoups and military interventions in civil polity from Aug 1975 to Dec 1990. Since 1991, successive civilian Govts have assumed power however; Bangladesh is yet to evolve a stable democratic system. Politics is mainly personality driven rather than on institutions or ideologies. Frequent military interventions have weakened the process of democratization and political institutions.

Besides the Liberation War which thoroughly politicized the Bangladeshi Armed Forces, the Army particularly developed their

professional ethos, culture and outlook more on the lines of the Pakistani Army which has disdain for the civilian authority and antipathy for India.

There appear to be two dominant sections in Army, the younger Officers who believe in remaining apolitical and professional and the seniors who have inherited the legacy of the Pakistani Army. Chief of Army Staff, Gen Moeen, has been seen modeling his force as apolitical force and has even openly declared that his forces are subservient to the civilian government. In fact, in the recent mutiny by Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), the Army has shown remarkable restraint in which more than 70 Army officers were assassinated. Undeniably, PM Sheikh Hasina's effort to discourage army reaction to the mayhem is also responsible for the restraint shown by the army. In view of these developments the panelists viewed that army will continue to remain an important component of the Bangladesh Government in foreseeable future.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND LINKAGES

Indian security interests require that whole South Asian region to remain free from outside influences, hence, India is always opposed to outside interventions in South Asian affairs, but, this has been misunderstood as being hegemonic by the smaller neighbors. India has vital interest in territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of all neighbors and expects reciprocity from South Asian countries.

Despite the above stated policy, several outside influences/linkages have markedly influenced our relations with neighboring countries. China's quest to attain super power status has resulted in her developing interest in South Asian countries including Bangladesh to meet her long-term strategic aim to contain Indian influence. Bangladesh too uses close linkage with China as leverage in its relationship with India. Bangladesh being a smaller in size unduly faces a psychological threat from India. So apart from economic reasons, its misplaced security concerns are behind alignment with China.

Role of Islamic Countries. Since 1975, Bangladesh has sought close relations with Islamic countries and a role

in Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Conservative Arab states did not find socialist and secular policies of Bangladesh in tune with their views. Hence, they did not lend support to its liberation war and recognized it as an Independent State only after Pakistan recognized it. Bilateral ties between Bangladesh and Arab states became stronger from mid to late 1980s which had both economic and political components. Arab states especially channel most of its aid to Islamic education particularly the Madrasas, which have become the breeding ground of Jehadi elements.

The anti-India feeling and common religious faith have resulted in reconciliation of its relations with Pakistan. Same has also provided conducive environment to ISI to pursue its anti-India operations from Bangladesh in conjunction with Indian separatists and Islamic Jehadi elements. ISI is also suspected to be responsible in inciting BDR Mutiny probably with the aim of dissuading newly elected Awami Govt from pursuing trial of war criminals.

Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism. Jehadi activities in Bangladesh peaked in year 2005 when Jammal ul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) carried out IED blasts in 63 out of 64 administrative districts of Bangladesh and demanded imposition of Sharia. Bangladesh since then cracked down on extremists organizations and banned several of them. However, it has been recently admitted by Bangladesh that as many as twelve extremists groups are still active in Bangladesh.

SAARC. During its last two decades of existence have made a very slow progress despite providing opportunity to the member countries to improve understanding of each other and their problems. Given apprehensions and political sensitivity of Bangladeshis about their country's dependence and domination by India, closer Indo-Bangladesh relations appear to be more feasible under aegis of SAARC.

INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Bangladesh lies at the strategic crossroad of South and South East Asia. For past few years, terrorists/insurgent movements and activities in or through Bangladesh have

posed a potential serious threat to India. The cross border terrorism, smuggling of arms, presence of anti India radical Islamic groups such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JUM) and Harkat-ul-Jamait-e-Islami (HUJI) with inter regional linkages with ISI, Al-Quaida etc are major security concern of India. In fact, North Eastern states have been the focus of destabilization through anti-India insurgencies sponsored by DGFI/ISI and Anti-India elements based at Bangladesh. Most of these radical groups receive foreign funding from various organizations in Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries. Many of these extremist groups singly or in collusion with Indian insurgent groups carry out extremist activities in India and have training camps in Bangladesh. Previously, Bangladesh always refuted the presence of Islamic terrorist and insurgent groups but, during the recent visit of Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Mr Pranab Mukherji,, the newly elected Awami League Govt has shared the Indian concerns. PM Sheikh Hasina has unequivocally declared that her Govt would not permit anti Indian activities from Bangladesh soil and even has shown willingness to repatriate a hard core ULFA activist, viz Anup Chetia and establish a South Asian Task Force to combat terrorism.

INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Indo-Bangladesh relations have often remained strained. Several unresolved issues have marred the relations since a long time and have created an atmosphere of mistrust. Awami League government is ruling Bangladesh since last five months and newly elected UPA govt is in place to provide a stable Government in Delhi. There is an opportunity available to both the nations to leave the acrimony behind and resolve long pending issues.

IRRITANTS IN RELATIONS

Bangladesh remains extremely concerned on water sharing and proposed river linking project of India. Two countries share 54 common river waters. The Ganges water sharing dispute has already been satisfactorily resolved after signing of 30 year Ganges Water Sharing Treaty in Dec 1996. The other concerns of Bangladesh need to be addressed through existing Bangladesh India Joint River Commission on priority to allay Bangladesh fears. Trade gap between the two nations,

demarcation of border and maritime boundary, cross border smuggling of Indian goods and border fencing are some issues that need immediate attention. Bangladesh perceives that it is not on the priority list of India's foreign policy and they are often neglected and ignored by India.

Some other irritants in relations having larger ramifications to India also need resolving. Problem of enclaves, Char lands, illegal migration, cross border terrorism, operation of Islamic Jehadi groups against India from Bangladesh soil, return of chakma refugees to their home land as per the 1977 Accord between Bangladesh Government and tribal insurgents etc, are some other important bilateral issues that need urgent resolution with Bangladesh.

ILLEGAL MIGRATION

An estimated 20 millions Bangladeshis immigrants are settled in 17 Indian states and union territories. One can not ignore these serious demographic challenges. Taking advantage of the policy of political appeasement, the migrants have not only created their dominance in the border provinces and districts but they are in position to influence the decision making and administrative process. To tackle the problem, a special law, viz Illegal Migrants Determination Tribunal Act 1983 (IMDT act 1983) framed by the Union Govt in this context has been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2005. IMDT Act instead of identifying and repatriating the illegal migrants created hurdles as the process to identify the illegal migrants was long and cumbersome. Till the year 2000, a total of 3,10,759 cases under this law were investigated. Of these, 10,015 were identified as illegal migrants and only 1481 could be repatriated. The existing law is much more cumbersome as the onus of proving an illegal migrant is on the person who makes the complaint. This has resulted in local ethnic groups resorting to militancy to protest and protect their rights and interests. Had a timely solution been found to the problem, United Liberation Front of Assom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and other extremist groups would not have existed in the North East.

ISLAMIZATION AND CONCEPT OF GREATER BANGLADESH

In May 2002, 63 representatives of nine muslim organizations congregated at Bangladesh. They have reportedly established a Bangladesh Islamic Manch, whose major objective is to create Greater Bangladesh by capturing Muslim majority area of Assam, North Bengal and Arakan State of Myanmar. The abject poverty, lure of better employment opportunities and lower density of population in India are major attractions leading to migration. Hence, the sinister design of Islamic groups, the concept of greater Bangladesh does exist and is a cause of concern for India.

A WAY AHEAD

Both India and Bangladesh can gain immensely through trade, investment, technical, scientific/education co-operation. While embarking on greater mutual cooperation with Bangladesh, India should also remove irritants in relations by addressing some problems on priority even at more favourable terms to Bangladesh while leaving serious issues for detailed discussions.

An Unjustified fear. First and foremost India should address the Bangladesh perception of threat from India. Bangladesh, being surrounded on three sides with India, is overawed by its might and size. Therefore, with a perception to maintain balance, it has developed close ties with China. India does not consider Bangladesh an adversary, hence, this perception is unjustified and should not become a stumbling block in improving relations. The panel was of the view that close co-operation and addressing minor bilateral issues even on favourable terms to Bangladesh can allay the fear of threat from India and reinforce the perception of a friendly India. For example, there is no point in saying that Bangladesh trade deficit is due to small export basket of Bangladesh. India could accede Bangladesh's demand for removal of trade barriers as Indo-Bangladesh trade is miniscule to the extent of ie, 1% of total import. Thus, it will have negligible impact on our trade balance as even otherwise Indian goods are being smuggled to Bangladesh which is benefiting only the smugglers. This would benefit us in building better relationship with Bangladesh.

Similarly, India needs to look after issues of enclaves, which is unresolved. By exchanging the enclaves, Bangladesh would gain only 31.08sq km of land but it would solve a long outstanding problem. Such an exchange can take place only after enactment of a legislation by the Indian parliament.

Bangladesh also has an unjustified fear on water sharing. While the Ganges Water sharing issue has been resolved satisfactorily, the other issues such as harnessing of rivers at our side for public gain and proposed river linking project could be discussed to allay their apprehensions.

Transit Facilities to Northeast. India has sought transit facilities from Bangladesh for shorter and easy access to North Eastern States. The arrangement will mutually benefit both and shall enable North Eastern states achieve faster economic growth and development. This will also enable Bangladesh to earn considerable transit levy which would further increase with time. However, so far no agreement has been reached. Bangladesh has also not allowed passage to Myanmar-India gas pipeline to meet the growing energy demand of India by linking it to several bilateral issues which need resolution.

India being a larger partner, should be magnanimous in its relationships with smaller neighbors including Bangladesh. This would be in conformity with our quest for regional power status with global reach. Therefore, India should seize the opportunity and continue on relation building with newly elected Awami League Government which is India friendly. However it should not compromise on issues, which have security implications and should firmly seek action on the following points :-

- (a) Denial of safe haven to India's insurgent group.
- (b) Curb on Harkat-ul-Jahad-ul- Islami (HUJI) and other radical Islamic groups operating against India from Bangladesh soil.
- (c) Completion of border fencing on Indo-Bangladesh border to control illegal migration and terrorist activities.
- (d) **Illegal Migration.** Deter illegal migration from Bangladesh by the following:-

- (i) Detect and deport the illegal migrants from Bangladesh who migrated to India after 25 March 1971 in accordance with Indira Gandhi Mujib Accord of 1972.
- (ii) For better border control, reduce effective distance between BSF border posts by creating more BSF posts.
- (iii) Use technology such as Spy Satellites for better surveillance and reporting of movements of illegal migrants, extremists/terrorists along the border.
- (iv) Resort to National Citizen Register to foreclose the issue of illegal migration.
- (v) To regulate the movement of foreign nationals including those from Bangladesh, issue valid work permits.

INITIATIVES

India must take initiative at strategic, political economic and military level to improve relations with Bangladesh.

Strategic. India and Bangladesh are not adversaries. Therefore, Government should enhance strategic partnership with Bangladesh through high level exchanges and visits by trade/commerce delegations etc. The effort should be to encourage more people to people contact.

Political. Visits by Heads of Government, Encourage scientific, technological and cultural exchanges to upgrade Bangladesh's technical and industrial skill. Pro active approach is needed to solve outstanding issues if necessary at political level. This would strengthen Sheikh Hasina's hands in guiding the country towards a stable democracy. India should also not demonstrate political bias towards any political dispensation at Bangladesh and mount sustained and imaginative information campaign to dispel any anti India perception in Bangladesh and neutralize anti India propaganda by Jehadi groups.

Economic. Jointly workout time bound development plan for infrastructure development in priority areas of Bangladesh, Encourage joint Indian investments in industrial

projects, Agro-tech industries development, fisheries development etc. Some of the issues related to the growth and economic development of the region are listed below :-

- Improvement of road networks. Improvement, Integration & harmonization of railways network.
- Liberalising aviation services / Open Sky Policy.
- Integration & linking of inland waterways.
- Liberalising and enhancing maritime facilities.
- Liberalising cross border transportation services.
- Improving export competitiveness in the textile and clothing industries.
- Bilateral FDI, trade and higher education services and health services.
- Energy cooperation.

Military. Closer military to military relations can become an important facet of an engagement. For increase interaction between the two Armed Forces following are suggested :-

- Reciprocal visits by Heads of Forces / PSOs.
- Increased defence cooperation to include providing arms and equipments to Bangladesh forces at subsidised rates.
- Invitation to Seminars / discussions on issues of mutual interest.
- Joint adventure activities and cultural events with a view to foster goodwill and understanding.
- Interaction between "Mukti Jodha's" and our ex-servicemen, especially those who participated in the 1971 War in the East.

- Develop Headquarters Eastern Command as a nodal centre because Bangladesh have cultural and ethnic affinity to Kolkata.

CONCLUSION

Both India and Bangladesh can gain immensely with improved relations. India is an emerging as an economic power in the region. Bangladesh can share the benefits by being a partner in the success story and not as an adversary. A more accommodative Indian approach could do wonders for development of our own North Eastern states as deep relationship will aid an exploring transit facility from India to North East and its access to South Asian markets through Chittagong Port. India needs to dispel Pak Centric obsession and pay attention to its other neighbours in equal measure. There is a sense of frustration about Indo-Bangladesh relations. People in India profess a degree of anger and believe that Bangladesh is now on verge of becoming a failed state or that it is rapidly following a path of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This perception is far from the reality as Bangladesh is a vibrant muslim democracy with secular credentials. It has cracked down on Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists and expressed its resolve to root out terrorism of all forms from its soil.

It is customary to talk of strategic perspectives in terms of "Hard Power", however from our historical perspective our "Soft Power", which includes, trade, religion, culture, spirituality and the arts; and later the political thoughts of Gandhi and more importantly Rabindranath Tagore have profound influence in this region even today. With democracy taking roots in Bangladesh, the time to exercise soft power option is now.



Based on the Round Table Discussion held on 13th May 2009 at Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). Views expressed in this paper are those of the panelists and do not represent the views of the CENJOWS.

Vice Admiral Anup Singh, AVSM, NM.
Maj Gen (Retd) KB Kapoor, VSM.
Mrs Veena Sikri, IFS (Retd),
Former High Commissioner of India To Bangladesh.
Dr Sreeradha Datta, Research Scholar, IDSA.
Dr Bibhu Prasad Routray, Research Scholar,
Institute Of Conflict Management .
Col (Retd) SK Sharma, Senior Fellow, (CENJOWS).
Gp Capt (Retd) GD Sharma, VSM, Senior Fellow (CENJOWS).



Centre for Joint Warfare Studies

Kashmir House, Rajaji Marg, New Delhi 110 011

Tel. Nos : 011-23792446, 23006535, 33006538/9 FAX : 011-23792444

Website : <http://cenjows.in> | e-mail : cenjows@yahoo.com