
HIMALAYAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

(JOURNAL OF HIMALAYAN RESEARCH AND CULTURAL FOUNDATION)

NGO in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC, United Nations

Vol. 26 Nos. 1-2

January-June 2022

BANGLADESH SPECIAL

BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

Anoy Mukherjee

HINDU SHRINES AND BUDDHIST VIHARAS OF BOGRA

Sunita Dwivedi

TABLIGHI JAMAAT IN BANGLADESH

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HOW THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AFFECTS

CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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Editor : **K. WARIKOO**
Guest Editor : **SREERADHA DATTA**

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SUBSCRIPTION

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Single Copy (Individual)	:	Rs.	500.00
Annual (Individual)	:	Rs.	1,400.00
Institutions & Libraries (Annual)	:	Rs.	2,000.00

OVERSEAS (AIRMAIL)

Single Copy	:	US \$	40.00
		UK £	25.00
Annual (Individual)	:	US \$	100.00
		UK £	80.00
Institutions & Libraries (Annual)	:	US \$	150.00
		UK £	120.00

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HIMALAYAN RESEARCH AND CULTURAL FOUNDATION,
B-6/86, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi - 110029 (India)

Printed and published by Prof. K. Warikoo on behalf of the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, B-6/86, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110029. Distributed by Value Publications, B-7, IIIrd Floor, Saraswati Complex, Subhash Chowk, Laxmi Nagar, New Delhi-110092. Printed at Nice Printing Press, A-33/3A, Site IV, Sahibabad Industrial Area, Ghaziabad-201010 (U.P.)

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CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Sreeradha Datta is Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation.

Anoy Mukherjee is Executive Member, Sampritee, Bangladesh

Sunita Dwivedi is a free-lance Silk Road traveler and author based in Delhi. She has been covering the Buddhist circuit from India and Bangladesh to Pakistan; Afghanistan to Kazakhstan and China. She has authored: *Buddha in Gandhara* (2020), *Buddhist Heritage of India* (2006, Revised and Updated, 2017), *Buddha in Central Asia* (2014), *In Quest of the Buddha-A Journey on the Silk Road* (2009). She is currently working on the Buddhist circuit of Bangladesh.

Dr. Mahesh Ranjan Debata teaches at Centre for Inner Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Dr. Debbasish Nandy is Associate Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal, India.

Debtanu Majee is Assistant Professor in Political Science, Bidhan Chandra College, Rishra, Hooghly, West Bengal, India.

Dr. Maitrayee Guha is Assistant Professor, Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College, Kolkata.

Dr. Sreya Maitra is Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, West Bengal.

Nahian Reza Sabriet is Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), Dhaka.

Nilova Roy Chaudhury is currently Consulting Editor with India News Stream and a Senior Visiting Fellow with WISCOMP.

Dr. Gunjan Singh is Assistant Professor, O.P. Jindal Global University.

HIMALAYAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

Vol. 25, Nos. 1-2

January-June 2022

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Editor's Page

The inauguration of the 16.1 km long Padma Bridge in June 2022, which Bangladesh built to connect capital city Dhaka to its south and southwest districts, beautifully marks the 50 years of celebrations of Bangladesh. It reflects Bangladesh's commitment to the development trajectory which began with its independence in 1971. A self-funded project of over US\$ 3.87 billion has become a symbol of national pride and prestige and received global accolades. It is a wonderful symbol of a remarkable journey of a country that broke away from its western wing and established itself as an independent nation in face of violence, genocide, loss of million lives, and ten million people who were forced to flee the borders into India. The Liberation War of Bangladesh upheld the cultural values and beliefs of the Bengalis of East Pakistanis who had dearly fought a *Mukti Juddho* post the partition of the subcontinent. While the ensuing years were difficult, the country rose above the challenges.

Today, Bangladesh has acquired an image of being a moderate Islamic nation prefixing itself with development. Although, it was beset with numerous problems that had it being clubbed together with other 'failed' states, accused of being the most corrupt country in the world or labelled as a fundamentalist Taliban state. However, to the present economic miracle, it is now being lauded for chalking a destiny of its own, matching its people and their aspirations. It has achieved a US\$ 1,888 GDP per capita income from the nominal US\$ 273 per capita in 1975 while recording a 6% growth rate despite being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic during the last three years. Bangladesh has achieved many milestones including lifting the nation from deep-rooted poverty to providing better social, medical and cost-effective quality of life for its burgeoning middle-income population, attracting substantial Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), foreign

remittance and holding periodic elections which is a remarkable growth story. This growth is referred to as Bangladesh Paradox defining its present-day peak from the basket economy it was once called, especially its past-phases of misgovernance and political instability.

Bangladesh has uniquely embraced economic growth through home-grown initiatives, and sheer hard work. At the same time, it has allowed for social changes to occur cohesively. In a short span of Fifty Years, Bangladesh has travelled a long distance from its religious symbolism in the nascent years to some definite fundamentalist social and political movements. The advent of Bangladesh was based on the secular concept of the 1948 language movement and now its religious identity is becoming prominent, if not overshadowing its cultural identity. While Bangladesh continues to commemorate the martyrs of the language movement on 21 February, the turn of events also reveals the changing nature of Bangladesh. The metamorphosis of the eastern wing of religion-centric Pakistan into a secular Bangladesh was rather notional and short-lived.

After the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, a stream of military leaders found religion their safest constituency to ensure legitimacy, survival and longevity of their reign. The formal entry of religious parties into the political arena in 1976 completely transformed the nature of polity. Only a few years earlier these forces had sided with West Pakistan and vehemently opposed the liberation of the country from the clutches of Pakistan, and hence were proscribed from political participation. However, the return of the anti-liberation forces to the forefront of national politics within a short span of time underscored the power of the fundamentalist forces as well as bestowing legitimacy of the military leadership.

In the first few decades, the growing crisis of governance and religious militancy further added to the gloomy picture. While it moved from military leaders to multi-party democracy in 1991, political violence was a significant problem in Bangladesh. The polity was deeply polarised between the haves and have-nots, political schism, and the growth of religious extremism immensely contributed to this trend. The dark side of the political violence included violent tactics employed by the political

parties and groups opposed to the government in power with an explicit desire to secure a political concession. Bangladesh came to be known for its *hartals*, *bandhs* (complete cessation of public activities during a political strike) and other non-parliamentary methods adopted by various political parties.

It was after prolonged public protests and mounting domestic unrest that compelled Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad to relinquish office in favour of a neutral non-political administration to conduct elections to the *Jatiya Sangsad*. The process of electoral politics thus ushered in 1991 is firmly in place and Bangladesh witnessed regular elections in 1996 and 2001 that were considered to be free and fair by neutral international observers. Bangladesh for another few years would be essentially run by two political leaders and a third political party *Jatiya Party* as well as *Jamaat-e-Islami Party*. Sheikh Hasina headed the *Awami League* and took forward the legacy of Mujibur Rahman. and Khaleda Zia took over the reign of the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* established by her husband Gen. Ziaur Rahman- the first military dictator who successfully ruled Bangladesh from 1975-1981, and Ershad's *Jatiya Party* that has been led forward by his family members subsequently holding sway over their home constituency in Rangpur.

The controversy over the caretaker government and its wilful manipulation by its leaders led to the interregnum period when the Army Chief run the country under the guise of a caretaker government from 2006-2008. The return to democratic election gave Sheikh Hasina-led *Awami League* coalition a resounding victory and some profound changes in the polity. With a coalition majority in the Parliament, Sheikh Hasina was able to reverse the controversial fifth and eighth amendments pushed by the military leaders, and restored the four basic constituent elements of democracy, nationalism, socialism, and secularism in the constitution. The *Jamaat-e-Islamic Party* was also forced to legally reinvent itself. However, the International Crimes Tribunal set up to deliver justice for those who collaborated against the Liberation War, virtually wiped out the heavyweight Jamaat leaders. It has subsequently negotiated with other Islamic groups to ensure their appeal in a Muslim majority state.

On the political front, a variety of reasons, the Opposition in Bangladesh have weakened and disputes over the overturn of the caretaker government by *Awami-e-League* had further vitiated the political atmosphere. Thus, the two *Jatiya Sangsad* (parliamentary) elections of 2014 and 2019 have been fraught with problems. It will suffice to say these elections were not free and fair, with barely no participation from opposition parties and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina continues to hold the helm of the government. Also, there is some dissonance about her style of governance largely recognised as authoritarian. At present, despite the tremendous economic development, the lack of democratic norms and transparent governance in Bangladesh raises many questions about the way ahead. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hasina has been very successful with her foreign policies. While India and China are likely to continue to be the sheet anchors of Bangladesh's foreign policy, it has been able to establish strong bilateral ties with near and far states.

The significant betterment of Indo-Bangladesh relations in the last decade was largely possible due to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's initiative, interests and ability to address core security concerns of India. Similarly, Hasina's ambition for raising Bangladesh's global profile has led her to develop close bonds with other important Asian powers such as Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore. Apart from sharing close bilateral ties, Bangladesh has been an active regional member state. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was indeed the brainchild of Bangladesh which for a variety of reasons has not been very functional. Bangladesh is also a partner in many other such regional initiatives. It continues to play a pivotal role in the sub-regional initiatives such as the Bangladesh-India-Nepal (BIN), and the transport corridors that will positively impact trade and transit in this subregion. Bangladesh's engagement with other regional initiatives has been also extensive. It joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2006, reflecting its growing ties with many Southeast Asian and East Asian countries, especially Singapore and Malaysia which host a large number of Bangladeshi workers. Bangladesh has also assumed the Chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and hosted the 21st Council of Ministers of the IORA

in November 2021 themed—‘Harnessing the opportunities of the Indian Ocean sustainably for inclusive development.’ It has been a reiteration of its sustained efforts to strengthen regional cooperation. Bangladesh is a critical partner in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and has been a strong member state, especially in building multi-modal transport connectivity within the sub-region.

This special issue of *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* on the occasion of 50 years of Bangladesh has a collection of articles by authors from India and Bangladesh. The issue begins with an article by Anoy Mukherjee who writes about Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman and his contribution to formulating the underlying principles of foreign policy which has been subsequently followed by the leaders of Bangladesh. He has also elaborated the success of Sheikh Hasina, the present Prime Minister of Bangladesh’s success in pursuit of foreign policy.

Sunita Dwivedi writes about an archeological excavation that unearthed Images of Hindu and Buddhist deities and Siva lingas found in various villages in and around Bogra. Numerous mounds in the district of Bogra are the sites of stupa, monastery or Jain and Hindu shrines. Some sites have been designated as Maths for Hindu and Jain sadhus. The city of Bogra in Rajshahi division was once part of Pundravardhana or the Pundra kingdom with its ancient capital at Mahasthangarh. Hindu and Buddhist antiquities from several villages in and around Bogra inform about the flourishing state of Hinduism and Buddhism in Bogra and about the existence of flourishing centres of art and architecture in the now northern Bangladesh. These also point to the peaceful co-existence of religious traditions that existed in ancient times.

Mahesh Ranjan Debata traces the evolution of *Tablighi Jamaat* (TJ) the “ultraorthodox”¹ organisation that has been a potent ideological and political force in Bangladesh. The TJ has been instrumental in nurturing, spreading and promoting “revivalist Islam” in Bangladesh besides having direct or indirect links with jihadi organisations. This paper highlights the role and contribution of the TJ in spreading its ideological ideas across Bangladesh and in South Asia too.

Debasish Nandy and Debtanu Majee discusses the two refugee groups in Bangladesh-Bihari and Rohingya and finds the Government of Bangladesh has shown different attitudes and treatments toward two different refugee groups. They analyse the reasons behind the changing perceptions of refugee treatment by the Bangladesh government and delineate the issue of human security in their treatment of refugees, it hosts.

Maitrayee Guha discusses the issue of Bangladeshi migrants coming to India. According to her, in spite of the Bangladeshi Government's economic growth and equality for all minorities, people have been moving from there to India. In the initial years the reason behind movement was mainly partition, which automatically pointed towards the religious divide. However, that should have stopped once Bangladesh became a stable State. It is not just religious persecution but the availability of opportunities in India which has attracted many from the neighbouring country.

Sreya Maitra argues about lessening of secular tendencies and the deepening of Islamization since the days of the military government in the 1970s in Bangladesh following the death of its founder leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Maitra examines the changing fabric of the state of Bangladesh from secularism to Islamization and inclusion of radical groups to reflect on how radicalization is affecting Indo-Bangladesh ties.

Nahian Reza Sabriet discusses how the issue of terrorist financing through digital means has emerged as a new threat for the security apparatus of the countries in this digital world. He examines the linkages between terrorist financing through digital means in Bangladesh and India, and the networks operating across the borders of these two countries. The use of digital channels by terrorists and organized criminal groups is not something new in Bangladesh or India. This trend also suggests that the use of digital means now requires the involvement of learned and educated members in the groups. Nahian argues attempts to understand and address the sources of threat persisting in Bangladesh or India, one has to look into the issue through a non-Western lens.

Nilova Roy Chaudhury points out how it is important to recall the 'jointness' of the Liberation War of Bangladesh through broad contours

of what happened in the run up to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 and its immediate aftermath, because they have played a significant role in shaping the Bangladesh of today– the psyche of its leaders and its global outlook, particularly vis-a-vis India. Those events have also, subconsciously or otherwise, coloured India’s attitude towards Bangladesh and there is a tendency to judge events only through the prism of bilateral relations. Dhaka’s perception of Delhi and its approach towards India, has varied under different governments. Periodically, as at present, it has been perceived as positive. At other times, it has been viewed as a threat to security and the cause of the problems ailing Bangladesh

Gunjan Singh discusses the contours of Bangladesh—China ties in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. While Singh attempts to look at the Chinese engagements in various areas and also examines if this has benefitted Bangladesh? She also discusses how economic and defence ties affect the Bangladesh-China relations while analysing their impact on Dhaka’s relations with other countries in South Asia, with major focus on India.

Sreeradha Datta

BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

ANOY MUKHERJEE

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is now a role model for many developing countries in the world in various fields. At the root of all the achievements of today's Bangladesh - the Bengali nation is the extraordinary leadership of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He is a Himalayan personality distinguished for his unprecedented political acumen and statesmanship. To attain independence, he repeatedly risked his life for the rights of seven and a half crore Bengalis. With his leadership, a new country named Bangladesh emerged on the world map in 1971. He was a dreamer and a fearless guide to the nation of vibrant Bengalis. His love towards Bengalis has not only made him the father of the nation, but also the friend of the people in distress. He has been a beacon of light for the freedom-loving countries. By the turn of the century, he was a rightful claimant of the recognition of 'friend of world people'.

Bangladesh has been playing an important role in the international arena since its birth due to the wisdom and far sighted policy of Bangabandhu. He spent almost one-fourth of his nearly 55 years of life in prison, where he was tortured. The Pakistan military also planned to hang him in the prison and he saw digging of a grave to bury his dead body. But he remained stoic and was not deterred from his goal to free Bangladesh from the Pakistan occupation. He was steadfast, fearless and

uncompromising and his thoughts were always on Bangladesh and the people of Bangladesh.

MUJIBUR RAHMAN THE TALL POLITICIAN

After his release from Miawali Jail in Pakistan on the 8th of January in 1972, he flew to London on his way back to his beloved homeland. He appealed to the media to recognize the newly independent Bangladesh and at the same time called upon the world to come forward to help millions of Bengalis in the new war-torn country.

The then Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and other friendly countries and the people of the state responded to his call. The government of the United States opposed Bangladesh. But Bangabandhu thanked the people of the United States for their support during the nine-month war. Many American citizens extended their sympathy to Bangladeshi people. During the stopover, Prime Minister of England Edward Heath and the then Leader of the Opposition Harold Wilson met Bangabandhu. Bangabandhu appealed to England to recognize and help Bangladesh as soon as possible. During this short break, Bangabandhu was met by Commonwealth Secretary General Arnold Smith. Bangabandhu told him of Bangladesh's intention to join the Commonwealth. Within three months, Bangladesh became a member of the Commonwealth in April 1972.

Bangabandhu left London for the Indian capital Delhi on a special flight. He arrived in Delhi on January 10, 1972. Ambassadors from at least 20 countries were present along with India's top leaders at the airport to welcome the great hero. Bangabandhu met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a true friend who stood by Bangladesh firmly during the liberation war. President of India V.V. Giri was also present to receive Bangabandhu. During the meeting, Bangabandhu proposed the immediate withdrawal of the Allied forces from Bangladesh as the war was over. After the meeting, he left for Dhaka where millions of people were waiting for him for a long time.

Bangabandhu, the beloved leader landed at the Tejgaon airport, in

the afternoon on the same day of January 10. Hundreds of thousands of people crowded the airport for a glimpse of their hero. From the airport, he went straight to the Race Course ground where he delivered the historic speech that effectively declared the independence of Bangladesh. This time, Bangabandhu shared his thoughts for the new Bangladesh. He spoke openly about the issues he discussed with Indira Gandhi in Delhi. Within two months, the Indian government officially withdrew troops from Bangladesh in a rare example in the world.

“Friendship with all, malice towards none” is the main theme of his foreign policy. Due to this dictum, Bangladesh got recognition from about 50 countries by March 1972. Within a year, Bangladesh was able to secure membership of the IMF, ILO, Inter-Parliamentary Union, UNESCO, Colombo Plan and GATT. On August 8, 1972, Bangladesh officially sought membership from the United Nations. Two days later, Bangabandhu wrote a special letter to all members of the Security Council requesting their support for Bangladesh. On August 23, the United Kingdom, India, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia strongly recommended to the Security Council for the inclusion of Bangladesh in a joint resolution. The resolution was recommended by the General Assembly on 30 November 1972, despite China's veto. On 16 September 1974, Bangladesh became the 137th independent country of the United Nations and gained worldwide recognition. It was delayed only due to China's close links with Pakistan during the 1971 war.

Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister gave a reception to Bangabandhu on February 8, 1972 at the Raj Bhavan in Calcutta. Bangabandhu in his speech said: “My sincere wish is that peace and stability will finally come to the subcontinent and the animosity between the neighbors will end. Without wasting our national resources, we should use them to improve the living standards of the people of our country. We will all strive to make South Asia a peaceful region, where we can live side by side as neighbors and where we can follow constructive principles for the good of our people. If we fail in that responsibility, history will not forgive us.” It is through this statement that political wisdom, generosity and far-sightedness of a statesman is well reflected.

On 1 March 1972, Bangabandhu visited the Soviet Union, another ally of the War of Liberation. In the days of the Great Liberation War, the Soviet Union gave Bangladesh overall support. Visiting the Soviet Union and attending the Commonwealth Conference was another big step forward in Bangabandhu's successful foreign policy. Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin received Bangabandhu at the airport. He was also received at the Kremlin by Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, who later became President of the Soviet Union. President Nikolai Podgorniy also welcomed Bangabandhu.

In a speech at a public meeting in Cumilla in 1974, Bangabandhu said that "in this subcontinent, we want Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka to live in peace. We do not want conflict with anyone. We want to live in brotherhood with each other with dignity as an independent and sovereign state. I don't want anyone to interfere in our affairs. We aren't interested in interfering in the affairs of others."

Bangabandhu joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Conference in 1973 in Algeria. It was a big achievement for the nascent democracy. The world leaders welcomed Bangabandhu at the summit with great respect. In any foreign trip, Bangabandhu drew massive media attention. He always spoke for peace and prosperity. Every statement given by Bangabandhu to the media as the head of state of Bangladesh was very well received.

When Bangabandhu Mujib was alive, Saudi Arabia did not recognize Bangladesh despite being a Muslim-majority country. So it was difficult for the Bangladeshis to perform Hajj. Bangabandhu said: "The world is divided into two parts. The exploiter and the exploited. I am in favor of those who are exploited." He always worked for the oppressed. However, he didn't allow his own and the country's honor to be ruined for any reason. Given his efforts, Bangladesh secured a place at the world stage within a short time due to his strong leadership.

HASINA SHEIKH CARRIES ON MUJIB'S TRADITION

But the anti-liberation force was active. They killed the Father of the Nation

on the fateful night of August 15, 1975 along with his family members. His two daughters – Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana - survived as they were abroad at that time. Through this military coup, the defeated Pakistani force came to power again. Bangladesh went back to the pre-independence era. Collaborators of the 1971, Bangabandhu killers, religious bigots all came back to politics during the military rules.

Their interest lay in making new friends while many of the friendly countries which had supported Bangladesh to attain its independence were not given adequate attention. All the erstwhile values, traditions and civil rights of the Bengali nation were now overturned. From 1975 to 1996, Bangladesh's foreign policy took on another phase, marking a break from what Mujib had pursued. Only the countries who were friends of Pakistan were friends of Bangladesh. The military dictators did not maintain good relations with time-tested friendly countries like Japan, India, and Russia.

Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996 after a long 21-year struggle against opposition forces. She followed the path of her father and started the work of building Sonar Bangla as was envisioned by her father. She reached out to develop relations with all those countries which were with Bangladesh during the 1971 struggle. Bangladesh under her stewardship followed the foreign policy goals that the Father of the Nation had laid out through, 'friendship with all, malice to none'. Through this, Bangladesh established relations with the economic and political superpowers in the world. Japan, China, India, and Russia became the economic partners of Bangladesh.

During her first term as Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina visited India in December 1996 and signed a 30-year old agreement with India on the sharing of Ganges water. In 1997, the government signed a peace agreement with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Jana Sanghati Samiti, which allowed Chakma refugees who had taken refuge in India to return home. The Ganges water sharing agreement and the return of Chakma refugees to Bangladesh were significant developments in Bangladesh politics. These developments were regarded as great diplomatic successes of the Bangladeshi government.

Sheikh Hasina's ability to secure territorial sea waters from India and Myanmar in a peaceful process and exchange of border enclaves with India was noteworthy. She also successfully balanced the relations between the two regional actors China and India rather well. Bangladesh is reaping the benefits of her balanced diplomacy. In the global and regional context, the Sino-Indian, US-Russian, Sino-Japanese and Sino-US conflicts are well known to all. Bangladesh has also developed integrated economy, trade and, in some cases, strategic military cooperation with all these five influential countries. Japan and Russia have huge investments in Bangladesh.

China, India, Japan and other countries are also making foreign direct investment on the basis of mutual cooperation with Bangladesh. For example, in the 2016-17 financial year, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China was 12.4 billion US dollars. It was expected to reach \$16 billion by 2021. In 2018-19, Bangladesh's exports exceeded \$1.04 billion in bilateral trade with India of about \$10 billion. According to Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Bangladesh will become the 29th largest economy in the world by 2030 and the 23rd largest by 2050. And all this has been possible due to the visionary and wise leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Another achievement of Sheikh Hasina is her excellent relations with the countries of the Middle East region. It is true that it has become difficult for most countries to maintain relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran and Qatar, as they are divided into two separate blocs, but Sheikh Hasina has been able to maintain equal relations with both Saudi and Iranian blocs. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are major markets for Bangladesh's labor force. It was once thought that without good relations with Pakistan, relations with these countries would not progress. But Sheikh Hasina's deft handling of diplomacy has changed this narrative revealing the depth of her leadership.

Sheikh Hasina is also widely acclaimed by countries who suffer the adverse effects of climate change, as does Bangladesh. She has become a strong voice for them on the world stage. At every climate conference, the leaders of the affected countries have praised Sheikh Hasina's speech. Sheikh Hasina has been awarded with the UN's highest environmental

award, the Champion of the Earth.

Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina's leadership is playing a strategic role for regional peace and harmony. The country is also active in the regional groupings such as Bay of Bengal Multi Sectoral Technical Cooperation, Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar (BCIM) Belt and Road Initiative, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal as well. Under Sheikh Hasina's visionary leadership, Bangladesh is also maintaining good bilateral relations with the countries of South Asia and beyond, including China, Japan and the United States. The Prime Minister was awarded with 37 international awards in recognition of her significant contribution in various fields. These include the Mother of Humanity, The Daughter of Democracy, the Huppe-Boani Peace Prize from UNESCO in 1997, and the Champions of the Earth. Bangladesh has been able to achieve great heights under leadership of Sheikh Hasina.

During the last 13 years of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's tenure, India-Bangladesh relations took a new turn. The bilateral relation is now said to be 'at its best'. It touches almost every aspect of life. Significant progress has been made, especially in allowing India to use the transit Chittagong and Mongla ports to export Indian goods. In 2010, when the Prime Minister visited India a year after her coming back to power, New Delhi offered \$1 billion LOC or soft loan for different projects of Bangladesh. Those 14 projects included road, railway bridges and inland waterway. Both sides also agreed to open border *haats* to prevent illegal trade along the frontiers. The border *haats* were first launched immediately after independence in 1971 to cater the needs of the people living along the border. But it was closed later. After a long discussion on border *haats*, it was finally decided to set up eight *haats*. These *haats* are fulfilling the long-standing expectations of the people of the border as well as playing a role in the trade between the two countries. During the visit, a prisoner exchange agreement was signed between the two countries. It came into force on January 13, 2011. Both sides can exchange convicted criminals.

Sheikh Hasina's politics of secularism has drawn the attention of the Indian elites. Her strong commitment against terrorism and extremism in any form also helped India to contain its separatist forces. As a result, the

anti-India forces in Bangladesh became weak. During the visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011, a structural agreement on development cooperation was signed. These include trade, investment, water resources, electricity, education, and enhancing cultural cooperation between the two countries, among others.

India and Bangladesh gave each other the status of 'most preferred country'. In 2011, an agreement was reached between the two countries on railways. According to the agreement, the two countries will have to build their part of the railway. Dhaka-Kolkata railway service will be launched.

The BGB-BSF reached an agreement in 2011 to reduce killings at the border to zero. On June 7-8, 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh and finalized 22 bilateral documents, including the ratification of the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and the second LOC of \$2 billion. In 1972, the first Bangladesh-India bilateral trade agreement was signed. A new agreement was signed in 2015. Under this, some more trade related agreements have been signed between the two countries including border *haats*.

Following the ratification of the LBA, 50,000 isolated citizens, who had no national identity, became citizens of India or Bangladesh through the exchange of 182 enclaves at the midnight of 31 July 2015. This exchange marks the end of a long history of deprivation. This exchange gives the enclave residents the opportunity to stay in their own country or to become citizens of the neighboring country if they wish. The 51 enclaves of Bangladesh inside India had a population of 14,214, all of whom remained in India as Indian citizens. Of the 111 enclaves of India inside Bangladesh, most of the 41,000 residents remain in Bangladesh. Only 989 people migrated to India. As a result, the number of new citizens of India stood at 15,193 and the number of new citizens of Bangladesh stood at 41,449. Bangladesh got 16,256 acres of land and India got 6,110 acres of land as a result of this exchange.

According to the trade agreement between the two countries, one country can take advantage of the transit of goods to another country using the water, land and rail of another country. In 2016, Bangladesh

provided a multi-dimensional transit facility to India through Ashuganj seaport in return for a fee.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India again on 08-10 April 2016. During this visit, 37 bilateral documents on various issues, including civilian nuclear power, space, information technology, and defense were signed. In addition, a third line of credit (LOC) of \$4.5 billion was also provided to Bangladesh. In the presence of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the Prime Ministers also launched a new passenger bus service on the Khulna-Kolkata route and the second Maitri Express from Khulna to Kolkata. The Biral-Radhikapur railway for freight services was also re-launched on a trial basis.

Dhaka and New Delhi have exchanged four MoUs. These are: Memorandum of Understanding on Bilateral Judicial Cooperation, Third Phase of Loan Assistance, Peaceful Outer Space Use and Passenger Crew Service Protocol Act on Passenger and Tourist Services on Coastal and Protocol Routes. During Sheikh Hasina's visit, Bangladesh and India signed two military agreements. According to the agreement, the two countries will jointly organize various training and exercises. India will assist Bangladesh in building the necessary infrastructure for the construction and repair of defense products used by both countries and will provide the necessary training, technology and logistics to the Bangladesh military. For the first time, India agreed to provide a \$500 million loan to Bangladesh for the purchase of arms or military equipment in the military sector.

During the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in 2019, seven MoUs have been signed. Under an agreement, India will be able to withdraw 1.72 cusecs of water from the Feni River. They will use the water in a clean water supply project in Tripura's Sabroom town. In March 2019, the two Prime Ministers inaugurated four bilateral development projects in Bangladesh through video conferencing. The projects are- (i) Supply of 500 trucks, 300 double decker buses and 200 AC buses under the second loan agreement (ii) Expansion of National Knowledge Network in Bangladesh (iii) Establishment of 36 community clinics in five districts of Bangladesh and (iv) Establishment of 11 water purification plants. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Shipping

of the two countries on the development of Naval Channel (Fairway) from Sirajganj to Daikhawa (Lalmonirhat) and from Ashuganj to Zakiganj on the Bangladesh-India Protocol Route was also signed. In October 2019, three more projects were inaugurated. Those are- (i) Vivekananda Bhavan inauguration at Ramakrishna Mission in Dhaka, (ii) Bulk LPG import from Bangladesh and (iii) Inauguration of Bangladesh-India Professional Skills Development Institute at Diploma Engineers Institution (IDEB) in Khulna.

On 16 December 2020, a virtual conference of the Prime Ministers of the two countries inaugurated the rail link from the Chilahati border at Nilphamari to Haldibari in West Bengal, which was closed during the Indo-Pakistani war in 1965. Using the seaports of Chittagong and Mongla in Bangladesh, India will be able to bring goods to and from its northeastern states on eight routes. On March 26, on the occasion of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of independence, the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi visited Dhaka. He handed over 1.2 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to Bangladesh as a gift. He also handed over ambulances which were needed during the time of pandemic.

Prior to 1947, most of the trade in the north-east of India was through present-day Bangladesh. The port of Chittagong was one of the routes for transporting goods in the region. Rivers, roads and railways are built in the light of the reality of the transport system of this region. The Pak-India war of 1965 destroyed railways and stopped river routes transportation. Pakistan revoked India's transit rights. When Bangladesh was born, river transit was re-introduced in 1972. In this age of globalization, no country can progress in isolation. India and Bangladesh have worked closely to recreate the border transport linkages that existed in the pre 1965 era. The two neighbors have covered much ground.

Bangladesh is expanding its economic activities, especially trade and commerce, through good relations with neighboring countries. India-Bangladesh trade ties are poised to reach a new height through transit and transshipment. Bangladesh is offering connectivity facilities to Nepal and Bhutan also. In course of time, bilateral relations with India have grown from strength to strength. Today, both countries are calling it the

'Golden Age' of relationship.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh is showing its economic progress in this critical moment of the pandemic by providing support to India and dollar assistance to Sri Lanka. Dhaka is using the pandemic to strengthen its ties with neighboring countries. Tourism dependent economy of Sri Lanka has been reeling due to the pandemic. The country's currency, the rupee, is constantly losing value in foreign exchange. In such a situation, the Bangladesh government has announced to give \$200 million to Sri Lanka in exchange for their currency rupee. On May 16, Dhaka handed over 2,072 boxes of various antiviral drugs and Covid protection equipment to India. Earlier, on May 8, Dhaka gave 10,000 doses of Remdesivir, a drug used in the treatment of corona, to India as assistance.

The government of Bangladesh, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has been praised around the world for its ever-evolving economic potential. Even Pakistan, is now full of praise for Bangladesh's unimaginable success. Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves now stand at \$45 billion in 2021, up from \$9 billion in 2010. In addition, remittances stood at \$200 billion. Bangladesh's achievements have been possible due to the policies that were undertaken by Mujibur Rahman and the subsequent leaders who followed his path. His daughter strictly followed the policy. Following in her father's footsteps, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has strengthened Bangladesh's diplomatic ties with the rest of the world. The year 2021 was a historic year as Bangladesh celebrated the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And in this great moment of celebration, people of Bangladesh pledged to follow Bangabandhu's path and make Bangladesh the golden Bengal as dreamt by him. The world joined Bangladesh in celebrating its 50th year which was also marked by many achievements spanning across the five decades. Along with its strong economic growth, Bangladesh has also achieved success in its foreign relations. With Sheikh Hasina at the leadership, there is much to look forward to for the youth of Bangladesh. Bangladesh will soon become a developed country and achieve many more milestones along its journey ahead.

HINDU SHRINES AND BUDDHIST VIHARAS OF BOGRA*

SUNITA DWIVEDI

A Pilot Survey Project launched in 1976-1977 by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums headed by Mohammad Ali and Swapan Bikash Bhattacharjee recorded a total number of 190 monuments and 115 ancient mounds in the district of Bogra. Evidence of ancient Hindu shrines and Buddhist viharas has been found in various villages in and around Bogra. Whenever any resident digs deep, idols of gods and goddesses are found. Numerous mounds in the district of Bogra are the sites of stupa, monastery or Jain and Hindu shrines. Images of Hindu and Buddhist deities and Siva lingas were unearthed during the excavations or as chance findings. Some sites have been designated as Maths for Hindu and Jain sadhus. The comprehensive *Archaeological Survey Report of Bogra district* by Mohammad Ali and Swapan Bikash Bhattacharjee, which this traveler/ author managed to obtain from the Mahasthan site museum, lists many such mounds found at the Unions of Fapore, Erulia, Majhira, Lahiripara, Madia, Shibganj Thana and Union, Rainagar Union, Bihar, Kahaloo Thana and several other Unions in the district of Bogra.

BOGRA ON ASIAN HIGHWAY

The 250 kms Dhaka-Bogra highway forms a section of the strategic

* This article is based on the author's travels to Bogra, Mahasthangarh, Bhasu Vihara and the site museum at Mahasthangarh, Varendra Research Museum and National Museum at Dhaka, archaeological notices at the site and written records of pilgrims, scholars and archaeologists who have worked on Mahasthan.

network of Asian Highway (AH 2) that will become part of an uninterrupted land route between Asia and Europe. Running over 13,000 kms starting at Denpasar, Indonesia in the east, it passes through Singapore and reaches the western end at Khosravi in Iran. Midway the highway passes through Bangladesh and India. Starting from Dhaka, the road passes through a picturesque landscape of emerald fields of the Borodhan and Iridhan varieties of rice, and numerous lotus filled water bodies rearing a variety of fish, ducks and water chestnut.

Some of the renowned cities of northern Bangladesh lie along the road, viz.. Sabhar, famous for its world reputed Jahangir University and the national martyrs monument called Jatiyo Smriti Soudho. Before reaching the textile town of Meerapur and the sari capital of Tangail on the banks of the Louhajong river, a traveler along the route meets snake charmers and gypsies at the exotic tent village of Kaliakor. At Karotia village of Tangail, bundles of exotic saris lie by the side of the road waiting to be loaded into trucks for West Bengal. Generations of master weavers have put their skill in the weaving of famous Tangail saris worn all over India.

After Elenga, also in Tangail the over five kms long Bangabandhu Bridge, commonly called the Jamuna Bohumukhi Setu) takes one across the Jamuna river (Brahmaputra). Opened in 1998, the longest bridge on the Asian Highway in South Asia is named after founder president of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and is a strategic East-West link between Tangail and Sirajgang. One can see numerous islands called *char* in the river that have been brought under vegetable cultivation and appear like floating farms. At Shirajganj, the famous jute centre of Bangladesh, I turned right for Bogra. Passing through Shahjehanpur, Aria Bazaar and Majhira Bazaar, I reached the beautiful Naz Garden Resorts of Bogra.

THE MAURYAN CONNECTION

As a traveler along the Asian Highway in northern Bangladesh, I found numerous Hindu and Buddhist architectural remains in the city of Bogra in Rajshahi division which was once part of Pundravardhana or the

Pundra kingdom with its ancient capital at Mahasthangarh, the ruins of which lie 13 kms north from Bogra. Lying on the west bank of the Karatoya river, a tributary of the Jamuna (Brahmaputra river in Bangladesh), Bogra has long been a commercial city of the southern Varendra region of the *doab* of the Ganga and the Jamuna. Marked for its close trade and cultural links with India since early times, Bogra has gained fame as a sacred city of both Hindus and Buddhists, as is evidenced from numerous heritage sites centred in and around the ancient citadel and sacred land of Mahasthan. The region was considered sacred as early as the 4th century BC during the reign of Mauryan emperor Asoka and is mentioned in ancient Buddhist chronicles such as *Divyavadana* or Divine narratives- a Sanskrit anthology of *Avadana* tales written sometime in 2nd century CE.

The story goes that a Buddhist devotee reported to emperor Asoka that a lay follower of Nirgrantha Jnatiputra (identified with Mahavira whose followers were Jains) in Pundravardhana drew a demeaning picture showing the Buddha bowing down at the feet of master (Mahavira). Asoka ordered the man to be arrested and brought before him. The heretic was brought before the king who ordered “ All Ajivikas in the whole of Pundravardhana to be put to death at once” And on that day 18,000 of them were executed¹. While researching on a third century BC painting from Mahasthan, Bangladeshi scholars Niru Shamsun Nahar and Mohammed Abu Al Hasan have provided important evidence from *Vitashokavadana* (part of Buddhist text *Divyavadana*) showing that painting was practiced in Mahasthan as early as the Mauryan period. According to this text, Nirgrantha-upasakas of Pundravardhana with its epicentre at Mahasthangarh, Bogra drew painting demeaning the Buddha. As a result the Mauryan emperor Asoka (268-232 BCE) destroyed the city.² The region of Pundravardhana was also in contact with Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh as revealed by two donor inscriptions of the railings of Stupa 1.³ The inscription on Sanchi Stupa in old Brahmi refers to the city of Pundranagara under the name of Pundravardhana.⁴

Asoka's Dhamma Mahamatras

That Asoka's *Dhammamahamatras* were scouring this sacred region of northern Bangladesh around Bogra and Rajshahi as early as the 4th/3rd century BC, is proved by the accidental discovery of a limestone slab bearing seven lines in Prakrit in Brahmi script, in 1931AD. The seven lines inscribed on a circular stone and paleographically dated to the Mauryan age in Prakrit, records an order issued by some ruler to the *Mahamatra* stationed at Pudanagala (Pundranagar/Pundravardhana/ ancient Bogra/ Mahasthangarh) with a view to relieve the distress possibly a famine like situation, suffered by the people called *Samgvangiyas*, who were settled in and around the town⁵. It may be noted that the Mauryan emperor Asoka set up a system of *Mahamatras* who are mentioned in several Asokan Edicts inscribed on rocks or pillars. The *Mahamatras* were an essential part of the Mauryan administration and were likened to officers of *Dhamma* (virtue/ morality). Those who were involved in *Dhammavijai* campaigns of Asoka in order to spread the tenets of *Dhamma* were called the *Dharmamahamatras* and it is possible that Asoka's *Dhamma Mahamatras* had reached northern Bengal and some monasteries of Bogra could be from that era. Since many mounds at Bogra and other neighbouring districts are yet to be explored, one cannot be certain of this.

This fragmentary lime stone epigraph in Asokan Brahmi unearthed at Mahasthan also identifies ancient Pundranagar with the present ruinous site of Mahasthangarh in Bogra, as one of the oldest living cities of the subcontinent having its root in the Mauryan period.⁶ According to eminent iconographer and art historian and former director of Varendra Research Museum, Mukhlesur Rehman, ancient Pundravardhana was the homeland of the Pundra people and was regarded as the *Prachi* (East) beyond which lay the kingdom of Kamarupa.⁷ In pre-Muslim times the region comprised the present districts of Rajshahi, Malda, Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur in north Bengal.

FA XIAN AND XUANZANG IN PUNDRAVARDHANA

Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian who visited Bengal in early 4th century AD mentions the kingdom of Tamralipti, where he stayed, studied and copied texts. Quoting ancient texts Prof. Biplab Dasgupta in his *European Trade and Colonial Conquest*, mentions that Fa Xian described Pundravardhan as densely populated and he met many learned men there. He noted that Buddhism and Jainism were both flourishing in that region.⁸

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Huiyen Tsang) visited Pundravardhana in 638 CE. The pilgrim travelled 67 miles eastwards from Champa (Bhagalpur) to Kankjol, the original name of Rajmahal. Xuanzang then crossed the Ganges and travelled further eastwards for about 100 miles to reach the kingdom of Pundravardhana bounded by Mahanadi on the west, Teesta and Brahmaputra on the east, and the Ganges on the south.⁹ He describes the country as being thickly populated and about 4,000 li in circuit with its capital city of about 30 li circuit. He found about twenty *sangharamas*, with some 3,000 priests; who studied both the Little and Great vehicle. There were also some hundred Deva temples, where followers of different schools congregated. The naked Nirgranthas (Jainas) were the most numerous.¹⁰

In all probability, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang travelled along this route to the monasteries of Pundravardhana in present day Bogra, viz. the Bhasu vihara. Travelling further eastwards of Karatoya, he reached Kamarupa (Pragjyotisha, Assam). From here going south, he reached Samatata (shores of the Bay of Bengal) and then westwards to Tamralipti and north-westwards to Karnasuvarna (*Raktamrittika Mahavihara* in present day Murshidabad). Actually his itinerary takes a full circle from Bhagalpur (Bihar) eastwards to Pundravardhana (East Bengal, present day Bangladesh) and Kamarupa (western Assam) then southwards to Samatata (on the shores of the Bay of Bengal) and back westwards to Tamralipti (Bengal), from where he again went north-westwards to Karnasuvarana (in present day Murshidabad).¹¹

FROM MAURYAS TO PALAS

As per the archaeological evidence, Mahasthangarh site was provincial capital of Mauryas, Guptas, Palas and the feudal Hindu kings of later periods.¹² Dating from the time of the Mauryan empire (321-185 BCE) it flourished during the Gupta (early 4th - late 6th century CE) and Pala periods (8th- 12 century CE). Pala rule was followed by that of the Senas. After the last Sena king Lakshmansena was driven out by Bakhtiyar Khilji, Bogra passed into the hands of Muslim governors of the Delhi Sultanate followed by the Afghans and Mughals . In 1757 AD, the last Nawab of Bengal, Nawab Sirajuddaula was defeated by Robert Clive in the historic battle of Plassey and the district passed into the hands of East India Company in 1756. Now Englishmen/Europeans settled along rivers on the east of Bogra district as indigo and silk planters.¹³

Many will wonder as to when the name Pundravardhana region changed to Mahasthan. Archaeological excavations carried out in Mahasthan show that the city called Pundranagara was the provincial headquarters of Pundravardhanabhukti (provincial unit) and the citadel of Pundranagara was in use up to the 18th century CE for multifarious purposes. But during the medieval period, it lost its identity as Pundranagara and acquired a new name Mahasthan (a place of sanctity).¹⁴ According to another report by Directorate of Archaeology, Bogra region which harboured the site of Mahasthan is believed to have derived its name after Nasiruddin Boghra Khan, son of Delhi Sultan Ghyasuddin Balban (1266-1286 AD)¹⁵. Mahasthan went on to retain the memory of its sacredness as a great city where different faiths co-existed and where art and architecture flourished.

COPPER PLATE INSCRIPTION OF MAHENDRAPALA

The noteworthy copper plate inscription of Pala emperor Sri Mahendrapala was issued at *Kuddalakhataka Jayaskandhavara* (camp of victory) in Pundravardhanabhukti (in present day Bogra) in the year 854 CE. The 12-kilogram copper plate inscription of a land grant written in

Siddhamatrika script in Sanskrit is displayed at the State Archaeological Department, Behala, Kolkata, West Bengal. The land grant charter states that the emperor and his successor Devpala announced before the body of officers assembled on the occasion of a land grant ceremony that his *Mahasenapati* Vajradeva had intended to donate the land adjacent to the *Nandadirghika Udranga Mahavihara* (Jagjeevanpur, Malda), erected by him for the worship of Buddhist deities and maintenance and performance of religious rites including copying (of manuscripts) by the monks residing in the vihara.¹⁶

The region of Pundravardhana (present Mahasthan in Bogra) was in close proximity with Jagjeevanpur (in Malda, West Bengal) where the *Nandadirghika Udranga Mahavihara* was located and also had close artistic links with it, judging from the similarity in motifs on terracotta plaques and the citadel like structure built of red terracotta bricks. Close links between the Buddhist cities of the Rajshahi division of north-western Bangladesh in which Mahasthan is situated, with the monasteries of north and eastern regions of West Bengal in India should come as no surprise considering that Rajshahi borders on Malda and the Monastery of Jagjeevanpur, 40 kms east of Ingrez (English) Bazaar, Malda is only 100 kms from Bhasu Vihara near Mahasthan in Bogra and less than 100 kms from Somapura Vihara, Paharpur in Naogaon. The *Raktamrittika Mahavihara* in district Murshidabad of West Bengal, India also lay close to the sacred site of Mahasthan across the Padma (Ganges) river. The India-Bangla border districts map clearly shows two border crossings that lead from Rajshahi into India at Malda and Murshidabad. The first at Malda lies just a few metres away from Chota Sona Masjid in Chapai Nawabganj district of Rajshahi division. The second is at Lal Gola, a village in the Lalbag sub-division of Murshidabad district of West Bengal where one can cross the Padma (river Ganga) by boat and reach Godagari in Rajshahi where the river Mahananda meets the river Padma.

INLAND AND FOREIGN TRADE AND BOGRA'S PLACE

Large number of statuary art recovered from numerous Hindu and Buddhist shrines at Mahasthangarh and surrounding sites in the district of Bogra give us an idea of the wealth that went into the splendid decoration of monuments with idols of gold plated Hindu and Buddhist deities, designed terracotta plaques, water-pipes, fortification walls etc. This wealth came from Bogra's commercial links, both inland and foreign with other parts of Asia. Bogra gained from its location on the Karatoya river and being located in the vicinity of the river Jamuna bordering its east and the Padma (river Ganges) towards its west. The growth in commerce was mainly due to the existing facilities for movement along the river systems. These were the chief routes of internal trade as the water-ways were navigable throughout the year. They served as 'corridors' or 'natural routes' for long-distance traffic. All principal towns, including Bogra stood on the rivers. The routes gave Bogra access along the Brahmaputra far towards India's north-eastern districts and up to the Bay. Along the Padma and its tributaries, it could reach the Ganga plains of north India. The commodities exported are said to have consisted of malabathrum, Gangetic spikenard, pearls, and muslin of the finest sorts.

Eminent historian R.C Majumdar has pointed to the antiquity of Bengal's inland and foreign trade as evidenced by the Jataka stories, the accounts of Strabo and Pliny, and the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea. Two factors seem to have promoted this early growth of commerce. "— first, the qualitative and quantitative development of Bengal's industries, and secondly, the unrivalled facilities for movement afforded by the sea-coast and river-systems of the province", says Majumdar.¹⁷ Majumdar has enumerated some important trade centres of Bengal including ancient Pundravardhana in present day Bogra. According to Biplab Dasgupta, the north Bengal city of Pundravardhan was perhaps more important than Tamralipti, due to its location north of the Ganga and between two other major rivers of the region, the Mahananda in the west and Karatoya in the east.¹⁸ Quoting from the *Katha-sarit-sagara*, Majumdar informs that Pundravardhana had a great market-place and streets lined with shops.

Besides the towns, a certain amount of business was probably done in villages also. Such large centres like Pundravardhana, Navyavakasika, Kotivarshawere were rendezvous for merchants. They were places where *hatta* or markets were held. We learn of grant of villages along with their *hattika* and *sa-hatta* (market-place), *hattiya-griha* (shops), *hatta-vara* (big markets).

Besides the sea-routes, there seem to have been a number of land-routes by which Bengal's foreign trade was carried. One of these was the route which connected Pundravardhana with Kamarupa. It was along this route that Hiuen Tsang journeyed to the latter kingdom in the seventh century AD. From ancient times Kamarupa was noted for its textiles, sandal and agaru, which were taken to the main trade centers in Northern India along this highway. According to Majumdar, Kamarupa was not the terminus of this route, for it extended eastwards to South China through the hills of Assam or Manipur and Upper Burma. This is testified to by the famous report of Change-kien, the Chinese ambassador in 126 B.C. When he was in Bactria, he was surprised to find silk and bamboo which came from the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Szechwan. On enquiry, he was told of the rich and powerful country of India across which the caravans carried these products from southern China to Afghanistan.

Katha-sarit-sagar mentions merchants travelling from Pundravardhana to Pataliputra along westward routes that joined the network of highways which converged at Benares. One of these highways that connected with Pundravardhana ran from the port of Tamralipti. I-tsing, who landed at Tamralipti in 673 AD, says that when he left the sea-port, "taking the road which goes straight to the west," hundreds of merchants accompanied him in his journey to Bodh Gaya. A rock inscription of a chief named Udayamana, which on palaeographical grounds is dated to 8th century AD, reveals that merchants from such distant places as Ayodhya used to frequent the port of Tamralipti for purposes of trade. These western routes formed the principal means of communication and also the grand military routes between Bengal and Northern India.

A third line of overland trade, according to Majumdar, connected Bogra through the passes of the Himalayas, past Sikkim and Chumbi

Valley, to Tibet and China. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea bears testimony to the fact that as early as the 1st century AD, “raw silk, silk yarn and silk cloth” came into Bengal from China and were re-exported to “Damerica by way of the river Ganges.” These were the routes that in later period became the great highway of Buddhist pilgrim travel between Magadha and Tibet. Majumdar also mentions a fourth overland route from northern Bangladesh which ran southwards, along the Kalinga coast, to the South Indian peninsula.

MAHASTHAN CITADEL

Several monuments that appear like high mounds, lie inside and outside the vast ruins of the Mahasthan citadel. Once upon a time both Hindu and Buddhist shrines and viharas co-existed side by side. According to the onsite notices of the Archaeology Department and literature provided by the site museum at Mahasthan, mounds or *Bhitas* viz. *Bairagir Bhita* dated to the fourth century CE were discovered inside the citadel, from where archaeologists discovered ruins of temples including two sculptured stone pillars. Another temple complex was found at *Parasuramer Prasad* which belongs to the Pala period of eighth century CE. Terracotta plaques, bronze Ganesh and Garuda images were recovered from the Hindu temple of *Mankalir Dhap*. Some pieces of stone carvings representing the transcendent Buddha along with devotees kneeling with folded hands were recovered from the Buddhist site of *Khodarpathar Bhita*.

Farrouk Hussain of Mathura village in Mahasthangarh told this author that while working in their fields, farmers often find Buddhist antiquities which do not go to the museum and are sold at a very high price in the antique market for sale abroad. The high mounds inside the fortified walls of Mahasthangarh are surrounded by private fields which lie within the boundaries of the site and are openly ploughed by farmers. This author saw several farmers working in their fields next to hilly mounds that are still unexcavated. The vast open space inside the walled city is now children’s playground and lovers nest for young couples.

Visitor to the site of Mahasthan citadel will first notice the extensive

thick red fortification walls of citadel stretching for more than a kilometer along the western bank of the Koratoya river. That Karatoya river once flowed at the foot of the citadel, is testified by the name of Jahajghat given to the north-eastern corner of the citadel, where a flight of steps takes a visitor into the ramparts of the citadel. The name Jahaj (sea or river vessel) ghat (bank), denotes a river port where vessels sailed in. This shows that once upon a time the anchorage for Karatoya river vessels was at the citadel. The extensive suburbs of the citadel are marked by massive gateways that open in four cardinal directions. From the number of gateways and their distance from each other one can get an idea of the large area covered by the city. These gateways lie at different points: Kata Duar (in the north), Dorab Shah Toran (in the east), Burir Fatak (in the south), and Tamra Darwaza (in the west). There is another gateway called Sanatan Saheber Gali near Kataduar.

BUDDHIST AND HINDU SHRINES IN AND AROUND MAHASTHAN

One is amazed at the abundant Buddhist and Hindu (both Vaishnavite and Shaivite) antiquities that were recovered from the ancient shrines and viharas of Mahasthan and its surroundings. Incidentally, the most revered tomb of the 14th century Sufi saint Shah Sultan Balkhi Mahisawar also lies here. The story goes that the famous dervish who was attracted by the sacredness of the site, arrived on the back of a fish that gave him the sobriquet Mahisawar. Possibly the fish was a dragon boat commonly found in the coastal regions of Bengal and south India.

According to the onsite notices, the discovery and identification of the ruins at Mahasthangarh was initially done by Francis Buchanan Hamilton who was the first to locate and visit Mahasthangarh in 1808. C.J.O'Donnell, E.V. Westmacott, and Beveridge followed him. Alexander Cunningham who visited the site in 1879, identified Mahasthan as the capital of Pundravardhana. The first archaeological excavation in Mahasthangarh was carried out in 1928-1929. The excavated mounds were Bairagir Bhita, Munir Ghon and Govind Bhita. After a long gap,

excavations were resumed in 1960-1961 and continued every season upto 1988. The French-Bangladesh Joint Venture started excavations in 2001 in the south-eastern area of Mahasthan and successfully exposed unique monumental remains of a pillar building, defensive towers, monumental gate and a paved platform at the entrance of the city and several fortification walls. Most importantly, the team discovered traces of a siege around the city and those of an earthquake in later times.¹⁹ The team also recovered a lot of sculptures belonging to different Gupta, post- Gupta and Pala- Sena periods.

According to the notices of the Archaeological Department and literature provided by the site museum, intensive explorations and excavations at Mahasthan beginning 1928 AD and covering several decades, revealed a long cultural sequence from 4th century BC to 15th century AD. Mud, brick built houses, roads, drains, wells, temples, mosques, gateways, bastions of pre-Mauryan, Mauryan, Gupta, Pala and Muslim periods have been successively unearthed in 18 building levels. Apart from these architectural ruins, the archaeologists unearthed inscribed stone tablet of the Mauryan period, punch marked coins, copper cast coins, black and red ware, rouletted ware, terracotta plaques of Sunga affiliation, stone and terracotta images, semi-precious stone, beads, terracotta beads, net sinkers, earthen and metal objects of everyday use and a stone slab with Arabic inscription.

The excavations also led to the recovery of a large number of Buddhist and Hindu statuary art most of which lie at the Mahasthangarh Museum nearby. Villagers discover terracotta and stone sculptures of deities in many mounds that lie within the fortified city during and after the monsoon season, while they are ploughing their fields or digging wells. Substantial ruins found at the site include those of temples and votive stupas. The Department of Archaeology mentions terracotta seal and sealings, punch marked coins, copper cast coins, NBPW sherds, rouletted ware sherds, looking glass bronze frame, yaksha-yakshi terracotta plaques, ring stone, antimony rod and etched beads of semi-precious stones.²⁰

However, about 31 major mounds lie unexcavated, according to the Archaeology Department. One of the major mounds is known as Salibahan

Rajar Kachcharibari Dhipi (the mound of king Salivahan), Padmavati and Padmadevi Dhap (mound of Queen Padmavati and Padmadevi), Yogir Dhap (mound of the yogis) etc. Some of them are distinctly Hindu and Buddhist antiquities. For example, a gold coated bronze image of Bodhisattva Manjusri was recovered from Balai Dhap (housed in Varendra Museum, Rajshahi), a sandstone Buddha from Chota Tengra Dhap (house in Mahasthan Museum) and a number of terracotta plaques depicting scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata from the western adjoining areas of the citadel. Excavations of the mounds are expected to reveal more antiquities related to the past history and culture of northern Bangladesh. On surface examination, most mounds are found littered with profuse number of sherds, brickbats, objects of daily use, ornaments, terracotta plaques etc. mostly made up of baked or unbaked clay.²¹

Among the most exotic finds (both Hindu and Buddhist), there are a large number of highly artistic stone statues in both limestone and greyish black stone called Rajmahal slate, from different location in Bogra. These have been catalogued and showcased at the adjacent site museum of Mahasthan and at the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi which is rightfully known as the 'treasure house of Bengal Delta'. Since its inception in early 20th century, it has been playing a pioneering role in collecting archaeological relics from every nook and corner of Bangladesh in order to preserve the country's cultural heritage. It is renowned for its iconographical relics of the Pala-Sena period and possesses artifacts from the Mauryan period upto 19th century CE.

MAHASTHAN MUSEUM

The site museum at Mahasthan lies adjacent to the archaeological site amid lush gardens where carved pillars of limestone, Buddha images, lintels with yakshas are showcased for visitors. The museum has a good repertoire of Hindu and Buddhist objects including statuary art, terracotta plaques, bronze idols and votive stupas. A joint France-Bangla Expedition recovered a terracotta pinnacle, that appears to be a proper stupa, from Mahasthangarh, perhaps a votive stupa. A 5th century Buddha stone

sculpture recovered from Bhasu Vihara, a Lokeshvara stone sculpture, salvaged from neighbouring Namuja village, a number of sand stone door-frames, pillars and lintels (dating to 5th–12th century), Buddha bronze sculpture datable to 10th–11th century, a terracotta Surya discovered at Mankalir Bhita, and numerous other pieces are presently showcased at Mahasthan Museum. Apart from Bhasu Vihara, Buddhist antiquities displayed at the Mahasthangarh museum, Buddha image from Namuja in Bogra adorns the entry to the museum and is strictly guarded by museum officials. Another image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in black stone from Namuja dating to 9th century AD is gracefully standing with six-armed image of Lokeshvara in *tribhanga* posture. The deity's right hand is in varada mudra and holds a ratna and aksmala and in his left hand he holds the *tridanda* (triple gem), *padma* (lotus) and *kalash* (pot). He is accompanied by other deities. Some terracotta sculptures listed at the site Museum are of great interest. These include the magnificent four-armed Mahisamardini image from Sarsabaz (Bogra). The ferocious goddess with wide bulging eyes is depicted crushing the demon Mahisasur under her feet.

BODHISATTVAS AND OTHER DEITIES AT VARENDRA MUSEUM

Among the images of Bodhisattvas from Bogra catalogued and stored at the Varendra Research Museum²², are a seated Loknath (12th century CE) from Khetlal, Joypurhat; head of Bodhisattva from Kalinjar (12th century CE)]; standing Bodhisattva from Joypurhat (2th century CE); Standing Manjusri (12th century CE) from Saralpur, near Mahasthan; seated Avalokitesvara (8th century CE) from Mahasthan; seated Padampani (12th century CE) from Yogirbhavan. Two images of Khadiravani Tara, dated 10th century CE from Shibganj, and another dated 11th century CE from Nandigram are also preserved at the museum²³. Two images of Prajnaparamita dated 10th and 11th century CE are both from Joypurhat²⁴. Some images of the snake-goddesses dated 11th century, holding a snake and having a snake canopy over the head have also been recovered from the village of Khidrapalli (Bogra). Hindu images of Visnu, Siva, Uma-

Maheswar and Bhairava belonging to the 11th and 12th century CE, which were found in villages in and around Mahasthan viz., Adamdighi, Joypurhat, Dumaragaon, Sherpur, Madhainagar have been catalogued and showcased at the museum. An eighth century image of Uma-Maheswar is from Shanail²⁵.

Among the different type of cult images discovered in Bengal, those of Surya occupy a very important position. Numerous icons of Surya have been recovered from Rajshahi division including the district of Bogra. According to Majumdar, the cult to which these images belong, was introduced to India by Iranian sun-worshippers in early centuries of the Christian era.²⁶ A particularly beautiful Surya image from Deora (Bogra) dated 6th-7th century CE in bluish basalt, according to Majumdar belongs to the 'eastern version' of the Gupta tradition.²⁷ Another is from Gopinathpur (Bogra). Both are now at the Varendra Research Museum.

Varendra Research Museum is one of the oldest museums of Indian sub-continent and its parent body, Varendra Research Society, was founded in 1910 at Rajshahi to encourage the study of art, literature, history, archaeology, anthropology with special reference to Bengal and collect archaeological relics, ancient books, manuscripts etc. According to notices and information available at the Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi, its richest collection of Hindu and Buddhist statuary is the result of pioneering work of enthusiastic Bengali scholars of Rajshahi, viz. Sarat Kumar Roy, Akshay Kumar Maitra, Rama Prasad Chand, Sasadhar Ray who formed an exploration team to study, explore and collect valuable archaeological relics from Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts. They studied and explored the entire Godagiri region presently along the Padma river and ancient villages of Deopara, Palpara, Jagatpur, Malanchi, Itahar, Chatisnagar, Talain, Malain. They also explored Mahasthan, Khetlal, Shibganj, Machpur, Chhatangaon, Satayel of Bogra; Birat, Satgar of Rangpur; Bangar, Morchali, Basar, Tapandighi, Balurghat, Mahisantosh, Agradigun, Jagaddal, Yogigopha, Haragauri and Ghoraghat of Dinajpur and collected a large number of archaeological relics that included both Hindu and Buddhist iconography.

HINDU TEMPLE OF GOVIND BHITA

On the other side of the road opposite the Mahasthan museum gate, lies the archaeological site of the Hindu temple of Govind Bhita on the banks of the Karatoya river. Tradition ascribes it as the temple of Govind or Vishnu. Archaeological notice at the site quotes *Karatoya*, a metrical Sanskrit work of 12th/ 13th century AD mentioning the temple (the Govind Bhita) on the northern limit of Mahasthan. Excavations carried out in 1928-29 and 1960 revealed cultural objects of various periods from 2nd century BC to the Muslim period. The existence of two temples (eastern and western) within a massive enclosure were found. These temples were constructed and reconstructed in four building phases commencing from Late Gupta period (6th century). Important antiquities discovered at Govind Bhita include cast copper coins, silver coins, NBP ware, terracotta, female figures, terracotta seal bearing Brahmi script and semi-precious stone beads. Temple remains were also found at *Khulnar Dhap* situated in village Chenghispur, 700 meters west of the citadel. Another was found at Skandher Dhap situated in village Baghopara on the Bogra-Rangpur road, 3.5 kms to the south of the citadel from where a sandstone image of Kartika was recovered. Other mounds in the village are believed to conceal more shrines.

BUDDHIST MONASTERY AT BHASU VIHAR

Bhasu Vihar, a Buddhist monastery known as the Narapatir Dhap lies six kilometres north-west of the Mahasthangarh site. A single road winds through rice fields, along small lotus filled lakes, fish ponds and irrigation canals and reaches the Bhasu Vihar village named after the famous vihar which lies three kilometres from the village in a vast open space surrounded by Banyan trees. One can see three huge structures, perhaps different sections of the same vihara or different departments of the monastic university, at the site. However, a large part of the high rising mounds around the vihara structures are yet to be explored. When fully uncovered, the size of the vihara could be huge. Several rooms have been

uncovered at a lower terrace of the Buddhist temple to the left of the monastic university, which gives an impression that the temple might have once been located on the second storey of the monastic cells on the lower terrace.

The first structure to be seen on approaching the vihara, is the expansive structure believed to have served as a monastic university with clearly marked entry and exit structures. This is flanked by a temple on its left and residences for monks on its right. The structures appear to be complete in themselves. The visitor sees an entry gate with huge square shaft like pillars on which once stood Buddha images. Steps lead to a quadrangular monastery with a deep central courtyard surrounded by monastic cells or residences for monks. All the cells open into a veranda that runs like a gallery around the central courtyard. The cells appear to be large enough to accommodate more than one monk.

In the centre of the courtyard rises a quadrangular structure what must have once been the central shrine to the Buddha as four bronze Buddhas dated 7th-9th century AD and one image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara were found from the vihara. A headless statue of a seated Buddha in padmasana that lies in the Mahasthangarh museum, with the title 'Dhyani Buddha' from Bogra could in all likelihood be the one that embellished the Bhasu Vihara monastic centre. The central monument which is said to have functioned as a monastic university with cells opening outside, has four gateways in a row on its front. This could perhaps mean that one gateway was not sufficient for the large number of monks who studied or resided here. It could also have been the administrative complex of the monastic establishment. It seems that the site was too huge to have been fully excavated. We, therefore, see only three separate buildings that must have once combined to form an immense structure like the modern buildings with wings arranged in a semi-circular plan. The frontage was once a vast open space or gardens with banyan and peepal trees for shade and beauty.

Several other high rising grassy mounds now covered with trees lie in close vicinity of the Bhasu Vihara and could have been part of the same establishment, as different departments of the monastic university. One

such mound is the Tamra Duar mound, an archaeological site that rises like a high hill. What lies beneath the grassy hill is not known. But one can say with certainty that it was once a vihara and a part of Bhasu vihara. According to the site attendant, Daulat Zaman working for the Archaeological Survey of Bangladesh for 32 years, there are 40-50 high rise mounds in Bogra district which are believed to hide large monastic establishments. Many antiquities recovered from all over Bogra include several Buddhist gods and goddesses, which adorn the museum at Mahasthangarh.

Antiquities from Bhasu Vihar include four bronze Buddhas dated 7th-9th century AD and one image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Terracotta plaques from vihara dated 10th-11th century are decorated with motifs of animals with their young ones and life sustaining *purnakumbha*. There are apsaras, guardian deities, deer, crocodiles, elephants. Two unusual motifs are those of a lion playing with a rabbit and a boy shooting an arrow at an elephant. There are mermaids having upper half of a woman and lower of a fish- *matsyakanya*. In another motif, a bird holds a beaded necklace in its beak. There is a beautiful motif of a reclining apsara holding a flower or about to shower flowers on some deity standing below. Similar terracotta images and plaques have been found in Jagjivanpur and Mogolmari monasteries in West Bengal, which now adorn the site museums and the Directorate of Archaeology Museum at Behala, Kolkata. An image of a standing Buddha, dating to 7th century, in grey-green schist was also recovered from Bhasu vihara.

XUANZANG'S VISIT TO BHASU VIHARA

Xuanzang who visited Bhasu Vihara, describes it as being located to the west of the capital 20 li or so. The Po-chi-p'o (Bhasu Vihara) Sangharama had courts that according to him were light and roomy and its towers and pavilions were very lofty. Seven hundred priests who dwelled there, studied the law according to the Great Vehicle. Many renowned priests from eastern India dwelled at the Vihara. He also describes a stupa built by Asoka raja. "Here Tathagata, in old days, preached the law for three

months for the sake of the Devas. Occasionally, on fast-days, there is a bright light visible around it. By the side of this, again, is a place where the four past Buddhas walked for exercise and sat down. The bequeathed traces are still visible". The pilgrim finds another Vihara close by, in which there was a statue of *Kwan-tsz-tsai* Bodhisattva. "Nothing is hid from its divine decrement, its spiritual perception is most accurate. Men from far and near consult (this being) with fasting and prayers".²⁸ He could be right, as close to Bhasu Vihara, lie the remains of another Vihara, Totaram Panditer Dhap. In the village Vihara, about 6 km north-west of the citadel, structural remains of a damaged monastery have been found. Gokul Medh with a terraced podium and 172 cells could also be a monastery. Dated sixth century CE, the site is situated in village Gokul, 3 km to the south of the citadel, off the Bogra-Rangpur road.

CONCLUSION

Hindu and Buddhist antiquities from several villages in and around Bogra inform about the flourishing state of Hinduism and Buddhism in Bogra and about the existence of flourishing centres of art and architecture in northern Bangladesh. These also point to the peaceful co-existence of religious traditions. According to Xuanzang who visited Pundravardhana in the 7th century, there were Buddhist and Jaina and Brahmanical sects, but the Buddhists and Jainas were far outnumbered by the followers of the Brahmanical sects.²⁹ Even Majumdar attests to the fact that a large majority of images and inscriptions which may be assigned to the period between the 750 CE and 1200 CE, are Brahmanical and not Buddhists. Very few Jain images and inscriptions have come to light.³⁰ Judging by the number of cult images from the last two or three centuries of Hindu rule in Bangladesh, Vaisnavism and Saivism were both prevalent.³¹ In spite of the co-existence of different religious sects, there was no sectarian jealousy. There was respect and reverence for others' creed and there existed an intimate association between different religious sects.³²



ANCIENT OUTER WALL OF MAHASTHAN CITADEL, BOGRA



A VIEW OF BHASU VIHARA, BOGRA



BUDDHA FROM NAMUJA, BOGRA (9TH CENTURY CE)
(COURTESY: MAHASTHAN MUSEUM)



BUDDHA IN MEDITATION, BOGRA (COURTESY: MAHASTHAN MUSEUM)



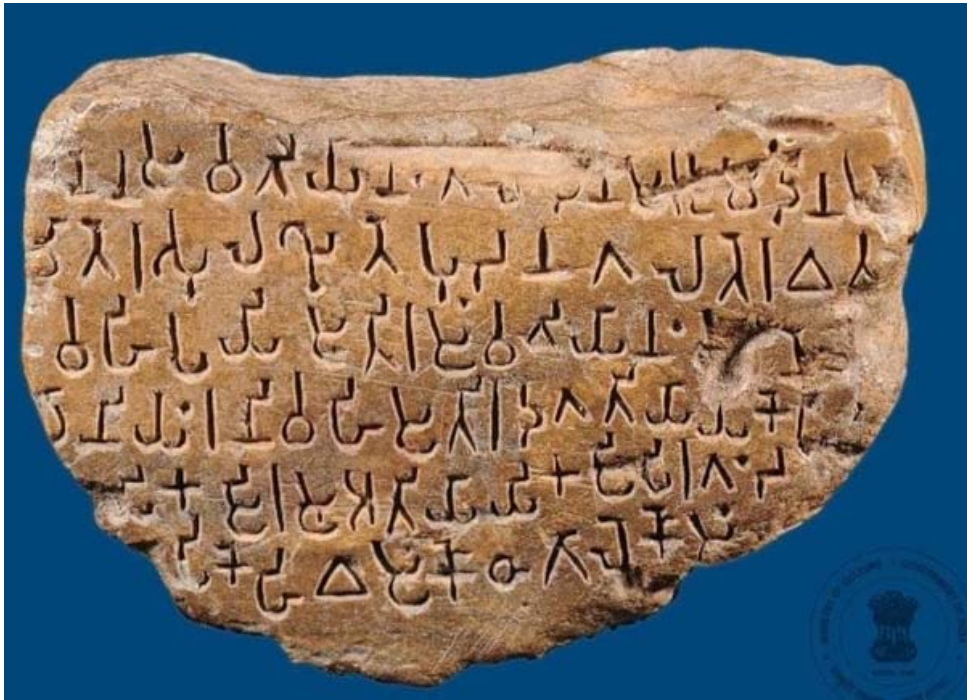
DECORATIVE PILLAR FOUND AT MAHASTHAN (COURTESY:MAHASTHAN MUSEUM)



BARA AHNİK HINDU TEMPLE, PUTHIA, RAJSHAHI



SHIVA TEMPLE AT PUTHIA, RAJSHAHI



MAHASTHAN BRAHMI INSCRIPTION (COURTESY: MINISTRY OF CULTURE, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA)

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TABLIGHI JAMAAT IN BANGLADESH¹

MAHESH RANJAN DEBATA

INTRODUCTION

The importance, ideological influence and political clout of the *Tablighi Jamaat* (henceforth TJ) in Bangladesh was ironically felt, when Islamic clerics and scholars in Bangladesh voiced strong opinions on the Saudi ban on the TJ last December (2021). The Saudi authorities dubbed the TJ as “one of the gates to terrorism” and “danger to society”,² which had evoked strong reactions in Bangladesh. Mahmudul Hasan, Chairman of *Al-Hayatul Ulaya Lil-Jami’atil Qawmia* and President of *Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh* described the aforesaid Saudi decision as a “shock” to Muslims in Bangladesh, and stated that this would benefit the people “who oppose Islam around the world”.³ It is imperative to mention herewith that this “ultraorthodox”⁴ organisation (the TJ) has been a potent ideological and political force in this South Asian country in the last half a century since the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971. The TJ has been instrumental in nurturing, spreading and promoting “revivalist Islam”⁵ in Bangladesh besides having direct or indirect links with jihadi organisations. It is against this backdrop, this paper highlights the role and contribution of the TJ in spreading its ideological and political tentacles across Bangladesh. This paper, which is mostly based on secondary source materials in English language, is divided into two sections. Firstly, the paper deals with the genesis of the TJ as a transnational religious extremist organisation, and secondly, it dilates upon its spread,

influence and popularity in Bangladesh, and linkage with jihadi and terrorist organisations in the country.

EVOLUTION OF THE TJ AS A TRANSNATIONAL RADICAL ORGANISATION

The TJ is a transnational radical extremist organisation with solid footprints in more than 150 countries across four continents (Asia, Africa, America and Europe) of the world with 70 to 80 million active members. Since its creation in 1927 by Mohammad Ilyas Kandhlawi till date, it has been able to mobilise active followers from different ethnicities and nationalities. Its international headquarter is situated at Banglewale mosque in Nizamuddin (Delhi), known as 'world market',⁶ which acts as "a regional and even global point of reference and authority,"⁷ After consolidating its position in the Indian subcontinent, the TJ became a transnational force immediately after the World War II, when it was first introduced to the outside world between 1940s and 1960s, i.e. Britain (1946), the United States (1952) and France (1962).⁸ Now it has spread its wings across the globe.

The TJ's ideological, political and radical activities across the world have become possible because of huge monetary donations and contributions from wealthy patrons, non-government institutions, traders and governments (Saudi Arabia) to establish, run and manage its mosques and *madrassas*, even though it claims that its activities are sponsored by *khuruj* (self financing). The *World Muslim League*, a Saudi organization, donates generously to the TJ exchequer and covers the transportation costs for thousands of Tablighis. It had earlier contributed substantially in monetary terms to build the Tablighi mosque in Dewsbury (England) in 1978, which is the TJ headquarters in Europe. It is reported that several Wahhabi organisations pay salaries to Tablighi cadres in Africa.⁹ Former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's father, Mian Mohammad Sharif, had donated huge amount of money to the TJ activities in Pakistan.¹⁰ In addition, the TJ is not averse to membership in other religious organisations, which fetches enormous financial resources, especially to arrange funding for unemployed young Tablighis' visit to India and Pakistan.¹¹ The *Ijtima*

or annual gathering, being organised by the TJ since 1967, is the other source of amassing enormous wealth for TJ's transnational activities.¹² Raiwind (Pakistan), Bhopal (India) and Tongi (Bangladesh) are the venues, where Tablighis all across the globe gather every year for *Ijtema*.

THE TJ AND POLITICS

The TJ claim to have disinterest in politics is mere eyewash. As a scholar opines, there have been "definite political overtones" to the TJ¹³ and its strategic goals are connected precisely with politics and power. For example, the TJ imposes its demands, claiming that the decisions made on the *mashfar* (meeting) are distributed to supporters and defenders of TJ around the world, where they are locally customized by the leaders of TJ.¹⁴ It is important to bring out the arguments of one Indian scholar (Yoginder Sikand), a Bangladeshi scholar (Bulbul Siddiqi) and two Western scholars (Alexiev and Barbara Metcalf) with regard to the TJ's claims to be non-political or apolitical. Sikand argues that the TJ does have a "political vision" and its views on politics have changed over time. He states that the TJ adopted various political roles in order to survive and expand. To Sikand, one of the political implications of the TJ is that many notable leaders of Islamic militant groups had their initial exposure in the TJ.¹⁵ Siddiqi argues that the TJ has a "long-term vision to establish Islamic rules in every sphere of the society" by transforming individual to a dedicated Tablighi.¹⁶ Alexiev claims that the TJ has "more involvement and aspiration in politics", than in religion.¹⁷ According to Metcalf, the TJ never hesitates to utilise governmental assistance to secure permits for buildings and meetings, as well as visas for travel. Barbara analyses that due to the exigencies and opportunities presented by state recognition, the TJ seems to have adopted a higher institutional profile in the West than the status it enjoys in South Asia.¹⁸

Whatever said and done, it is a matter of fact that the TJ has been wielding considerable influence amongst powerful institutions of the state and prominent politicians across countries, especially in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh).¹⁹ In pre- and post-independence India, the TJ

could be able to garner the support of Muslim leaders such as former President of India Dr Zakir Hussain, Maulana Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, President All India Congress Committee Dr Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari, founder of All India *Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen* Navab Bahadur Yar Jung, founder of *Jamaat-e-Islami* Maulana Abul Hasan Madudi, Sheikhul Islam, Maulana Muhammad Hussain, Dr Mohammad Iqbal, Sheikh Abdullah, Mirwaiz Yousuf Shah, President of *Muslim League* Muhammad Ismail and Muslim thinker Maulana Wahiduddin Khan.²⁰

Furthermore, political fluidity has made the TJ prone to manipulation by the state as well as by mainstream political parties, both secular and religious. Pakistani President General Ayub Khan had pitted the Tablighis against the *Jamaat-e-Islami*.²¹ With Pakistani President General Zia-ul-Haq's patronage, the Tablighis spread influence in Pakistan.²² In the 1980s, the Tablighis visited Pakistan Military Academy to indoctrinate and convert the officers to its own brand of Islam.²³ Further, during Pakistan's general elections in 2002, the TJ supported *Muthaida Majlis-e-Amal*, the alliance of Islamist parties. Former Pakistani presidents, Farooq Ahmad Legari and Mohammed Rafiq Tarar have also been members and supporters of TJ.²⁴ Former chief Minister of Pakistan's Punjab province, Pervez Ilahi gave 75 canal of land to the TJ in 2011 to open its headquarters in Raiwind.²⁵ Former Pak Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif had visited the TJ *markaz* at Raiwind during his second tenure (1996-99) and further on 24 November 2018 to condole the death of TJ chief, Haji Abdul Wahab. The TJ's nexus with Pakistan's political establishment is so strong that when recently Saudi Arabia banned the TJ, the Punjab provincial Assembly adopted a resolution on 21 December 2021 in support of the TJ against the Saudi act. The same day Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's Special Representative on Religious harmony met the Saudi Ambassador to Pakistan and briefed him about the TJ's activities.²⁶

Besides, the TJ has extended its reach to powerful bureaucrats, diplomats, defence personnel and cricketers. Prominent Pakistani ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) heads such as General Javed Nasir and General Mehmood Ahmed, General Muzaffar Husain Usmani, former Deputy Chief of Army Staff, cricketers (Shahid Afridi, Mohammad Yusuf, Saqlain

Mustaq, Inzamam-ul Haque, Mustaq Ahmed, Saeed Anwar, Waqar Yunus etc.) have been associated with the TJ.²⁷ Abdullah Gul (son of late Lt General Hameed Gul, who was known for his contacts with jihadis in Pakistan and Afghanistan) criticized the media for blaming the TJ as the carrier of Covid-19 virus in Pakistan.²⁸ The political influence of the TJ in Bangladesh is discussed in detail in this paper later.

FUNDAMENTALIST AND JIHADIST AGENDA

Some academics and scholars have thrown light on the TJ's direct or indirect link with radical, fundamentalist and jihadist elements across the world. For instance, Oliver Roy describes the TJ as a "neofundamentalist" or unstructured movement that establishes a relation to the fundamentals of Islam.²⁹ Yoginder Sikand's argument that the TJ providing a "fertile ground" for many Islamist movements to grow³⁰ is corroborated from the fact that the TJ gets tremendous support and sympathy from radical Islamist organisations like *Jamaat-e-Islami* (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and *Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islami* (Pakistan) in its efforts to preach radical Deobandi-Wahhabi-Salafist jihadist ideology,³¹ which many global terrorists like Al Qaeda and Taliban share and follow.³² Marc Gaborieau explains how jihad has been the warp and weft of the TJ's agenda. Firstly, the TJ has connection with the Deobandis, who advocate jihad through violent means. Secondly, the first book of Maulana Maududi (1903-1979) on Jihad, which marked the birth of Muslim fundamentalism, appeared first in a Deobandi journal in 1927, the birth year of TJ, and has been a source of inspiration of the TJ for its direct or indirect involvement in jihadi activities. Thirdly, the view of Mohammad Ilyas on jihad, which has profoundly affected the hearts and minds of Tablighis, states: "the travel (for Tabligh) has the same characteristics as the raids (*ghazwat*) (in jihad), and therefore, we hope to earn the same reward. Even though it does not constitute "physical fighting with weapons" (*qital*), it is still a branch of jihad. It is lower than *qital* in some respects, yet it is higher in certain respect."³³

It must be remembered that the TJ has its roots in the Deobandi

tradition, which stems from the fact that the founder of the TJ, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas had studied in *Dar-ul Ulum* (Deoband) in early 1920s,³⁴ which was established in 1867 by some Wahabi-inspired *Ulemas* (clerics). It is noteworthy to mention here that the Deobandis managed to act covertly and professed in the name of “Islamic reformation” that worked well with the new generations of Muslims and resulted in mushrooming of *madrassas* across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh,³⁵ and other parts of the globe.

The TJ’s fundamentalist ideology has enticed many disillusioned and disgruntled Muslim youth into the world of jihadism. For example, at the TJ’s behest, Pakistan based terrorist organisation, *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami* (HuJI) recruited many young Muslims for jihad during gatherings at Raiwind. HuJI’s founder Qari Saifullah Akhter and Fazal ur Rehman Khalil were former TJ members. International terrorist like Masood Azhar has reportedly travelled extensively in East Africa (Sudan, Somalia and Kenya) to help build TJ network there.³⁶ Pakistan based and sponsored terror outfits like *Harkatul Ansar*, *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami*, (HuJI), *Harkat-ul Mujahideen*, *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, *Jihad bi al-Saif*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* have been associated with the TJ somehow or other. *Harkat ul Mujahideen* and the TJ even make up a truly international network of jihadis, and *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen* and *Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shari-at-i-Muhammadi* (TNSM) maintain a close link with the TJ.³⁷ Further, the TJ’s militant offshoot, Taxila (Pakistan)-based *Jihad bi al-Saif* (Jihad through the Sword), had hatched conspiracy to overthrow Benazir Bhutto because of her abhorrence towards the TJ.³⁸ According to an Indian scholar, hundreds of Uyghurs from China’s Xinjiang were sponsored by the TJ for jihadi training at the Islamic University (Islamabad) and Syed Maududi International Institute (Lahore).³⁹

In addition, those who joined militant jihad in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries have unleashed terror attacks in their home countries after being brainwashed by the TJ. It is reported that among the Indians who have gone to wage jihad on behalf of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, some 17 had links with the TJ.⁴⁰ The ISIS sponsored online English magazine, the *Voice of Hind*, brought out its special 17-page lockdown

edition hailing the TJ Chief Muhammad Saad and calling upon Muslims to become Covid-19 virus carriers in order to spread it and kill *kuffars* (non-believers).⁴¹

In North Africa, the TJ's activities involved the formation of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. A section of Moroccan Tablighis are under investigation for their link with terrorist organisation *At-Takfir wal-Hijrah*. Another Tablighi has been convicted for masterminding the Casablanca terrorist bombings of 2003. Investigation is also on to probe the links between the Moroccan cells and the murder of Theo van Gogh (Dutch filmmaker in Netherlands in 2004). In May 2017, more than 100 militants entered into the Philippines and used the TJ's *johor* (an international and local gathering) as cover to sneak out Isnilon Hapilon, a top ISIS terrorist in Southeast Asia.⁴²

A Brussels-based think tank, South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) summarises the TJ's violent extremist and terrorist activities in Western world in a report published in 2020. According to the report, the TJ not only serves as a "springboard" for terrorists and the "operational headquarters for terrorist cells", but also "a nursery for indoctrinating Islamist terrorists" as well as a "de facto conduit" for terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda to recruit new members. According to the report, some 50,000 TJ cadres are active in USA operating through Tablighi mosques in California, Texas and New York. The report has found out direct or indirect complicity of Tablighis in the Portland Seven (October 2002) and Lackawanna Six attacks (September 2002) in the US, and the plot to bomb airliners en route from London to the United States (August 2006). Further, the 'shoe bomber' Richard Reid, the 'dirty bomber' Jose Padilla, and Lyman Harris, who sought to bomb the Brooklyn Bridge were associated with the TJ, the report adds. Two perpetrators of San Bernadino massacre (December 2015) had paid their obeisance at the local TJ mosque. Similarly, the report jots down the grave concern European countries express over the activities of the TJ in Europe. Some terrorists are initially trained by the TJ and then transited through the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movements to wreak havoc in Europe. The TJ too has a strong presence in the United Kingdom. Its cadres were involved in London underground

bombings (7 July 2005) and attempted bombings in London and Glasgow, Scotland (July 2007). The 7/7 London attackers, Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shahzad Tanweer, had prayed at the TJ's Dewsbury mosque before the attacks. Similarly, Spanish security had found out 14 suspects (12 Pakistanis, an Indian and a Bangladeshi) of the TJ for planning to attack vital installations in the country. Further, three leading members of the TJ were found to be the masterminds of Madrid train bombings (March 2004). In Germany, the TJ was first mentioned in 2004 as a potential threat. German Administrative Court (VG) Ansbach's (State of Bavaria/Bayern) rulings on 9 and 18 May 2005 states: "TJ not only supports terrorism, but also endangers the liberal democratic basic order and security of Germany. It also serves as a recruitment base for violent Islamist groups and jihadist networks."⁴³

On account of religious extremist activities, the TJ is banned in Russia, prohibited in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), hounded out in Europe and US and kept under watch in India. The next section analyses as to how the TJ has been popularising its activities in Bangladesh through various means, especially by organising the *Biswa Ijtima*, making a significant mark in the political circles by establishing strong rapport with Bangladeshi politicians, and radicalising the Bangladeshi society by means of its nefarious designs.

THE TJ IN BANGLADESH

The growth and popularity of the TJ in Bangladesh has been most spectacular. Bangladesh is one of the four major centres of Tablighi activities in the past few years, the others being India, Pakistan and England.⁴⁴ The Kakrail Mosque in Dhaka is the headquarter of the TJ Bangladesh. It is the only Islamic organisation that cuts across socio-economic class barriers. For instance, the TJ has attracted a number of people from the higher echelon of Bangladesh politics to the lower strata of the society. President, Prime Ministers, cabinet ministers, political and religious leaders, senior military officers (both serving and retired), high profile civil servants, ex-

diplomats, engineers, doctors, professionals, and para-professionals, students, teachers, farmers, day labourers etc. are directly or indirectly involved in the TJ activities. It is popular among the educated classes in the urban areas, has strong presence in universities, especially engineering and medical colleges and universities of Bangladesh. What is more interesting is that under the ideological influence of the TJ, a significant number of new age and newly mobile women, including university students, love to use the veil as their religious identity. This is a new development and was previously less popular or not popular at all in Bangladeshi culture. *Char Sathir Dal* or Group of Four Companions (GFC) has emerged as an alternative Tablighi group that has been entrusted with the spread of Tablighi agenda and propaganda in Bangladesh's educational institutions.⁴⁵ The profound influence, the TJ does have on the university campuses is clearly visible on the young and impressionable minds.

THE BISWA IJTEMA

The TJ in Bangladesh is popular among the Tablighis across the world because of its role and contribution to successfully organising the annual gathering known as the *Biswa Ijtema* since its inception in 1967. The *Biswa Ijtema* is held every year in two phases along the Turag river in Tongi area of Gazipur district, where millions of Muslims from across the globe assemble. The two phase *Ijtema* began in the year 2011 on account of the huge participation of Tablighis. This gathering is considered as the second largest congregation of the Muslim world after Haj. The whole program gets wide media coverage – TV talk shows arrange special discussions, and social media platforms are full of features on the TJ.

However, the *Biswa Ijtema* has been criticised as a “cover provided by default to those Muslims, who have a more lethal agenda.”⁴⁶ Besides, congregations of such nature and intensity are potential sources of amassing enormous wealth for TJ's transnational activities.⁴⁷ For example, during the *Biswa ijtema*, a number of garment factories, book publishers and producers of daily commodities not only make temporary stalls to sell

their products, but also reportedly pay \$590 to \$1,180 to local landlords for every stall.⁴⁸ It is believed that the TJ demands and receives a huge sum from the local organisers as well to fund its activities.

POTENT FORCE IN BANGLADESHI POLITICS

This is an incontrovertible fact that the TJ wields considerable political clout in Bangladesh. The popularity of the TJ amongst various sections of Bangladeshi society has made itself a force to reckon with in this South Asian nation. After Bangladesh was created and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was made the Prime Minister, the TJ's influence in Bangladesh society came to light when most of the "Islam oriented people", who did not like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, joined the TJ.⁴⁹ Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the military regime led by Zia-ur-Rahman too understood the importance of TJ for Bangladesh politics. During his reformation process, political Islam got a major boost in Bangladesh and the Islamist political parties that were banned in the years after Bangladeshi independence joined the political mainstream in 1979. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who ruled over the country for nearly a decade from 1982 to 1990, declared Islam as the state religion in 1988. In the past three decades or so, Bangladesh's two main political parties, *Awami League* and the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP), have made alliance with the Islamic groups and parties to remain in power. This state of affairs provided the golden opportunity to a radical organisation like the TJ to nourish its sinister designs.

The TJ has directly benefited from the process of Islamisation in Bangladesh. It has left no stone unturned to exacerbate significantly the radicalisation of Bangladeshi society. A couple of examples can be given herewith to substantiate the aforesaid argument. Firstly, *Jamaat-e-Islami* leader Ghulam Azam began his ideological and radical journey with the TJ before joining his own organisation.⁵⁰ Secondly, the leader of *Islami Andolan Bangladesh* (Islami Movement Bangladesh), who is also a Sufi leader, regards the TJ as an important force in contemporary Islamic movement with strong political implication. *Islami Andolon* has invited

many Tablighis to take part in its political activities on many occasions.⁵¹

Furthermore, the presence of high profile political leaders at the TJ-sponsored *Biswa Ijtema* speaks volumes about its influence cutting across political parties in the country. All presidents and prime ministers of Bangladesh have made a point of being seen (or reported in the press) attending the *Biswa ijtema*.⁵² Former Bangladeshi President Iajuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia used to take part and deliver inaugural address at the *Biswa Ijtema*.⁵³ Present Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, along with her family members and relatives, had taken part in the *Akheri Munajat* (final prayers) of the first phase of 53rd *Biswa Ijtema* (January 2018) from her official residence Ganobhaban. *Awami League* Presidium Member Advocate Sahara Khatun, Joint General Secretary Dr Dipu Moni, Principal Secretary, secretaries of various departments (Agriculture, Military and Press), and officials and employees of the Prime Minister's Office and Ganobhaban were present at that point of time.⁵⁴ State Minister for Religious Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah offered Friday prayers at the *Biswa Ijtema* in February 2019.⁵⁵

The TJ's political influence is so much that a powerful minister of Hasina cabinet (Abdul Lateef) was removed from the ministry as well as from all *Awami League* responsibilities in 2014 for his comments against the TJ's *Biswa Ijtema*.⁵⁶ Analysing the popularity and political influence of the TJ, one scholar pointed out that "the Tablighis in Bangladesh are other groups who think beyond borders, and putting politics most often in parentheses they first build individuals and institutions, which over time may exert a more lasting political influence."⁵⁷

LINKAGE WITH JIHADIS AND TERRORISTS

The TJ has been instrumental in the rise and growth of radical, fundamentalist and terrorist organisations in Bangladesh, such as *Jamatul Mujahiden Bangladesh* (JMB), *Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami* (HuJI), *Hizbut Tahrir*, *Al Bayinaat* and *Hefazat-e-Islam*.⁵⁸ Intelligence agencies report about the JMB militants in Bangladesh joining the TJ in large numbers after being hounded out by the security forces.⁵⁹ As reported, the TJ has been a source

of recruitment for the female unit of the JMB.⁶⁰ HuJI was responsible for the attack on an American cultural center in 2002, as well as the assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina Wajed in 2004.⁶¹

This section focuses on the TJ and *Hefazat-e-Islam* bonhomie, which is a well known fact in Bangladesh because of their adherence to Deobandi ideology. In this context, the observations made by Bulbul Siddiqi are interesting. The TJ not only supports the *Kawmi madrassa* of Deobandi tradition ideologically, but also considers the principal cleric of the Hefazat as their informal religious leader. Influential and rich followers of the TJ always patronize and support the *Kawmi madrassa*. The TJ also has specific instruction to attract graduates and students of *Kawmi madrassa* as dedicated followers. Furthermore, in 2013, the TJ supported “Dhaka Blockade”, a mass demonstration by *Hefazat-e-Islam*. It was led by a Deoband trained cleric, Ahmad Shafi. Nearly 500,000 followers were gathered together at the Motijheel, in Dhaka. Many Tablighis supported *Hefazat-e-Islam* by their presence, active participation, and distribution of food and drinks during the demonstration. The government was forced to officially recognise *Kawmi madrassa*’s long awaited demand of its Dawra-e-Hadith Degree as equivalent to Master’s Degree.⁶² It is important to note here that the TJ supported *Kawmi madrassa* was dubbed by Sunni Islamist organisation *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammata* as “root of all militancy” in Bangladesh. *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammata* also demanded the government to monitor activities of the Tablighis.⁶³ The TJ Bangladesh’s influence among the Tablighis grew like anything in January 2017, when hundreds of members of the TJ’s Bangladesh chapter and some *Kawmi madrassa* clerics staged a demonstration near Dhaka Airport against Maulana Muhammad Saad Al Kandhalvi, the leader the TJ faction in India and prevented him to take part in the *Biswa Ijtema*.⁶⁴

TABLIGHIS FROM BANGLADESHI AND THEIR GLOBAL OUTREACH

Tablighis from Bangladesh have not only made a significant mark in their homeland, but also extended their influence abroad. Few examples

corroborate the above mentioned argument. For example, there is a large and active Tablighi population in Britain, who have strong links with Tablighi communities in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.⁶⁵ Many Kyrgyz families have sent their children to Islamic schools in Bangladesh, where the TJ is strongest, because privately funded religious schools in Bangladesh are not monitored by any government regulatory body. At least 55 young Kyrgyz students are now enrolled at the Tablighi's Kakrail Markaz madrassah.⁶⁶ The TJ Bangladesh's influence in Southeast Asia stems from the fact that in 1990, the Tablighis in southern Thailand secured a large plot of land in Jala town, which would later serve as the foundation for the Markaz Besar Tablighi Masjid al-Nur. Most interestingly, the design of the mosque was done by Haji Abdul Mukif, one of the best engineers of Bangladesh. Furthermore, in June 1974, a Tablighi delegation from Bangladesh while conducting a *khuruj* across Malaysia and Southeast Asia met Dr. Murshid Ali, a Malaysian citizen from Punjab, who later became the main propagator of the TJ ideology in Malaysia.⁶⁷ On 19 January 2015, Spain police during raid in a mosque in Barcelona, arrested 14 terrorists, who were linked to the TJ and one of them was a Bangladeshi.⁶⁸

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

The rise and growth of the TJ in India's immediate neighbourhood, particularly in Bangladesh and Pakistan, is matter of grave concern. Multiple reports claim that Tablighis from Pakistan meet and interact with the Tablighis from India in different places of Bangladesh, where they work in close coordination with anti-India forces such as *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Tablighis from Pakistan enter India through Bangladesh nowadays,⁶⁹ who are apprehended of carrying out anti-India agendas. Besides, Bangladeshi terrorist organisation *Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) has not only spread rapidly in the Indian province of Assam, but also organizes "capsule courses" under the cover of the TJ.⁷⁰ In West Bengal's Joygram, where the TJ's presence has rapidly grown in recent years, the imams in local mosques are Deobandi, the local *madrassas* follow the Deobandi curriculum, and the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind*, a Deobandi organization of

Islamic scholars, frequently organizes gatherings, including sermons. The implications of the growing presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Joygram, a Muslim-majority village in rural West Bengal, India, are huge.⁷¹ It is reported that the TJ in Bangladesh, in connivance with *Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh* (JIB), *Hefazat-e-Islam* (HeI) and *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) provides the most convenient platform for spreading religious extremism, anti-Hindu, anti-India sentiment and jihadism. These Islamist political forces are eyeing the 2023 general elections in Bangladesh and want *Tablighi Jamaat* activities to enhance vote banks.⁷²

CONCLUSION

It is found from the above analysis that the *Tablighi Jamaat* has been a force in Bangladesh to reckon with and has spread its ideological tentacles in this South Asian country. Because of its popularity among various sections of Bangladeshi society (including young women), cordial relations and influential rapport with the country's political and military dispensations, decade-old pleasantries shared with radical and fundamentalist ideological entities, and most importantly, linkages with transnational terrorist organisations, the TJ has proved its indispensability in this South Asian nation. However, the exponential growth in TJ's covert designs is a challenge to Bangladeshi society as well as its South Asian neighbours like India. Time has come for Bangladesh, India and the international community to work out combined strategies to tackle the menace of extremism and terrorism propounded and spread by transnational radical organisations like the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

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REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH: THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SECURITY

DEBASISH NANDY AND DEBTANU MAJEE

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Bangladesh is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention of 1951. Due to this, there are no official compulsions with regard to taking responsibility for the refugees. However, the Sheikh Hasina government hosted and provided political shelter to the Rohingya refugees. The Government of Bangladesh has shown different attitude and treatment towards two different refugee groups in Bangladesh- Bihari and Rohingya. The Bihari refugees had settled down before the liberation of Bangladesh, and are unwanted refugees. The Rohingya refugees settled in Bangladesh very recently. In treating these two refugee groups, Bangladesh follows different outlooks. This section analyses the reasons behind the changing perceptions of refugee treatment by the Bangladesh government and delineates the issue of human security in treating refugees in Bangladesh.

The word refugee is acquired from the French word *se refugia* meaning-seeking shelter. This term became a part of the English language when Huguenots requested shelter in the UK during the 17th century. During that time the persons fleeing the persecution in Catholic France were received by the UK as refugees. Refugees had no legal basis at that time. It was only in 1951 when the UN Convention relating to the status of refugees was adopted, that they got recognition legally. The UN 1951

Convention mentioned a refugee as a person who “ is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”¹ In addition to this Convention, a protocol was also adopted in 1967, to determine the status of the refugees. The protocol defined a refugee as, “Every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality.”² So, it is clear from the above definitions that a refugee is a person who has no state. They have been compelled to run away from their country due to war, violence, conflict or persecution. As a result, they move to another country for safety. But when they arrive in a new country they are without jobs, houses, family, or sufficient food, and are often deprived of necessities of life. In such a situation they find it difficult to live a life with freedom, choice, and dignity. According to UNHCR, there are about 26 million refugees around the world and half of them are below eighteen years of age.³ More than one million people are without nationality and they do not have access to basic human rights like education, health care facilities, employment, and freedom of movement.⁴ This shows that the refugees’ lives are constantly marked by human insecurities.

Kofi Annan, the former secretary-general of the United Nations regarded human security as not only the absence of violent conflict, rather it is also concerned about good governance, access to education, health care, and human rights. He also emphasized that to protect human security each individual must have opportunities and choices to fulfil his or her own potential. He believed that every step in this direction is also a step towards eradication of poverty, ensuring economic growth, and preventing conflict. According to him, the interrelated building blocks of human and national security are freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment.⁵ This paper investigates the humanitarian aspect of refugees in Bangladesh. It also throws light on the capacity of the government of

Bangladesh in ensuring the human security of refugees. The content analysis method has been used in this study.

CONTEXTUALIZING REFUGEE AND HUMAN SECURITY IN BANGLADESH

Identifying refugees and migrants is necessary for ensuring the rights of refugees and migrants, but often the states conflate the notions 'refugees', 'migrants', 'stateless', 'intruders', and 'outsiders'. This section focuses on the dilemma of identifying refugees and migrants and the necessity of clarity on such a dilemma. On one hand, a person becomes a refugee when he has fear of persecution or the need to flee from an armed conflict. The situation of refugees is so perilous and intolerable in their birthplace that they are driven or forced by the state authority to flee from there and cross national borders to seek safety in nearby states or countries. So, there is little chance of returning to their homeland. UNHCR and other organizations clearly recognize these people as 'refugees' for whom returning home becomes dangerous and who need shelter and protection in other countries. Alternatively, migrants usually choose to move for different purposes such as betterment of livelihood or improved education, treatment, or social position. There is no such threat to migrants' lives in their birth state or any impediment to their return. Unlike the refugees, they receive protection from their own governments whenever they choose to return to their countries.

Amartya Sen and Sadako Ogare are of the opinion that human security is about protecting fundamental freedoms. They have advocated human security as the protection of the people from critical and pervasive threats and situations. Both of them emphasized developing political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural stems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood, and dignity.⁶

In the *Human Development Report* of the UNDP published in 1994, human security is defined as a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a

concern with weapons-it is a concern with human life and dignity.⁷ It is indicated from the above definitions of human security that human development, dignity, human rights, eradication of poverty, health, food, environmental and political security of the individuals cannot be undermined to ensure human security. In this context, it is observed that the refugees are excluded from the process of development, and they are deprived of their dignity as human beings. Besides, the absence of economic, food, health, and political security endangers human security. Among the refugees, the worst sufferers are the women and children. The refugee women become the victims of human trafficking, and forced prostitution. Most of the refugee children are unable to safeguard their human security conditions as they are deprived of education, employment opportunities, and necessities of life. It is to be noted that both state and non-state actors are responsible for escalating the refugee crisis and endangering human security of the refugees. In the case of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, it is observed that they were forced to run away from Myanmar due to the repressive action of the state.

In the post-cold war scenario, the repressive actions of the state on its citizens turned the state from a protector to the destroyer of human life and dignity. Previously the concept of security was defined narrowly and was concerned with only state's security defined in terms of military power. But once the state itself became the perpetrator of violence, there was a growing demand for human security. In this context, it is pertinent to advocate that a strong government can ensure state security but human security can be safeguarded only when there is good governance. The crisis of human security is identified as one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Problems related to human security are highly complex and they cannot be addressed by a particular state or organization. Comprehensive planning, and cooperation among the governments, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and regional organizations are required to overcome the crisis of human security. For example, if we consider the refugee problem as a crisis of human security, it is observed that there are many actors (governments of refugee receiving and origin country, the government of the country providing citizenship

to the refugees, UNHCR and NGOs assisting the refugees) involved in resolving the problem and ensuring human security for the refugees. Thus, the refugee problem cannot be resolved by a particular state or organization, only a network of actors working in collaboration can end the plight of the refugees and ensure their human security. The next section examines the Bihari and the Rohingya refugees in some detail.

BIHARI REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

One of the darkest incidents of the sub-continent is the 'Great Bihari Killing' in October-November 1947. After the partition, communal violence took place across West Pakistan, East Pakistan, and India. This communal violence resulted in a large-scale Bihari Muslim killing in East Pakistan. Around one million refugees went to East Pakistan after independence from different provinces of East India in 1947. It was estimated that 95.9% of these refugee people had settled in East Pakistan from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. Although Pakistan was successful in gaining its independence as a theocratic State, it had problems with the national integration of an ethnically plural society. The partition of India immediately posed numerous complexities. The refugee issue was one of them. In East Pakistan, due to the refugee influx, a conflict began between the 'insider' and 'outsider'. The acceptance of Bihari refugees in East Pakistan was denied by the Bengali people.⁸ The cultural identity issue became a major concern in East Pakistan. The majority of Bengali indigenous people had no ethnic, linguistic, or cultural affinity with the Bihari community and societal adaptation was not achieved by the Bihari refugees in East Pakistan. Many of them used to hide their original identity to gain entry into various occupations. The Biharis had been treated differently in East Pakistan which resulted in social isolation.

The migrated Biharis had acquired the nationality of Pakistan as a part of resettlement. The Pakistan administration had given them importance in the public sector and considered them Muhajir. A positive discriminatory policy was followed by the Pakistani government towards the Bihari community. A large number of Hindu landlords, businessmen,

professionals, and government employees migrated from East Pakistan to India between 1947 and 1951. There was persecution and illegal acquisition of Hindu properties in East Pakistan. The Bengali Muslims and Bihari Muslims had jointly acquired their positions in the job sector. The Bengali-speaking Muslim people of East Pakistan did not consider the Urdu-speaking Biharis as minorities. Jinnah had announced in March 1948 at Dhaka that Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan. He also announced that those who opposed Urdu as the State language should be considered an enemy of Pakistan. Despite their class and cultural differences, Biharis in East Pakistan were patronized by the West Pakistani ruling elite. The Pakistan government considered the Bengali Muslims as 'semi-Hindus, pro-Indian, and disloyal to Pakistan'.⁹ The Bihari refugees in East Pakistan had established a close relationship with the West Pakistani bureaucrats and political leaders. They firmly believed that their prosperity and existence strongly depended upon the goodwill of West Pakistani ruling elites.

When the West Pakistani leaders realized that the East Pakistani people would not be supportive of them, they tried to mobilize the half-educated or illiterate, poorer, working-class sections of the Biharis against the Bengali neighbors. The poor Bihari mill-workers at Dhaka, Narayanganj, Khulna, and Chittagong participated in anti-Bengali communal riots to please their Pakistani masters in the 1950s and 1960s. The Bengali nationalism was roused during the parliamentary elections in December 1970, where most of the Biharis had supported the pro-Pakistan *Muslim League*. The Bengali nationalists did not relax but initiated systematic attacks on Biharis, mainly in Dhaka and Chittagong. They were also being persecuted and tortured in several districts. Until March-April 1971, the Pakistan Army was unable to control the situation. For three months, between December and March 1971, the Biharis of East Pakistan were subject to systematic persecution. Thousands of Biharis were brutally killed as a result of ethnic cleansing on the part of Bengalis.¹⁰ In many parts, Biharis were burnt alive or hacked to death by Bengali marauders. In early March 1971, many Biharis were killed at Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur, and Saidpur. Bihari women and girls were raped by Bengali murderers, and even children did not escape the massacre.

Since the independence of Bangladesh, the socio-economic conditions of the Urdu-speaking Muslim minority and stranded Pakistanis have not improved. They have no citizenship and have continued to be stateless for more than 45 years. Between 1974 and 1992 around 175,000 Biharis had been repatriated to Pakistan. Currently, Bihari Muslims are living in 66 camps in Dhaka and 13 other districts across the country.¹¹ These Biharis are the classic instance of stateless people whose rights are not protected by the bureaucratic state structures of either Pakistan or Bangladesh. Both Bangladesh and Pakistan are very reluctant to grant them citizenship.¹² In 1982, they were given a new name: 'stranded Pakistanis' or 'non-Bangladeshis', by the International Convention on Biharis, held in Geneva.¹³ The Bihari Muslim community is now commonly recognized as internally displaced people as well as a minority in Bangladesh.¹⁴

However, the legal recognition of Biharis as the citizens of Bangladesh is completed, and now they are expecting their social and economic rights as the citizens of Bangladesh.¹⁵ The Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2008 in a verdict has said that children of Bihari refugees who have been born and brought up in the refugee camps are to be given the citizenship of Bangladesh. The verdict of the Supreme Court, however, could not affect any significant changes in their livelihoods. Now, more than 250,000 Bihari people live in the urban Bihari camps.¹⁶ The unwanted refugee people in Bangladesh are still economically vulnerable and educationally backward. The rate of literacy is very poor. After 2010, a good number of the Bihari people received the National Identity Card (NID). Now the government of Bangladesh is inspiring the Bihari children to pursue education. At present, a low percentage of Biharis are going to colleges and universities. Several international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh are offering opportunities to the Bihari children and youths.

ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

Currently, Bangladesh has one of the highest influxes of refugees though

it is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Since 2017, a large number of Rohingya refugees have entered Bangladesh through the South-eastern part of Bangladesh, crossing the Naf river. The Rohingya people are the persecuted Muslim community in the world. Over the last few years, due to an increase in the degree of persecution, the Rohingya people have been compelled to leave Myanmar and have taken shelter in many countries. They are originally inhabitants of the Rakhine province of Myanmar which is geographically very close to the Chittagong province of Bangladesh, therefore they preferred to flee to Bangladesh. Initially, the Government of Bangladesh welcomed the Rohingya refugees on humanitarian grounds. Currently, more than 1.1 million Rohingyas are living in various crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh. For the past four decades, Bangladesh has provided safe accommodation for the Rohingyas. The first Rohingya refugee influx in Bangladesh occurred in 1978 when around 200,000 Rohingya people entered Bangladesh to flee the atrocities of the Myanmar government. In early 1990s, roughly a quarter-million refugees arrived in Bangladesh following the wave of abuses unleashed by the Myanmar military forces. Initially, the Rohingya had enjoyed citizenship rights under the citizenship law of 1948, but Nevin's citizenship law of 1982 deprived Rohingyas of all fundamental rights of the country. Because of the 1982 citizenship law, Rohingya national identity cards were rescinded, and they are no longer considered legal documents.¹⁷

Regarding the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, in 2017, the then Chief of UN Commission for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein stated that "it seems a text book example of ethnic cleansing". This continues to loom large in Myanmar politics and has created one of the world's largest refugee problems. The role of Suu Kyi has been highly criticized by the global community due to her silence, and her indirect support of radical Buddhist nationalism.¹⁸ In Myanmar politics, the popularity of Suu Kyi remains strong, although she has recently been arrested during a military coup, which is currently the subject of many protests. The Nobel peace prize winner and Burmese politician sided with the Barmar community, which constitutes 70% of the total population of the country. Due to majoritarian-led pogrom on the minority Rohingyas, strong allegations

were raised against Suu Kyi's government. The allegations of genocide were made at the International Court of Justice in 2019. Despite living for a long time in Rakhine province, and other provinces, the Barmar community considers the Rohingya illegal migrants. The radical Buddhist nationalism took a violent path, denying communal harmony and ethnic pluralism. This attitude of the radical section of the society has been implemented by the government through the policy of exclusion. In terms of human security, the Rohingya case is the worst example in modern world history. In contrast to Myanmar government's attitude, Bangladesh has received the Rohingya refugees, mainly due to religious consideration.

After August 2017, the number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh increased rapidly when Myanmar's security forces started a military operation in response to attacks by *Arakan Rohingya Salvation*. After this incident, the atrocities of the government agencies gained momentum and within a few months around 750,000 Rohingyas were forced to leave Rakhine province, taking shelter in the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh. Around 600,000 Rohingyas came to live in the Kutupalong camp, the largest refugee settlement camp in the world. Initially, political leaders, NGOs, and local volunteers took generous steps toward Rohingya refugees based on Islamic sentiment and values. Their Muslim identity gave an advantage to the Rohingya refugees in getting special treatment. They received humanitarian assistance from the local people, often as 'Zakat', an obligatory charity, one of the five pillars of Islam. Voluntary charity played a crucial role in motivating local people and leaders to offer emergency humanitarian assistance to the Muslim Rohingya refugees. The religious leaders of Bangladesh have also used this perception to encourage donations to the refugees. The Rohingya people received special sympathy and consideration from the government of Bangladesh also.

In 2019, during her address to the UNO, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina mentioned humanitarianism in Islam to explain her policy. She shared her perception of Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh., making it clear that due to their Islamic faith, and identity the Rohingya people had been persecuted by the Myanmar administration, and the majority Buddhist community. Sheikh Hasina played the religious

card due to the compulsion of domestic politics. With a large number of Rohingya Muslims, a small number of Hindu and Christian Rohingyas also fled to Bangladesh. All these three groups received emergency assistance and shelter. On 27th September 2019, during her address to the 74th Session of the General Assembly of the UNO, Sheikh Hasina also talked about the painful experience of the Bengali people. During war time, millions of East Pakistani Bengali people took shelter in India to escape the persecution of West Pakistani forces. So, the government of Bangladesh received the persecuted Rohingya refugees beyond its capacity only on humanitarian grounds. Since 2017, Bangladesh has submitted three proposals to the General Assembly of the UNO to give special attention to the Rohingya issue. Sheikh Hasina wanted to draw the attention of the UNO, and the international community to resolve the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Officially, the Rohingya do not have the right to legal protection in Bangladesh. For a lower-income, and highly populated country like Bangladesh it is quite difficult to arrange the rehabilitation of a large-scale refugee influx. The government of Myanmar is unwilling to take back the refugees despite international criticism. The initiatives of Bangladesh to repatriate Rohingya refugees to their country remain unsuccessful. The Myanmar government has not made any commitment. Currently, the leaders of Bangladesh have expressed their concern about the negative impact of the Rohingya displacement crisis on the country. There have been constant conflicts between the local Bangladeshi people in Cox's Bazar and the refugees. The security forces in Cox's Bazar have killed dozens of Rohingyas. Due to the illegal activities of the refugees, the number of extrajudicial killings have been increasing.

In April 2019, the Crisis Group recommended observing the process of law and order. Due to the increase of violence and crimes in Rohingya refugee camps, the regular surveillance of police force is needed to stop criminal networks in camps. The gradual degradation of law and order in refugee concentrated areas puts political pressure on the government. Restrictive measures were taken by the administration on the free-roaming of refugees. Due to the tightened enforcement of travel restrictions on

refugees, they cannot now freely move anywhere. Finally, the government has also replaced local officials in the camps known to be sympathetic to refugees, including the refugee relief and repatriation coordinators, who were regarded highly by humanitarian partners.

The policy makers of the government have understood the hard reality of the Rohingya crisis. It is a difficult task for the Government of Bangladesh to arrange houses for all displaced Rohingya people in a particular area. To decentralize Rohingya's presence in Bangladesh and consider the long-term reality, uninhabited Bhasan Char (an island in the Bay of Bengal) has been used to control overcrowding camps.

Sheikh Hasina government has allocated a budget to create the necessary infrastructure and protection to construct shelters for the Rohingya people. The cyclone-prone island will be prepared for the Rohingyas not only to reduce current crowding but also for security reasons. The Rohingya people have no affinity with the language, culture, or sentiment of local Bangladeshi people, therefore, to avoid conflict, the government has taken this wise decision. This island will be able to provide the facility for 100,000 refugees. The relocated refugees will get better services, security, and livelihood opportunities than in their earlier camps. This new place will be beneficial for those who are involved in agriculture and fishing.

The Rohingya community is not only financially vulnerable but also educationally backward. Most of them were deprived of formal education facilities in Myanmar. They realized that education can empower their children's future and have realized the need for education for their older children as well. The eagerness for higher education for their children is increasing gradually and Rohingya leaders are also arguing for informal education programs. Now their children are accessing education through *madrassas* in which religious and mainstream education are being taught equally.

In October 2020, the UNHCR inaugurated the expansion of medical services in association with Sadar Hospital of Cox's Bazar, and the Government of Bangladesh for the treatment of Rohingya COVID-19 patients. The attitude of local administration of Bangladesh towards the

Rohingya refugees' health care is cooperative. The Bangladesh government has taken many initiatives toward refugees according to its capacity and has also taken joint initiatives in coordination with the UNHCR. The government has implemented a generous and humanitarian policy regarding the Rohingya refugees. The first health care initiative was initiated with the establishment of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and the High Dependency Unit (HDU) in June 2020. This medical-care facility would be provided both for the refugees and local Bangladeshi communities. It is a positive sign that the UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh are jointly responding to the treatment of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar district.

CAPACITY OF THE GOVERNMENT IN ENSURING THE HUMAN SECURITY OF REFUGEES

Due to the geographical compulsion and humanitarian outlook of the government, Bangladesh has given shelter to the refugees. Despite having financial and social-political constraints, Bangladesh has allowed the Bihari refugees to stay in Dhaka and some other places and also has received Rohingya refugees. But the overwhelming number of Rohingya refugees has put huge pressure on Bangladesh. Officially, Bangladesh is not responsible for receiving refugees and taking care of them, as it is not the signatory of the Refugee Convention of 1951. However, some issues have prominently surfaced in handling and taking care of refugees. There has been criticism in ensuring human security for refugees in Bangladesh, which are as follows—

- (1) Due to financial constraints, the rights of refugees from a human rights perspective have been questioned.
- (2) Women in Rohingya refugee camps are being oppressed physically, mentally, and economically.
- (3) Healthcare for refugees provided by the government of Bangladesh is not adequate. Women's health situation is alarming.
- (4) Low and irregular wage of the refugees in Bangladesh poses a threat to ensuring human security. Rohingya people who are living

in the camps are not up to the mark.

- (5) Both Bihari and Rohingya refugees are not familiar with the Bengali language. Due to linguistic and cultural differences, they have not been well accepted in society and the working sector as well.
- (6) The refugee child's health and child education are vulnerable. Due to the lack of quality of life, women, and girls, are looking for better lives. Some initiatives have been taken by UNICEF and the government of Bangladesh in association with local NGOs. Some collaborative works are being done by the humanitarian education providers in the Rohingya camps of Cox Bazar.
- (7) Despite living for a long time, the Bihari refugees are still stateless. They have no citizenship. The citizenship rights for the stateless are more than a dream. However, some refugees have been given citizenship cards.¹⁹
- (8) The refugee women and girls are being trapped by the traffickers that forced them into early marriage, sexual violence, forced laborers, and the sex trade.
- (9) The Rohingya refugees have built shelters on 6,164 acres of land which are within reserve forests that resulted from environmental degradation. Due to the Rohingya influx, the host communities' forests and lands are damaged.
- (10) The government of Bangladesh is no more in a position to receive refugees from Myanmar. Some Rohingya refugees are also involved in criminal activities that break law and order. Against this backdrop, the socio-political pressure has been created against the government to push back Rohingyas to Myanmar. In 2016 and onwards, the Bangladesh Border Guards detained and forcibly returned hundreds of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. This violation of the principle of non-refoulment principles of international law on refugees. This is also a violation of human rights also.²⁰

The researchers have visited Cox's Bazar area and the Muhammad area of Dhaka to evaluate the situation of Rohingya and Bihari refugees.

No one was ready to give any formal interview. The local people were also not interested to give their opinion regarding the human security of the refugees. So, the researchers followed the content analysis method to investigate the human security of these refugee groups in Bangladesh. The Bengali people term Biharis as 'Standard Pakistani' or 'Bihari Refugee'. Currently, about 400,000 Bihari refugees are living in 116 different camps in Bangladesh. In Dhaka city, there are about 100,000 Bihari refugees who are living in 45 different camps.²¹ The Geneva camp is the biggest one.

It is observed that the freedom of movement of the Rohingya refugees in the camps is restricted as the authorities fear they will be attacked by the locals or they may indulge in activities that can threaten the national security of the country. The conditions of refugee camps are poor. Refugees in Bangladesh believe that they are not provided with adequate housing facilities. Furthermore, they have limited access to health facilities and the lack of hygiene in the camps has endangered their health security. The World Food Programme has pointed out that eighty-six percent of the Rohingya refugees are highly vulnerable to poverty and hunger. In terms of personal security, the refugees in Bangladesh are also not safe.²² They may be harmed by the locals at any time as they consider the refugees a threat to their human security. Besides, the influx of refugees is always hampering ecological security. As the population increases due to the arrival of the refugees, it creates an adverse impact on the natural environment. More population causes more pollution. As stateless persons, they are hardly entitled to any political rights. Furthermore, they are victims of human rights violations. Therefore, political insecurity haunts the refugees from the moment they are repressed by the government of their origin country.

Human security is an amalgamation of seven types of security. It should not be understood in an isolated manner. Thus, the government of Bangladesh must safeguard all the seven aspects of human security to ensure the development of refugees living in the country. Sensitizing the citizens about assisting the refugees can resolve the problems related to personal and community security. Increased communication between the citizens and the refugees will strengthen their relationship and this can be

a step towards building the necessary ambiance for fostering human security. Respect for the rule of law and human rights are also conducive to maintaining the human security of refugees.

However, a dangerous consequence of the refugee influx is that it can alter the demography of Bangladesh. It is observed that in Ukhiya and Teknaf, the locals have already been outnumbered by the Rohingya refugees. Although the Rohingya Muslims are regarded as 'Bengali' by Myanmar's government, they are different from the Bengali Muslims in terms of culture and language. The Bengali Muslims speak the Bengali language while the Rohingya Muslims speak the Rohingya or Ruaingga language. The Bengali Muslims are the majority group in Bangladesh and the Rohingyas are stateless people who are staying as refugees in Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar are facing double jeopardy. They are often involved in clashes with local people and also within other groups of Rohingya. Due to lack of resources and other facilities, Rohingya refugees are often involved in clashes among themselves. In October 2021, casualties occurred in a Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar to establish supremacy over an illegal drug business. In Cox's Bazar area there are some Rohingya groups that are involved in serious crimes. In that incident, about 7 Rohingya refugees were killed and 10 injured. They have been involved in smuggling also. Since 2017, Bangladesh has been receiving thousands of Rohingya refugees creating serious security implication. The potential criminal activities have gradually increased in the Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar. Due to the overburden in Cox's Bazar, the government of Bangladesh has relocated about 100,000 Rohingya refugees to the flood-prone, uninhabited island, Bhashan Char. This remote island is situated in the Southern part of Bangladesh which is isolated from the mainland and there are no minimum facilities for livelihood. The scarcity of food, shelters, and work has raised the question of human security.

Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country where usually the human rights of the religious minority are often challenged. However, both Bihari Urdu-speaking refugees of Bangladesh and Rohingya are Muslims. Now the question is why the human security of these two refugee groups has

been threatened in a Muslim majority country? The Bihari Muslims are ethno-linguistically different from the Bengali Muslims of Bangladesh. This group had migrated during partition and during the Pakistani regime, this group was so close to the Pakistani government and army. This group was against the liberation movement of Bangladesh. Therefore, this Bihari refugee community is considered as the enemy of sovereign Bangladesh. Since 1971, this community has not been socially accommodated and the government of Bangladesh is also not generous to them. The socially and economically backward Bihari-Muslim refugees of Bangladesh are facing human security challenges. The Rohingya refugees are also a different set of Muslims. Their culture and language are different from Bangladeshi Bengali Muslims. The Rohingya refugees have not been well accepted in Bengali society.

Many commentators have considered this as a threat to the human security of individuals and the majority community of the refugee receiving country. From a realistic angle, many have also questioned why the tax payers' money be utilized for the welfare of the refugees? At the end of the day, the refugees are foreigners. Based on the sons of the soil theory, the original inhabitants of the country are entitled to jobs, food, health care facilities, and deciding the politics of their country. In Bangladesh, it is observed that conflicts between the refugees and the citizens are erupting as the citizens have to share their land, jobs, and food with the refugees. It is a paradox that when we are trying to fix the human security crisis of the refugees, it is igniting the human insecurity of the citizens of the refugee receiving country. In the context of Bangladesh, the approach of citizens to the refugee problem is diametrically opposite to that of the government.

For Bangladesh, the rising population is a major problem to manage human security. The arrival of the Rohingyas in the country as refugees has questioned the economic, food, health, and environmental security of Bangladesh. It is observed that the Rohingyas are perceived as a strain on already overstretched state resources and as risks to national security.

With limited resources and space, accommodating the Rohingyas has become a major challenge for Bangladesh. The sharing of natural resources with the Rohingyas has angered the local population. It is to be

noted that land and water are scarce resources in Bangladesh and the Rohingya crisis is responsible for escalating the scarcity of these two resources. It is observed that for cooking purposes the Rohingyas are cutting trees from the forest. A study has revealed that the Rohingyas have damaged 3918 acres of natural and 1879 man-made forest coverage in the Ukhiya Upazila of Cox's Bazar. It is also evident from this study that the Rohingyas are responsible for the depletion of other natural resources like soil, surface and groundwater, and agricultural land. The local ecosystem is severely affected due to the influx of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar.²³ The Rohingyas have become a burden for Bangladesh economically. They are responsible for reducing the job opportunities of the locals. The wage pattern has also changed in Cox's Bazar area due to the Rohingya refugees, as the refugees are providing cheap labor services. The tourism industry of Bangladesh is also suffering a loss due to the Rohingya refugees. In the future, the food security of the country may be jeopardized due to the destruction of natural resources by the Rohingyas.

CONCLUSION

It is argued that human security of the refugees has to be emphasized at the policy level both by the government of Bangladesh as well as the UNHCR. The term needs to be understood in a broad sense and all the seven aspects of human security must be protected to promote the well-being of the refugees, however, difficult the circumstances may be. South Asia has witnessed a huge refugee flow across the national boundaries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal since 1947. The internal socio-political response to these flows is highly diverse in different countries. Bangladesh is one of the prominent refugees receiving countries of South Asia and it has no particular refugee policy to treat the refugee problem properly. The attitude of state authority and indigenous people toward the refugee groups are extensively varied. None of the refugee receiving countries of South Asia are signatories of the Refugee Convention of 1951. The refugee issue has also been politicized. The issue of human security raises several important questions. The refugee influx in South Asian

countries cannot be discussed from a single point of view; it is multifaceted and extremely complex. The issues of legality, security, and social adaptability have become crucial in refugee studies. Bangladesh must urgently formulate uniform refugee policies for all refugee groups to ensure social justice. The government of Bangladesh is in dilemma in dealing with refugees and ensuring human security for all of them.

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MIGRATION : AN IMPEDIMENT IN INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

MAITRAYEE GUHA

ABSTRACT

The year 2021 marked the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's Independence. It was on March 26, 1971, that the country got its independence from Pakistan. History is a proof of how partitions have caused trauma to people. Partitions have forced people to move away from their homelands to foreign lands. The reasons behind such movements are varied. People move in search of safety and security of life as well as better opportunities. The 'host country' is either considered safer than the homeland or is regarded as a land of opportunities. India, in South Asia, has been a common host country for many of these forced migrants.

This article gives a bird's eye view of one of the most talked about issues between India and Bangladesh, migration. The geopolitics of South Asia and thereby the history of the partition in the region clearly reminds us about the plight of the people. Ever since the partitions, the two countries have been a witness to this age-old phenomenon called migration. The question is whether migration has been and can still be considered to be an impediment in the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh.

The article has been divided into three segments. The first part is a historical overview of how migration began in the region. Second segment is about the difficulties in the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh over this issue. The article concludes by focussing on a very significant part of bilateral relation, which is on how, in spite of the hitches, the two countries have managed to overcome the obstacles. This has been possible only because of the prolific efforts of the leaders from both sides.

THE PARTITIONED PEOPLE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The partition of India in 1947 gave birth to a new nation called Pakistan. This division was carried out in the name of religious differences between the Hindus and Muslims living in India. The geopolitical dissection of India had been such that the position of Pakistan looked inexplicable on the map of the world. It was not a geographically contiguous state. West Pakistan lay at the western border of India while East Pakistan on its eastern side. This new nation was geographically structured in such a manner that there were bound to be administrative complications in future. That is exactly what happened twenty-three years after Pakistan's birth. East Pakistan and West Pakistan, unable to survive as one country ultimately became independent from each other in 1971.

As rightly said by the renowned Pakistani Historian Ayesha Jalal, partition is the central historical event of the twentieth century in South Asia. After the first partition in the region in 1947, hundreds of thousands of people crossed the newly created international borders. This unbearable act of having to move out of one's homeland was certainly a cause of concern for administration of the partitioned countries. The newly formed Indian Government, for example had a herculean task in front of it. The first task was to bring back normalcy and achieve some stability in the domestic sphere. The second task was to manage the refugee movement from both the eastern and the western flanks. The situation was complicated. There were people who wanted to stay in India even after partition but were unfortunately victims of artificially created boundaries. Their homes and hearth had fallen on the other side of the Indian borders. There were those who had expected to stay back in Pakistan, but because of their religious status, were scared to remain in that country. In order to understand the nuances of migrations during partition, one has to study the reasons behind them. Since partitions around the globe have always led to migrations, narratives on partition are also accompanied with narratives on migration.

The 1947 partition left behind scars that were never to be healed. William Dalrymple writes in an article in *The New Yorker*:

'In Punjab and Bengal—provinces abutting India's borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively—the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered.'¹

More than fifteen million people had been uprooted by that year. This process of movement continued for four years and has been referred to as being the largest and the most rapid migration in world history.²

Another widespread exodus during the second partition was from Bangladesh to India. It was that of the Bengali Hindus. During that period, around seven million Bengalis had crossed over from Bangladesh to West Bengal, Tripura and Assam.³ Refugee camps were constructed by the Indian authorities in order to provide shelter to this large population. The record of the Indian Government then, claimed that around nine million people (including non-Hindus) had entered the Indian territory as refugees.⁴

The leaders from the two neighbours, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and Indira Gandhi built a strong neighbourly relationship. Their speech together at Suhrawardy Udyan at Dhaka in front of 5 lakh people reflected how India was eager to carve out a cordial relation with this new neighbour. They signed the Indira-Mujib Friendship Treaty in 1972. It reflected India's intention to hold on to close bilateral ties between the two for the next 25 years. From Dhaka's end, cordiality was responded with cordiality and this was possible only because of the leadership of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was eager to establish within his country a strong sense of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as core values. These were incorporated in the Constitution in 1971. It was only after the assassination of Mujib, that the domestic and thereby the international relations of Dhaka changed.

MIGRATION: A THORN IN INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATION

There were significant changes in the relations between India and Bangladesh after the death of Banga Bandhu Mujibur Rahman. The

Constitution of Bangladesh underwent a number of changes through amendments under the military rulers post-Mujib's Government. All the military dictators in the country promised to build a constitutional government in order to have a corruption-free system, fair elections and proper administration.⁵ However, none kept their promise. Internal problems not only led to their failure to provide good governance but it also led to communalism. Population increase and lack of resources were some features of the society during the unstable caretaker governments. Bangladesh in fact, has faced huge space crisis ever since the days of its independence. Around 1,70,000 Biharis known as Stranded Pakistanis, had to be resettled in the country. This group of people had supported West Pakistan during the independence war of 1971, in spite of living on the eastern flank. However, they were not welcomed by Pakistan and had to be resettled in Bangladesh. Apart from these people, there was an inflow of migrants from Myanmar as early as 1978.⁶ These migrants also known as Rohingyas, were Muslims.⁷ They fled the country because of atrocities by the Government of Myanmar. Thereafter the political and economic atmosphere in Bangladesh deteriorated and the Government found it difficult to manage all these issues together. More and more people began to illegally move into Indian territory. Internal political dynamics was such that as a neighbouring country India too was apprehensive about the kind of relation the two neighbours would have in the coming years.

Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, a few changes were brought about in the Constitution of Bangladesh. In 2011, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh declared the fifth⁸ and eighth⁹ amendments to the Constitution null and void.¹⁰ It declared military rule in the country to be unconstitutional. Most notably, it restored the four basic principles or pillars of Bangladesh.¹¹ The position of the Constitution of 1972 was upheld. The four foundational principles of liberation, along with Article 12 (which talks of secularism) were restored. However, Article 2(b) was unchanged, which makes Islam the state religion.

It is necessary for a neighbouring country to study the character of the Government in the geographically adjacent countries. This aids in

understanding why people from that country migrate to the neighbouring country. An analysis of Bangladesh Government's activities and its internal condition shows that secularism had been partially restored. But had it been so why are people still fleeing in the name of religious atrocities? If it is not the minorities, who does the illegal group of migrants constitute?

One has to accept the fact that the resources of a country are limited in nature. When they become fewer in quantity because of excess usage by not only citizens but even outsiders, problems may arise. Similarly, history is witness of how outsiders have used the host country as a space to indulge in unlawful activities, such as insurgencies in North East India.¹² Problems there have been fanned by the outsiders living inside.¹³ It is, however, true that planning and implementation of any such activity can never be effectively executed without any support from the domestic front.

Myron Weiner, in an article writes about three categories of forced migrants, namely rejected people, political refugees from repressive regimes and unwanted migrants.¹⁴ Human beings tend to look at each type differently and create a self-analysis about each category. A refugee who is a migrant coming into a host country lawfully is viewed with some sympathy by the people of the host country. However, with undocumented migrants, it is difficult to even know whether they have assimilated with the general population unless they are caught. When it comes to this category of forced migrants, there is a sense of losing one's resources to an outsider. This differentiation in perception towards migrants has been evident in India. Refugees, who settled here after the partitions are now, part of our country. The undocumented migrants are, however, the ones who can be called Weiner's 'unwanted migrants'.

India and Bangladesh have witnessed ups and downs in their relation not only because of India's disagreement to share the Teesta waters, the contentious border issue, questions related to connectivity or China's involvement in various development projects, but also because of the continuous inflow of people from the other side of the border to India and the resultant constant denial by the Bangladeshi Governments. There have been times when Bangladesh has asked India to produce documentary proof of undocumented migration.¹⁵ In fact Bangladesh has been long

claiming that its economy has transformed so that it is impossible for the people of that country to migrate to India. They even claim that because of its economic upturn, there is now a flow of migrants from India to Bangladesh. It is true that the economy in Bangladesh has been on an upward movement since the last few years.¹⁶ The country is considered to be the second fastest growing economy in the world.¹⁷ What is intriguing is the fact that in spite of Bangladesh Government's claim of economic boom and equality for all minorities, why have people moved from that country to India during the course of its 50 years life span. In the initial years, the reason behind such movement was mainly partition, which automatically pointed towards the religious divide. However, that should have stopped once Bangladesh became a stable State. It is not just religious persecution but the availability of opportunities in India which has attracted many from the neighbouring country.

It must be mentioned here that migrants are not considered a burden in the host countries unless there is something deceitful about their actions. When migrants move in search of better opportunities, both the migrant as well as the host country accrue benefit. They may act either as cheap labour or bright brains for the former country. The labourers benefit by sending remittances back home. However, when the migrants are undocumented and the whole process is carried out in a clandestine manner, there are reasons for which the host country may respond differently.

Apart from the problems mentioned above, both these South Asian countries had to tolerate another consequence of partition. Partition in the region not only divided the people, but also led to division on the land, meaning geographical dissection. The crisis with regard to the enclaves is a result of geographical bifurcation. Although the leadership in both countries took a long time to respond to the issue of enclaves, they cautiously moved towards resolving this crisis. Around 51,000 stateless people from 162 enclaves lived in complete anarchy and lawlessness for years.¹⁸ Residents of the enclaves had been living without water, sanitation, schooling facilities, hospital facilities and even proper job facilities. There was no effective administration to look after these areas. Resolving this

issue was one of the very important tasks that was looked into by both sides.

It is this group of stateless people of the enclaves who understand the value of citizenship. Citizenship not only grants people the most important identity, but also carries certain basic rights, which if an individual is deprived of, can lead to complications. Citizenship, identity and a State are thus still very relevant for the peaceful existence of human lives. The more people are contemplating a borderless world, the borders are gaining more significance. In fact with globalisation, concepts of borders and migrations have perhaps been more critically analysed. Their significance has become even more visible.

Nevertheless, one has to remember the impact of migration on the geopolitics of a place and the role that migration plays in the structural transformation of a society. It has been found that the bordering districts of five Indian States with Bangladesh have a higher population growth rate.¹⁹ This has been a cause of worry for both the State Governments and the Centre in India. In 1992, Khaleda Zia, during her visit to India acknowledged the fact that illegal migration had been going on a daily basis from Bangladesh to India. Many of these migrants try to get naturally amalgamated into the local communities leading to growth in the Muslim population in all the bordering districts of West Bengal and this growth is quite alarming. The fertility rates are much higher among Muslims than in Hindus, but this sudden rise in population could only be attributed to illegal migration.²⁰ This has also been proved by the fact that during the Bangladeshi Census of 1981-91, there was a new phenomenon called the 'Missing Population' which was estimated to be around 8 million. This included 1.73 million Hindus. The 'Missing Population' referred to the difference in population data between UNDP and Bangladesh Government projections and the actual Bangladesh census of 1991.²¹ The changing demographic profile of a region is a situation demanding vigilance by the authorities. It is always important to find out the reasons behind any demographic change. The state of affairs becomes worse when this change is found to be a result of illegal immigration from a neighbouring region. In 2008, the Home Advisor under the then Caretaker Government

in Bangladesh also mentioned that every day at least fifty girls are lured in the border regions and sold off for a high amount. This increased forced prostitution and trafficking.²²

Bangladesh has also been reluctant to take back Bangladeshi inmates who have been living in correctional homes in Indian States. Many of their prison terms have already expired. They, however, have nowhere to go. In West Bengal's Beharmpore district there are a large number of these inmates living in Central Correctional Homes. These people have even confessed in the local courts about their infiltration and how they entered Indian territory. Administrative authorities in Bangladesh say that they would first have to get in touch with the families of these Bangladeshi inmates and then decide upon a course of action. The Indian authorities cannot push back such infiltrators unless they are directed to do so by the Union Government²³ India has till date handed over only around 577 Bangladeshi intruders. This has been carried out peacefully through mutual cooperation. The Bangladeshis were deported by the Border Security Force and handed over to their counter parts, the Border Guard Bangladesh.

A FRIEND NOT A FOE

History cannot be re-written. The pangs of partition of India shall remain for many more years to come. What can be re-written is the security of the bordering region of Eastern India which encompasses West Bengal and the North East. If the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh is such a critical matter, why did not India take any significant step to curb it? Why is the issue politicized and used as a vote bank phenomenon? Does this migration really cause any impact on the social, political and economic lives of the people in the East and the North East? Recent statistics show that undocumented migrants from Bangladesh have reached down south as well as the households of Delhi. The national capital Delhi acts as an economic hub for the unofficially estimated 300,000 undocumented Bangladeshis.²⁴ In Tamil Nadu there is hue and cry over the presence of a large number of Bangladeshi illegal migrants in different parts of the State.

They are considered a threat to national security.²⁵ Most of them pretend to be residents of West Bengal and possess Aadhaar cards in their names. They apply for jobs and other employments in industries within the State. However, there are still some migrants who do not have identity cards. The pandemic has been harsh on the illegal migrants. When the Indian migrants had to leave station during the closure of the industries, these Bangladeshis had nowhere to go.²⁶

Ethnic problems in the North East have emerged as a possible impact of the influx of outsiders. There are reports of many deaths in this border region. However, Governments in Bangladesh and India keep blaming each other for these deaths. No one is willing to take any responsibility. On the one hand, while we are dealing with State security and asking questions about the citizenship of a group of people, on the other, a certain group of people are always raising the issue of their human rights. This tussle between State security and human security is a matter of long-standing debate. It is also for us to decide what is important; whether it is the human rights of our very own Indian citizens, who often face difficulties for undocumented immigration, or whether it is the human rights of those who infiltrate (for being deprived of their rights in their own country) into Indian territory. Thus, it is this complex idiosyncrasy which ultimately leads to avoidance of any focus on migration from Bangladesh to India.

In one incident in December 2013 the Supreme Court of India served a notice to the Central government and the BSF asking them to give a fair trial of a BSF constable who was accused of gunning down a minor when she was crossing the India- Bangladesh border.²⁷The S.K.Sinha report of 1998 says,

‘Silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geo-strategically vital districts of Lower Assam. The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made’.

There is a lot of worry regarding the Siliguri Corridor or the Chicken’s Neck region. This area is especially significant in terms of geopolitics. It links West Bengal and the rest of India with the North East. A large number

of migrants have come to this region and are now staying here as permanent residents.

As mentioned earlier, population increase in Bangladesh is also a cause of concern. The population density of Bangladesh was around 1,064 persons per square km in and around the year 2013 which is compared to 345 for India.²⁸ Two-thirds of the population was employed in agriculture. Space crunch in Bangladesh is a known factor in the issue of illegal migration, that was discussed at various levels. Two Foreign Secretaries of Bangladesh, Sadiq Khan and Abdul Momin in support of this population movement said,²⁹

“It is said that a borderless world has become the prime requisite for economic growth under the new world order....There is no reason why regional and international cooperation could not be worked out to plan and execute population movements and settlements to avoid critical demographic pressures in pockets of high concentration. There is no reason why under-populated regions in the developed world cannot make room for planned colonies to relive build-up of demographic disasters in countries like Bangladesh.”³⁰

One must also take note of how India has been dealing with this issue in the recent past. During the pre-election campaign of the General Elections of 2014, Narendra Modi as the Prime Ministerial candidate promised that the Hindu Bangladeshi migrants would be accommodated if his party won the vote.³¹ All those detention camps in the country which already accommodate Hindus would also be discarded, if his government came to power. He divided the migrant community of Bangladeshi migrants into two groups, namely that group which has been brought into Assam for vote bank politics (including smugglers) and another group which was genuinely tortured in Bangladesh. It is this second group that he was more concerned about. Assam, according to him, had not treated these migrants well. They have merely been used in vote bank politics. These Hindu migrants should have been considered to be permanent voters of India long back instead of being tagged as suspicious voters. Since both the Illegal Migrant Determination Tribunal (IMDT) 1983 and the Foreigner's Act of 1946 have failed in their designated tasks, the Indian Government under the BJP took a tough decision with regard to this issue.

The party in power at the Centre successfully passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December, 2019. According to the Act, Indian citizenship would be granted to those illegal migrants who have been in India on or before December 31, 2014. All Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Parsi and Jain illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan shall be eligible for citizenship under this Act.³² The fact that the Muslims have been left out of this group, clearly reflects the position taken by the BJP Government. India had been partitioned on the basis of religion. It is thus expected that they have already found their place in the region. During partition it was propagated that Muslims and Hindus would not be able to live together under one roof. Those Muslims who supported this view went out of India and those who believed in secularism stayed back. This means that apart from the Muslims (who had an exclusive home for themselves in the region), it is the other religious groups who are at a loss because of the partition, especially those Hindus who have been tortured in neighbouring countries. This group of people needed a citizenship guarantee from India. Critics, however, believe that dividing the migrants on the basis of religion is completely against the ideals propagated by the founders of the Indian Constitution.

Other policy formulation includes ideas given by various research institutions in India. According to ICRIER there should be a separate Department in the Government of India to deal with border management.³³ Apart from the central office at New Delhi, all the bordering states must also have a branch of the department. Border fencing is necessary but it is always not possible to have fences over water bodies. Patrolling becomes more important. Sincere patrolling with joint cooperation between Indian and Bangladeshi forces would benefit both sides. In order to prevent bribery, the BSF should be given enough economic perks and benefits which will prevent them from getting lured. The BSF should also be technologically well equipped.

Yet another way of dealing with undocumented migration would be to use the manpower that comes in illegally and bring benefit to the Indian economy. As already done, these migrants are used as cheap labour in small scale factories or service centres. A recent employment opportunity

comes from the nursing centres that have come up in large numbers in West Bengal. Many of the women who work here confess that they had crossed India-Bangladesh borders in the dark of the night, got hold of an agent to help them with fake identity cards and finally employment. However, the idea of work permits would be more beneficial as it would legalize the movement of these people.

India is now also home to a large population of Rohingyas. India follows a short-term policy now by granting visas. The country is not bound to follow the policy of non-refoulment as it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, the matter became complicated when in 2015 many of these refugees from Myanmar began to settle down in Jammu and Kashmir. The locals have started questioning the authorities about this settlement. They believe that it is only because of the religious status of the Rohingyas, that they get settled in the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

There have been some security issues posed by migrants. Some incidents of terrorism have been witnessed in many Indian States. In West Bengal there have been a few incidents of external involvement of migrants, which is becoming a cause of concern. On October 2, 2014, two people were killed and one injured in a bomb blast in Khagragarh, Burdwan in West Bengal.³⁴ The two people who were killed were identified as Shovan Mandal and Shakil Ahmad, while the injured was Abdul Halim. Two women, who were identified as the wives of those dead, were found in the house. It was suspected that these people belonged to a Bangladeshi militant organization, *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)*.³⁵ JMB in order to create a *sharia* state in Bangladesh has been visiting places in West Bengal which has *madararas*. It aims to form a cadre group (of hundred members) base in Malda, Murshidabad and Nadia districts in West Bengal. According to Indian Intelligence, JMB has been generating finance and recruiting cadres from these *madararas*. A pamphlet calling for Jihad was found in the house where the bomb blast occurred. Papers and compact discs supporting Al Qaida and Chechnya were also found.

Formerly the route of the terrorists entering India from the eastern side involved West Bengal. People believed it was because of this reason

that West Bengal was never made a target by the terrorist attacks. However, in more recent times, bomb blasts took place in Siliguri in 2008³⁶ and 2013³⁷ in North Bengal, which needs special attention as they involve India's critical security areas, the chicken's neck.³⁸ In July 2021, two people living in the Haridevpur area of South Kolkata were identified as members of JMB.³⁹ Najiur Rahman, Rabiul Islam and Sabir were carrying forged Indian documents. The police found that they were also carrying Bangladeshi identity documents. The three men staying in a rented house had informed the landlord that they were here on medical grounds. It must be mentioned here that India is home to many patients from the South Asian countries. People from neighbouring countries come to India to avail the dedicated and cheap medical facilities provided here. According to *Dhaka Tribune*, 54 percent of medical tourists to India are Bangladeshis. According to figures of India's Ministry of Tourism, medical tourists from Bangladesh have increased to 83 percent in the last three years (since 2018).⁴⁰ In such a state of affairs, if terrorists come to India in the name of being medical tourists, there is very little that can be done to prevent Indian government from taking stern measures against undocumented migration.

Nevertheless, there is an innate trust between the two countries which makes all such difficulties look like minor issues. The Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi's Bangladesh visit in June 2015 and signing of a Joint Declaration titled Notun Projonmo- Nayi Disha reflects Indian desire to cooperate and collaborate with Bangladesh on various issues. A 60-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed. Smruti Pattanaik of IDSA mentions five issues amongst this 60-point MoU and believes that these five issues not only stand out, they can also lead to greater future cooperation between the two countries of South Asia.⁴¹

One of them was significant for the migration issue, namely, 'Coordinated Border Management Plan.' Both countries have agreed to be cautious about areas that are vulnerable in terms of activities like smuggling, crimes and illegal movements. For this purpose, coordinated activities are required from both the Border Guards Bangladesh and the Border Security Force in India. People to People contact is an important aspect. Proposals included two new Indian Consulates in Khulna and

Sylhet for Bangladesh while a Bangladeshi Consulate in Guwahati for the Indians. The Bangladeshi Consulate at Guwahati has already started functioning. The one that exists in Agartala has been renovated. All this was necessary in order to popularize the Moitri Express which was losing its acceptance because of slow immigration process and increasing travel time. Hence in order to overcome these hurdles, a new international passenger terminal has been agreed upon. The Moitri Express would restart services from May 29, 2022 between Kolkata and Dhaka.⁴² The Bandhan Express train services would begin from the same date and run between Kolkata and Khulna. The Mitali Express train services between India and Bangladesh are all set to begin from June 1, 2022. This train service will run between New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal, India to Dhaka in Bangladesh. These services would greatly increase connectivity between the two countries. West Bengal would play one of the most important roles in bringing about a positive change in the connectivity relation between India and Bangladesh.

Even amid the Covid Pandemic, India and Bangladesh have held serious talks over various issues.⁴³ They held summit on virtual platform in December, 2020. Bangladesh has been special for India because of its close cultural ties. It is because of this that PM Modi's recent visit to Bangladesh on its 50 years of independence, has opened a Pandora of opportunities for furthering their friendship and bilateral ties. According to Dr. Sreeradha Datta of Vivekananda International Foundation, Prime Minister Modi's visit on the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence marked 50 years of Indo-Bangladesh's formal diplomatic ties.⁴⁴ It also marked the 100th year of India's friend Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was an icon of secularism.

In international relations, it is diplomacy which matters the most. Good diplomatic gestures and confidence building measures between the two can bring about significant positive developments in any relation. This is exactly what has been shown by the PM of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina. Mango diplomacy is a gesture of goodwill. In spite of all the criticism in Bangladesh over how the Government trusted India over vaccine supply but was denied because of the sudden rise of cases during

the second wave, the PM decided to send some of her favorite variety of mangoes to some dignitaries in India. Critics in Bangladesh also blamed Hasina for not being able to get the Agreement on Teesta water with India. As a reciprocal gesture India has decided to help Bangladesh to fight the third wave of Covid by sending 109 ambulances to Dhaka.⁴⁵ These goodwill gestures are what matters the most, because there are countries in South Asia which would not be happy over good relations between India and Bangladesh deteriorate. In fact there were many people in India who had expected negative reactions from Dhaka on the issue of CAA and the NRC. However, when Sheikh Hasina was asked about her opinion on the issue, she clearly stated that although it was not needed, this was a matter related to India's internal affairs. This reflects that nothing can be a dampener in the cordial and warm relationship between the two countries.

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RADICALIZATION IN BANGLADESH AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES

SREYA MAITRA

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has felt the pangs of its birth amidst violence and revolution to ascertain its linguistic distinctiveness and autonomy from Pakistan. But its political independence has not allowed its complete severance from projects of Islamization and witnessed an uncomfortable presence within the adopted principle of secularism, before turning into an incendiary under forces of radicalization with the unfolding of domestic politics and entrenchment of global terrorist networks. From its active role in the inception of the country to being the contiguous neighbour bearing the consequences of the volatile mix of religion and politics in Bangladesh, Indian diplomacy has negotiated diplomatic bounds while being directly affected by the developments in Bangladesh's domestic politics. The present paper examines the roots and contours of this trend of radicalization in Bangladesh and its current implications for India.

Keywords: Bangladesh, India, Radicalization, Islamization, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The ebbing of secular tendencies and the deepening of Islamization since the days of the military government in the 1970s in Bangladesh following the death of its founder and leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman have pushed the country to the precipice of religious radicalization and 'unholy' political nexus with global terrorist networks. As contiguous states torn through the vivisections of dual political partitions, the course of relations between India and Bangladesh have always been tossed like a coin between opportunities and obstacles. They have multiple outstanding issues which

poke the very existence of people at stake (on both sides of the border) but at the same time, the ethnic and cultural affinities and imperatives of shared resources have bolstered bold political initiatives and pronouncements at regular intervals. At no point in history have relations reached a status-quo or comfortable equilibrium, which could translate into a static course in their respective foreign policies. Recognizing this volatility at its core, this paper examines the changing fabric of the state of Bangladesh from secularism to Islamization and inclusion of radical groups to reflect on how radicalization is affecting Indo-Bangladesh ties.

Radicalization in independent Bangladesh subsumes three facets, temporally strewn through the political history of the country. First, the rise of authoritarian tendencies to curb opposition to political reform programs under Mujibur Rahman. Second, the interference and involvement of Islamic elements in Bangladesh's mainstream politics through ideological infusions and subsequently participation in electoral contests. Finally, the establishment and entrenchment of radical, militant outfits which developed country-wide networks and even links with global terrorist networks. All three facets form the reality of today's Bangladesh. For India, while dynamics of internal politics remain out of diplomatic bounds, its foreign relations get severely affected by these developments directly and indirectly, tangibly as well as intangibly.

The paper is divided into the following segments. The first section surveys the contours of Islamization in Bangladesh and provide a brief overview of its political entrenchment. The second section explores when and how the Islamization project seemingly adopted the face of radicalization and began to affect political calculations in Bangladesh. The third section reviews the growth of radicalization and attempts a profiling of radical outfits in Bangladesh. The fourth section assesses the implications of radicalization for India-Bangladesh relations and offers concluding comments.

RECOGNIZING ISLAM IN POLITICAL IDENTITY OF THE STATE

Bangladesh was born out of a full-scale war that was fought not just to wrest sovereignty from the clutches of Pakistan's administrative control, but also build a new nation unified by principles of linguistic uniformity and secularism. Though many scholars have argued that the fragmentation of Pakistan was 'foretold'; given the geographical separation of about 1,000 miles as two wings flanked on either side of India, the ethnic and cultural differences, the resistance by Bengalis of the imposition of Urdu as the sole official language, the constant economic wrangling between the West and the East (Pakistan) for foreign aid, exports and imports which ultimately deepened economic disparity, and finally the arrogant dominance of the centralized West Pakistani ruling elites and the tightly run bureaucratic-military oligarchy that felt threatened by the political demands voiced by the Bengalis.¹ Yet, for the Bengali people who had been forced into the geographical-administrative niche of 'East Bengal' by the British in 1905 and then as the dependent but non-contiguous 'East Pakistan' in 1947, the struggle to consolidate their distinctive political identity around their ethnic sense of 'self' remained more complex, layered and dynamic than a few ostensible factors of contemporary times or history could contain. The significance of nationalist upsurge and demand for secession based on language seemed profound at that time and garnered the full-scale support of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government in India. Even though India and Pakistan had recently concluded the Tashkent agreement (1966) under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, having reached an understanding on their thorny Kashmir dispute, India found itself involved in a full-scale war with Pakistan over the Bangla cause. Not only that, rarely had the government and the people united in support of a cause like the Bangladeshi freedom movement during the Liberation war.² An important by-product of the complete focus on the rationale of secession as linguistic separation and India's staunch support was Bangladesh's easy embrace of secularism in its independent constitution in 1971.³ However, as inherent political and administrative

contradictions began to unfold in the post-freedom era, locating self-identity of the people in language and secularism fumbled. Historically, East Bengal had become a Muslim-majority province since the partition of 1905.⁴ Independent Bangladesh remained a Muslim dominant state where the principles of secularism began to seem forced after a point, and ornamental even later. As Datta and Srinivasan summarize the pulls to Islamization experienced in Bangladesh at this juncture:

“Apart from the devastation of the war, there were the effects of a deadly cyclone in 1970, 10 million refugees, massive internal displacement, famine, and Mujibur Rahman’s impetuous maladministration. India supplied food, clothing, medicines, building material, and all manner of consumer items, but no amount of assistance was enough. Having seceded from Pakistan, Bengali nationalism lost traction and the focus returned to religion. Despite Mujib’s secular commitment, Islam emerged as the primary national identity of Bangladesh and dependence on countries like Saudi Arabia, whose aid policies are usually linked to Islamic causes, provided further endorsement.”⁵

While Mujibur Rahman’s government jostled with these multi-fold challenges which fundamentally required economic reconstruction, buoyant administrative infrastructure and law and order, his plans of bringing about a ‘second revolution’ through socialist programmes largely met with opposition from the radical wings of his own party, the *Awami League* and other smaller leftist parties. Mujib’s reforms, especially his nationalization program were projected as ‘bourgeoisie’ which not only rendered his regime unpopular, but also instigated political unrest, chaos and deteriorating security situation. Problems such as the failure to deliver economic success, to check the deterioration of law and order, to address rampant corruption, and to deal with the excesses of party members, decreased the popular appeal of the regime within a very short time. In the face of growing economic and political crises, especially the growth of the opposition and the waning of ideological hegemony, the regime drifted toward coercive measures rather than making efforts to co-opt the opposition and combat the underlying reasons for the crises.⁶

Beginning with the establishment of the paramilitary force called *Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini* in 1972, Mujib’s subsequent political moves have been characterized as authoritarian and ambitious to gain total power⁷ which

further gave way to the rise of factional and dissenting political elements in Bangladesh. On December 28, 1974, the Mujib government declared an emergency, suspended fundamental human rights including freedom of speech, freedom of association, and limited the power of the High Court. The ostensible rationale was to tackle political instability and threats of anti-liberation elements. On January 25, 1975, Mujib randomly amended the constitution to provide for a presidential form of government. The change authorized the President to form one “National Party” and suspended the activities of all political groups that refused to join the “new” national party.⁸ The amendment also limited the power of the High Court by establishing control over the judiciary and brought all private newspapers under government. This drastically reconfigured the distribution of power, undermined the role of parliament as an institution of democratic checks and balances, and sidelined the politicians as the voice of the “people.”⁹ By the time Mujib and his family were brutally assassinated on the fateful morning of 15th August 1975, the stage was set for a military takeover in Bangladesh. Thus, authoritarian tactics encouraging radicalization of politics set the plank for the incremental Islamization of politics and subsequent radicalization of Islam in Bangladesh. Today, the radical elements are securitizing religion and Islam for fomenting terror and garnering global gains. Account by ace journalist Hiranmay Karlekar also points out that the move by Rahman to proclaim a general amnesty on 30th November 1973 which led to the release of all those convicted after the War of independence, paved the way for the Islamic, Pakistan-leaning ‘collaborators’ to return to Bangladesh’s political life. Radicals like Golam Azam who had fled to Saudi Arabia and were actively rebuilding the *Jamaat*, began their surreptitious engagement on the ground during this time.¹⁰

At the throes of such deep-rooted political turmoil, the nascent nation required a galvanizing force for remaining together. The iron hand of the military government under General Zia-ur-Rahman, his push towards Islamization and the thrust on Islamic ideology as the commonality binding the people provided just that. Mujib’s immediate successor, Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed, who was a senior member of the *Awami League* but

known for his Islamic and pro-Pakistan leanings, began to conclude his speeches with Bangladesh Zindabad (long live Bangladesh, but “zindabad” is a Persian word rather than the war cry of the liberation struggle, “Joi Bangla” (both words being Bengali). This soon became common practice in government announcements and radio broadcasts.¹¹ However, two things must be borne in mind at this juncture. First, the Islamization project undertaken at this time in Bangladesh was not akin to the radicalization witnessed in the subsequent decades. Bangladesh merely launched itself on the path of becoming a theocratic state. Hence, Islamization and radicalization must be examined distinctly given the context and unfolding of historical and political developments. Second, India had extended its more than friendly arms to provide unstinting material and moral support to Bangladesh, even being the first to grant recognition to the new nation. In 1972, the two signed a “Treaty of Friendship and Peace” for a term of 25 years, declaring that both sides would respect their mutual independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while refraining from interfering in each other’s internal affairs.¹² However, the veering towards Islamization now fissured these tendencies. In fact, Islam became a key difference between the two states, determining the future course of their interactions. India’s attempt to emphasize its common ethnic and cultural affinities with Bangladesh backfired as this supposedly threatened to dilute the status of hard-earned Bangladeshi national identity. Much like other states in South Asia, Bangladesh also started resenting India’s overwhelming regional presence, and India eventually became one of the central issues around which domestic politics in Bangladesh revolved.¹³ Bangladesh started ‘balancing’ against Indian preponderance in the region.¹⁴ India–Bangladesh relations deteriorated after the assassination of Mujib, and while India was accused of insensitivity, intolerance and highhandedness, Bangladesh frequently displayed ultra-sensitivity, suspicion, and mistrust on many issues.¹⁵

FROM ISLAMIZATION TO RADICALIZATION IN BANGLADESH

General Zia-ur-Rahman's controversial political tenure ranged from being the deputy Army Chief of Staff who instigated a coup against Mujibur Rehman to a President since April 1977 who re-established democracy and held free and fair elections in Bangladesh but permanently altered the Constitution by removing the principle of secularism. Further, having founded the *Bangladesh National Party* (BNP), President Zia fundamentally altered the course of Bangladesh's politics introducing a lasting, key player which continued to uphold the trend of religious dogmatism and entrench the Islamic ideology as the binding force of identity of the people. Mostafa and Subedi even contend that the high political ambition of establishing a one-party system from the Mujib government era can be found in the authoritarian politics of the BAL after 2014.¹⁶

In 1977, Zia dropped secularism as one of the four cornerstones of the Constitution. He made recitation of verses from the Quran a regular practice at the meetings with the newly formed BNP.¹⁷ He apparently believed that a massive section of the population was suffering from an identity crisis, both religious and as a people, with a limited sense of sovereignty. To remedy this, he began the Islamization of Bangladesh and took the following measures. First, he inserted the salutation in the Preamble, "Bismillahir-Rahmaanir-Rahim". Second, in Articles 8(1) and 8 (1A), the statement 'Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' were added, replacing the socialist commitment to secularism. Third, socialism was redefined as economic and social justice. In Article 25 (2), Rahman introduced the principle that the state shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity. Fourthly, he introduced Islamic religious education as a compulsory subject for Muslim school children. Fifthly, Rahman lifted the ban on communal parties and associations which had been imposed by Mujib's regime. Finally, he amended the Constitution to change the nationality of the people from 'Bengali' to 'Bangladeshi'.¹⁸ Thus, Bengali became an ethnic identity whereas Bangladeshi as a national identity with

allegiance to a sovereign nation excluding the non-Muslim minorities, particularly the Hindu community. Lintner observes that following the military takeover by Major General Zia, a new era of Bengali nationalism was ushered, where the religious and ethnic minorities had little or no place. A shift in foreign policy was also noticeable. Unlike the first regime which was close to India and the Soviet Union (for its socialist leanings) Zia's government steered Bangladesh closer to Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), became active in Bangladesh again, working closely with its local counterpart, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Pakistan was determined to regain its influence over its former eastern part and, especially, to keep Indian influence there to an absolute minimum. Zia's policies, including allowing the *Jamaat* to return, served these interests, and the Pakistanis, quite naturally, emphasized the main bond that united the two countries: Islam.¹⁹

General Hussain Muhammad Ershad who grabbed power in Bangladesh in 1982, declared Islam as the state religion. Ershad also changed the weekly holiday from Sunday to Friday, and revived the *Jamaat-e-Islami* to counter secular opposition. The *Jamaat* had supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders had fled to (West) Pakistan after 1971. While under Zia, they had come back and brought with them new fundamentalist ideas, under Ershad, Islam became a political factor to be reckoned with.²⁰ A decade back, a verdict by the Bangladesh Supreme Court declaring these amendments as void, has also reflected and summarized the spirit of these impositions in the following words.

“These changes were fundamental in nature and changed the very basis of our war for liberation and also defaced the Constitution altogether...they transformed a secular Bangladesh into a “theocratic state” and “betrayed one of the dominant causes for the war of liberation of Bangladesh.”²¹

Observing the role of *ulemas* in the increasing Islamization of politics in Bangladesh, Smruti Pattanaik points out that while before Zia's regime *ulema* politics had remained confined to regulation of *madrassas*, shaping the attitude of the government towards religion and preservation of Islam,

after 1975, *ulema* politics in Bangladesh actively entered electoral contests. As Zia lifted the ban on religious political parties, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JeI) participated in the 1979 elections as part of Islamic Democratic League and won six seats. The declaration of Islam as state religion activated some *ulemas* under the *Islami Shasonotantra Andolan*. At this stage, therefore, the religious parties started to enter the race for political power and the volatile mixing of politics and religion started.²²

The 1980s happened to be the last decade of military rule in Bangladesh but it was enough time for radical, militant outfits to gain strength on the soil. Bangladeshi militants joined wars in Libya, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to fight and defend the *Ummah*. The *Muslim Millat Bahini* (MMB), the first militant organization in Bangladesh, surfaced in 1986 under the leadership of Major Matiur Rahman. Its members had connections to transnational groups. Tracing the roots of the entry of organized radical and militant outfits in Bangladesh politics, it is claimed that the Afghan *jihād* provided critical opportunities for Bangladeshi militants to meet and forge common ground. The key organizers of *Harkat-ul-Jihad Al Islami Bangladesh* (HuJIB) and many other militant activists came to know each other through their participation in the Afghan War (Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). This facilitated the development of an eventual organizational structure for the emergent militant organizations. While the process began when a small volunteer corps joined the war in 1984, Bangladeshi militant groups began taking organizational shape much later, after 1992.²³ The *Harkat-ul-Jihad Al Islami Bangladesh* (HuJIB) was formed in 1989, the *Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) in 1998, and the *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMJB) in 1998 came to be best known for their countrywide network, the ferocity of their terrorist attacks and the number of their activists. JMB received attention from the world media in 2005 when it exploded 459 bombs simultaneously in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts.²⁴ Also, since 1978, Bangladesh has hosted Rohingya Muslims, and presently, half a million Rohingya refugees and illegal immigrants are residing in Bangladesh. Both IS and Al Qaeda have constantly used the Rohingya issue to advance their propaganda.²⁵

While a detailed account of the militant outfits is beyond the scope of

this paper, it must be pointed out that as Bangladesh returned to periodic elections and parliamentary democracy in the 1990s, it could not dispel the presence of these radical elements anymore. Though the Sufi tradition within Islam and the secularist Bengali culture kept Bangladesh insulated from the growing forces of fundamentalism in other countries, the political developments in the 1990s firmly placed the country on the path of militancy.²⁶ A direct repercussion was felt in India-Bangladesh relations as their porous borders and shared 'Bengali' identity of the people complicated both passive indifference and active interference.

NEW FACES OF RADICALISM AMIDST THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY

The decade of the 1990s was particularly interesting in terms of the string of political developments witnessed in Bangladesh. There were three landmark events: intense public discontent, popular movements and a united opposition proffered by all political parties compelled President Ershad to resign. The regime collapsed on 4th December 1990. A unique transitional arrangement was devised by the opposition alliances as a constitutional way out from the military regime of General Ershad, which culminated in the BNP winning the parliamentary elections in February 1991. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia announced the reintroduction of the parliamentary system in Bangladesh (twelfth amendment to the Constitution) to which all parties unanimously agreed. Thus, third decade of the nation's political history began when a civilian government headed by Khaleda Zia took power through a free and fair election and era of representative democracy was ushered in. However, it must be noted in this same election, the *Jammat-e-Islami*, which had been gaining ground throughout the 1980s, emerged as the third largest party, gaining eighteen seats and more than twelve per cent of the votes. With its avowedly dogmatic vision of creating an Islamic state based on the *shari'a* law, it encouraged the entry of religious parties into politics. In fact, the tenure of Khaleda Zia's leadership till 1998 witnessed the rise of Islamist militancy as a serious threat to peace and order and a gradual assault on the

democratic future of the country.²⁷ While the scope of the present paper does not merit a detailed account of the sequence of political events in Bangladesh, two outcomes remain significant. First, the country launched itself into a *de facto* bi-party system alternating between the BAL and BNP, and both parties being bitter and politically virulent when in opposition.²⁸ Religious parties played a key role during power shifts as allies and forged links mainly for calculated political gains and not merely to promote any ideology.²⁹ As Shamsul Islam observes, courting the support of the Islamist parties in order to achieve state power became a new political game. Both the main political parties attempted to form alliances with the Islamist parties whenever they lacked an absolute majority in the parliament. Also, the two parties routinely resorted to extra-parliamentary tactics like demonstrations, strikes and political chicanery to undermine the ability of the other to govern.³⁰ *Hartals* as the tactic used by political parties steadily increased since 1990, and many of them were violent causing deaths of innocent members of public. Apart from electoral violence, attacks against minorities particularly against Hindus, Buddhists and ethnic minorities such as the Chakmas with political objectives and Ahmeddiyas were rampant.³¹ Thus, there were deliberate attempts to polarize voters and criminalization of politics set in.³² Acrimonious relations between the two parties deteriorated further since 1993.³³ Hagerty observes that rampant corruption and institutional decay created a widening socio-political vacuum into which Islamists nimbly stepped in.³⁴ Thus, the ground was fertile for the entrenchment of radical trends and this is exactly what happened. But it assumed multiple facets and manifestations; first, there was the inclusion of radical, right-wing parties in politics, contesting elections, thereby gaining legal and constitutional legitimacy. As Datta observes, following the electoral victory of the BNP in October 2001, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, two religious parties, namely *Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote* (IOJ) became part of the government. Having fought the election jointly, these parties began to wield significant influence in the direction of policy. While the BNP could have secured a simple majority on its own, its pre-election alliance with *Jamaat-e-Islami* was instrumental in the four-party coalition securing a two-thirds majority

in the *Jatiya Sangsad*. The portfolios allotted to its two ministers, namely Social Welfare and Agriculture, endowed *Jamaat-e-Islami* with greater visibility and gave it access to the rural population, its natural constituency.³⁵ In the recently concluded 2018 national elections, two significant manifestations of the continued radicalization of politics were visible. The *Jamaat-e-Islami* candidates contested on the BNP symbol for the first time. Also, Sheikh Hasina diluted the professed secular credentials of her party by openly wooing *Hefazat-e-Islam* (a radical group) in the run up to the elections and accepting their core demand of recognizing *Qwami madrasa* degrees.³⁶ Secondly, there was steady Islamization of politics and with direct and indirect linkages between Islamist political parties and the secular parties, radical Islamism slowly began to emerge in the country's polity; the radical Islamist ideology also tried to gain an upper hand through exerting pressure on the secular components of society.³⁷ The notion of being Islamic gained increasing acceptance, legitimacy and popularity.³⁸ Taking advantage of this sentiment, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* argues that only Islamic values, Islamic consciousness and character can help maintain independence and sovereignty.³⁹ Datta observes that the growth of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, with its large base and organisational skills and welfare programs, has lent credibility to the religious style in political life and second, its participation in the democratic political process has provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of militancy. A number of conservative, strident and militant religious groups have found ways to voice their opinions without much opposition from within the system⁴⁰ Thirdly, there was the rise and entrenchment of terrorist groups which perpetrated the radical cause and tried to capture political attention and space in Bangladesh. Fourthly, the global terrorist networks worked with gusto within Bangladesh through local militant outfits and organized attacks which captured global attention.

Rich academic literature exists on the profiling of militant outfits in Bangladesh and their contributions to not only the radicalization of the country, violence, and vulnerability, but also the opening up to global terrorist networks.⁴¹ A few inferences may be drawn from that to continue the discussion at this juncture. First, the rise of Islamist militant groups

was initially used as a counterfoil to eliminate leftist and socialist groups from the polity, such as the *Purba Banglar Communist Party*.⁴² Thus, their prevalence directly implied the narrowing of space for political and ideological opposition. This put fundamentalism deeper in the society and polity. Secondly, the Islamic militants have transcended five generations since the 1970s; each having a related but distinct focus with the former, and a principal area of operation and influence. While the first generation comprised of returnees from the Afghan war and led by the HuJIb and they were interested to use Bangladesh as a launch pad for influencing the Rohingya movement inside Myanmar,⁴³ the second generation headed by the *Jaamatul Mujaheddin Bangladesh* was focused on transforming the country into an Islamic state. This generation was active in the 1990s as the JMB established its reign of terror in north-western Bangladesh. On 17th August 2005, the JMB bombed five places in Bogra district, about 100 miles north of the capital Dhaka which killed at least twenty-six people. The BNP launched a crackdown though initially it had refused to acknowledge the presence of militant groups. The JMB denounced the secular legal system of the country and pressed for Islamic law. Thus, the increase in the intensity of operations was met with greater visibility on the global terror map. Since 2007, the Bangladeshi militant groups have increasingly forged links with the Al Qaeda and IS and this has defined three successive generations of terrorists in Bangladesh.⁴⁴ The defining feature of the new generation is that they are inspired by, and connected to the transnational terrorist groups, intend to pursue their objective of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh and participate in the global militant Islamist movements. This generation of militants is also founding their own local organizations.⁴⁵ Though the state confronted these groups with strong counter-terrorism strategies between 2004 to 2008, bitter political divisions since the controversial elections in January 2014 reopened the space for new forms of Jihadist activism.⁴⁶ The JMB and *Ansarul Islam* dominate the Bangladeshi Jihadi landscape and launch targeted attacks against secular activists, intellectuals and foreigners, as well as religious and sectarian minorities.⁴⁷ The 1st July 2016 attack on Holey Artisan cafe in Dhaka cafe with mostly foreigners sitting inside allegedly involved close

cooperation between different groups, including both rural based *madrassa* students and elite urban young men. 5 young people were responsible for the massacre which led to 29 deaths (18 foreigners, 2 locals, 2 police officers, 5 gunmen, and 2 bakery staff) and many of them were educated abroad and represented the urban youth. This caused a new profiling of terrorism in Bangladesh as it was found that youth of any educational and socio-economic background could be a prime target of radicalisation.⁴⁸ The rise of Jihadi feminism and cyber radicalization have emerged as two new faces of terrorism. Bloggers and secular intellectuals have been prime targets. For example, the members of *Hefazat-e-Islami* participated *en masse* in demonstrations supporting the murder of a young, secular blogger in 2013. The group further launched its 13-point charter of demands, including the enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provisions for death penalty; exemplary punishment to all bloggers and others who “insult Islam”; and cancellation of the country’s women development policy. As manifested, secular writers and bloggers appear to be high up on the ‘hit list’ of Islamist terrorist organizations.⁴⁹

The crackdown by the state without following the due process of law has further fuelled jihadi resurgence. As the ICG observes,

“The government’s excesses against political opponents and critics include enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings. Police tasked with targeting the government’s rivals and an overstretched justice system compelled to prosecute opposition leaders and activists now also face a renewed threat from violent extremists. The permissive legal environment, however, is creating opportunities for extremist outfits to regroup, manifested in the killings of secular bloggers and foreigners and attacks on sectarian and religious minorities in 2015. The government’s reaction to rising extremism, including arrest and prosecution of several suspects without due process and transparency, is fuelling alienation that these groups can further exploit.”⁵⁰

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF RADICALIZATION ON INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Much has been written about the potential and pitfalls of India-Bangladesh relations. Summarizing the arguments would be beyond the scope of his

paper. Nevertheless, three observations may be made. First, that India and Bangladesh have navigated a unique relationship, which has oscillated between an integral bond borne out of India's role in the inception of Bangladesh to being uneasy and proximate neighbours with perennial outstanding issues. Tensions crop up on agenda including the Farrakha barrage, Moore Island, border-dispute including the Teen Bigha corridor, border fencing, illegal migration, Chakma refugees, border crimes, human trafficking, smuggling, trade and transit issues. Secondly, relations and resolution of disputes have been influenced by the political leadership in the two countries. The matrix of perception runs thus, that BAL is India-friendly; BNP is anti-India; the Congress has been friendly towards BAL whereas BJP is invested in its doctrine of *Hindutva* and therefore suspicious of Bangladesh. "Notably, the migration issue from Bangladesh was one of the critical issues in BJP's policy mentioned in 1998 election manifesto. In addition, BJP-led government linked 'cross border movement, the ISI and Al-Qaeda in its foreign policy approach towards Bangladesh'⁵¹ The recent moves of abrogation of Article 370 and the CAA linked with NRC may be viewed in this context. Third, domestic politics and the opposition by contiguous states like West Bengal to acquiesce to unilaterally adopted central decision in India have affected the ability of the two countries to navigate through some pending issues. At one level, this has caused disruptions in concluding agreements, such as Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee refusing to accompany Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to sign the Teesta water sharing treaty with Dhaka in 2011. At another level, the contiguity itself has compelled electoral calculations and appeasement of unholy (radical Islamic) forces to fester. For example, in West Bengal, the BJP has alleged that the reigning *Trinamool Congress* engages in a politics of unbound appeasement to the fundamentalist Muslim groups for their votes *en masse*. Also, many parts of the state have emerged as the sanctuary of terror operatives belonging to HuJI-B and *JMB*. Despite fencing and better coordination of security personnel of both India and Bangladesh, the border is slippery and porous, infested with smugglers and miscreants who cross over into each other's territory while fleeing from their national security agencies. The TMCs lackadaisical ways and manifest dependence

on a number of conservative Muslim organizations enabled a few notorious Huji-B and JMB operatives to take shelter in west Bengal, often far away from the border. This was evident in the 2014 accidental blast in the Khagragarh locality of the Burdwan district, which literally blew the lid off the JMB's secret activities and sleeper-cells in West Bengal. The connect between unregistered *madrassa*, the unguarded and easily penetrable rural backyards and the terror cells exploded with the Khagragarh blast, and the politics of denial and initial disclaimers of the TMC government alluded to a hidden but sinister political agenda that provided shelter to radical terror groups lest any punitive action against them would politically backfire to the party.⁵²

Pakistan's ISI has been making full use of growing radical Islam for furthering its own activities against India. BNP leader Khaleda Zia, while in opposition, had been quoted as saying that the insurgents in India's Northeast are "freedom fighters" and that Bangladesh should help them instead of curbing their activities. There is a consensus in India that Bangladesh cannot continue to deny the anti-India terrorist and insurgent activities that emanate from Bangladeshi territory and that Dhaka should be forced to take concerted, verifiable action against anti-India actors within its borders. Bangladesh, in fact, has long been a willing host to militant outfits operating in Northeast India. Even before the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, the Chittagong Hill Tracts were used by the Pakistani army to train and shelter Mizo and Naga insurgents fighting against India. It has been suspected that Bangladesh, and Pakistan's ISI, has been coordinating anti-India activities along with outfits like the *United Liberation Front of Assam*, the *National Socialist Council of Nagaland*, the *National Liberation Front of Tripura*, and the *All Tripura Tiger Force*.⁵³

The increasing links of ISI in Bangladesh also problematizes economic opportunities. Apart from the infrastructure projects, the growing Chinese weapons supply, including two Ming-class submarines, indicates that Beijing's interest in Dhaka goes beyond commercial considerations. Bangladesh's strategic location at the head of Bay of Bengal abutting North East India where China has a territorial dispute, and its continued

sheltering of ULFA leader Paresh Barua in Kunming are pointers that Chinese engagement with Bangladesh cannot be taken as benign. The possibility of the ISI using the China route to reassert its influence in Bangladesh cannot be ignored. India cannot afford to ignore this.⁵⁴

Thus, returning to the focus of this paper, the rise in radicalization of Bangladesh has left an indelible mark on the equation, accentuating the already existing concerns of illegal migration across porous borders and terrorism. The promotion of virulent Islam directly clashes with India's avowed liberal-secular order. More than just being a simple binary of secular/non-secular, the India-Bangladesh dilemma finds itself pegged on the majority/minority dichotomy; India's largest minority (14.2 percent as per 2011 Census) is Bangladesh's outright majority (89.1 percent), and vice versa (Hindus in Bangladesh constitute roughly 10 percent of the population). In the latter context, there have been accusations of minority persecution by the radicals and the state in Bangladesh. Politicization of the religious identity coupled with demographic distribution has cast a shadow on the way the two states perceive their foundational national interest. The key implication for India has been distrust and treading tenderly, using a cautious approach to balance between diplomacy and strategic security.

The abrogation of Article 370 to reconstitute Jammu and Kashmir as Union Territories and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) linked with the National Register for Citizens (NRC) have considerably stirred the radical wings in Bangladesh. Even though the Bangladesh government has formally accepted these legislations as internal affairs of India, there have been protests and marches against India on the streets of Dhaka. A platform of different Islamist parties urged the people and government of Bangladesh to stand by the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Under the banner of "All Parties for Kashmir Solidarity, Bangladesh", hundreds of protesters formed a rally followed by a procession that paraded different roads after *Jumma* (Friday) prayers at the Baitul Mukarran national mosque. They have argued that granting independence to Muslim-dominated Kashmir, India has now decided to abolish the existing autonomy of Kashmir. "It is a violation of human rights," according to

them. Further, they have been urging all to stage protests demanding the independence of Kashmir.⁵⁵

Similarly, the CAA and NRC are viewed adversely by the civil society in Bangladesh, although the government again maintains that this is an internal matter of India.⁵⁶ Radicals have been irked by the twin implications of these policies; that the condition of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh is insecure and that illegal migrants from Bangladesh are living in Assam (in India) for decades now and should be sent back. The government has also looked at it unfavourably with External Affairs Minister Abdul Momen stating that there are no such Bangladeshi migrants in India any more. Identity as the basis of citizenship has been strongly objected to by radical Muslims.⁵⁷

Thus, using Majumdar's observations to sum up,

"Despite the common cultural links, disunity among people persists over national identity and national priorities, and the concomitant trust deficiency disturbs bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. From pressures and threats to concessions and soft persuasion instigating resistance and counter-pressure, India-Bangladesh have experienced it all."⁵⁸

Foreign relations of forty years should not be allowed to be mired in the hazards of radicalization, which has the ominous potential to turn every cooperation effort into a *non-sequitur*. Political willingness and astute leadership at the level of foreign policy must be exhibited to steer cooperation through diplomacy. In his recent visit to Dhaka in March 2021, coinciding with Bangladesh's Independence Day and the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Narendra Modi categorically highlighted that the two countries have shared common goals and challenges, including terrorism which must be tackled 'collectively'. He further rekindled the historical bond by stating that, "Bangladesh is sustained by the blood of the freedom fighters of the country as well as of the Indian soldiers. This blood will create such a relation that will not break under any kind of pressure, nor will it be a victim of any manner of diplomatic manoeuvres."⁵⁹

Other confidence building measures were adopted like the joint launching of the Mitali Express between Dhaka and New Jalpaiguri. However, there were protests and violence by Muslim worshippers which

were met followed by clashes and police action, leading to the death of twelve civilians. The *Hefazat-e-Islam* called for a nationwide shutdown to protest the attack on protesters.⁶⁰ The contentious figure of Narendra Modi provides leverage to radical groups in mobilizing the people against India. But roots of radicalization and its manifest links with terrorism threatens the entire sub-continent at the moment. India and Bangladesh can play a key role in diffusing the impact. India and Bangladesh's bilateral relations have not only stood the test of time, but they have together led the possibility of sub-regional initiative in the South Asian neighbourhood.⁶¹ However, the future of their relations cannot be built on unfinished business and burdens of the past. They must focus on resolving pending problems to move forward. The two countries have always focused on people-centric relations. Returning to this as the framework of relations, increasing connectivity and people-to-people contact would go a long way in diffusing tensions. The people on both sides of the border must be assured of the intentions of the governments to nurture reciprocity, mutual respect and thrive as 'rock solid neighbours.'⁶²

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TERROR FINANCING THROUGH DIGITAL MEANS: ACROSS THE INDO-BANGLADESH BORDER AND BEYOND

NAHIAN REZA SABRIET

Standing in between the discussions of Political Economy and Security Studies, the discourse of terrorist financing demands a cautious inquiry. The digital age, despite all its blessings, has made the concept of financing more obscure than ever. The lives of human beings have become easier due to the digitization of monetary means across all platforms. However, this ease has a repercussion in disguise. When it comes to digital financial channels, in-person contacts are compensated at the expense of anonymity. Therefore, it can be easily perceived how the issue of terrorist financing through digital means has emerged as a new threat for the security apparatus of the countries in this digital world.

India and Bangladesh share a long-standing relationship for around five decades since the independence of Bangladesh. India's first e-banking service was introduced by ICICI Bank in 1997.¹ Bangladesh adopted e-banking in 2003 after the Dutch-Bangla Bank Ltd. made online transactions available for its customers.² Although the formal currency of Bangladesh and India are different, rapid technological development, availability of tools, and mainstreaming of online transactions have made it harder for traditional counter terrorism mechanisms to intervene. Terrorist organizations have taken advantage of this means of escape, and in many cases, have funded organizational, operational, and recruitment-related endeavors via digital means. Crypto currency and block chain networks are somewhat of new entries in this regard. Nevertheless, they have taken the world by storm, and this unexpected trend also has both negative and

positive sides to be taken into consideration. On 29 July 2021, Bangladesh Bank reinforced legal restrictions on crypto currency trading.³ In December 2021, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) made a declaration in favor of a complete ban on crypto currency showing deep concerns over “macroeconomic and financial stability” and “exchange management”.⁴ Despite the growing concerns, however, there is no all-encompassing framework to understand the rapid shifts.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the linkages between terrorist financing through digital means in Bangladesh and India, and the networks operating across the borders of these two countries. The research gaps primarily revolve around two issues – the lack of non-Western landscapes and a subconscious attempt of the academicians to generalize and regulate “digital” terrorist financing networks through the erstwhile means of legal and operational frameworks. The study, here, is qualitative in nature, which incorporates both primary and secondary data. Among primary data, there are news reports and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of various senior officials of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. Among secondary materials, books, journal articles, reports of think tanks and other scholarly analyses have been used.

CONCEPTUALIZING TERROR FINANCING, CRYPTO CURRENCY NETWORK AND ORGANIZED CRIME: BREAKING INTO THE “DIGITAL”

The phrase “terrorist financing” carries the definition itself. Although there is no universal standard to define what terror financing is; from the notes of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), it can be referred to as “funds or other assets that may be used, in full or in part, to facilitate the commission of terrorist acts”.⁵ The term “fund”, hence includes,

“[a]ssets of every kind, whether tangible or intangible, movable or immovable, however acquired, and legal documents or instruments in any form, including electronic or digital, evidencing title to, or interest in, such assets, including, but not limited to, bank credits, travelers’ cheques, bank cheques, money orders, shares, securities, bonds, drafts, letters of credit.”⁶

Crypto currency does not represent all different sources of digital means. They are mostly “digital units created and transferred between the users through the use of cryptography”.⁷ Now, the culture of cryptography requires a big platform that is facilitated through various digital means, i.e., order-book exchange⁸, custodial exchange⁹ and brokerage services. However, the features of these digital currencies are somewhat similar since they share the feature of “a store of value but no legal tender status issued or guaranteed by any jurisdiction”.¹⁰ This atypical issue of “legality” makes it easier for terrorist organizations to find out loopholes in cross-border financing and exploit them for their own purpose. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that crypto currency trading itself is a kind of crime that can terrorize an entity or organization; or it can facilitate terrorist activities of other organizations as a source of funding.

“Organized crime” is also a very contesting concept. For this study, the definition provided by the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) has been taken into consideration, where an organized criminal group has been referred to as,

“[a] group of three or more persons acting in concert with the aim of committing at least one crime punishable by minimum four years’ incarceration in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefits”.¹¹

It is important to note that, although crypto currency networks are often viewed as “organized crime” in several international scholarly platforms, this article has separated them in order to address two different yet parallel streams— (i) Trading of money via digital channel as an exclusive source of terrorist financing, and (ii) Using other criminal activities to collect and distribute money via digital means.

Among the theoretical frameworks, Tamara Makarenko’s theory¹² on the convergence of terrorism and transnational organized crime can be taken as the point of departure. In her theory, Makarenko addresses criminal organizations’ alliance with terrorist groups and vice versa, the use of terror tactics by a criminal group for operational purposes, as well as the use of criminal activities by a terror group for operational purposes. Among the “crimes”, there are political and commercial crimes (Figure 1).¹³

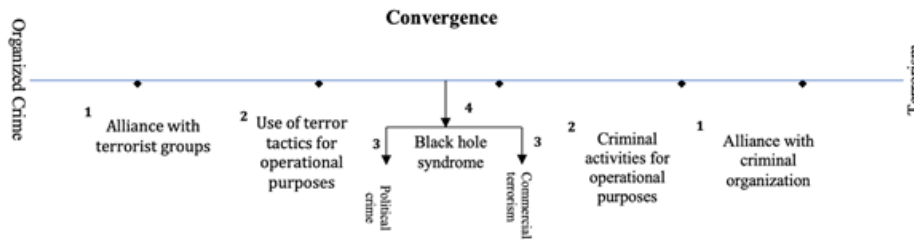


FIGURE 1: TAMARA MAKARENKO’S THEORY ON THE CRIME TERROR CONTINUUM

However, this theory is based on one-dimensional exchanges among crime, political and commercial terror where each activity (alliances, activities, and their convergence) has an individual locus. This means, at a hypothetical non-digital level, each of the actions can be distinguished from the active structure. When it comes to the digital channel, an analyst or practitioner might not be able to separate them. Anonymity and condensation of time hence lead to “alliances without convergence”, or usage of terror and criminal tactics by different groups in different places without any direct connection. Moreover, the nature and motivations might not always be either “political” or “commercial”, rather more “social” when it comes to the non-western settings of Bangladesh and India. The following sections of the article will try to see more into the mentioned crime-terror nexus while consciously evaluating them based on empirical evidence.

ANONYMITY, INVESTMENT, AND INFRINGEMENT: THE “ECOSYSTEM”

Several pieces of literature have dedicated themselves to the “ecosystem” of crypto currency and digital networks. As scholars like Hileman and Rauchs have pointed out, the problem with this ecosystem is that it promotes the idea of currency investment, but the concept of the industry gets “blurry”.¹⁴ There is definitely a risk in that “investment”; but terrorists or organized criminal groups do not step back from taking it. This kind of study is more focused on understanding rather than problematizing the use of digital means in illegal activities. Lukianchuk, Grebeniuk, and

Cherniak have directly addressed the “trends” and “peculiarities” lying with crypto currency networks—be it the payment infrastructure, absence of intermediaries or even a lack of universal understanding on the topic.¹⁵ In Ukraine, the nexus is seen from the point of other monetary offences like tax evasion.¹⁶ In Pakistan, *hawala/hundi* channels from the Middle East are inclined to the new fangled digital network as an alternative.¹⁷ In Venezuela, interestingly, the state itself has decided to introduce a state-sponsored crypto currency named “Petro”.¹⁸

According to the 2017 Global Crypto currency Benchmark study, 76 per cent of the customers of the Asia Pacific region would receive payment from a service provider of the same region, making Asia (along with Latin America, which stands for 90 per cent) as crypto regions serving local markets.¹⁹ On the other hand, more diverse markets are served by European and North American crypto sources.²⁰ Only 5 per cent of the sources surveyed in the study would accept the Indian Rupee (INR) as an exchange unit for a crypto transaction (compared to 56 per cent acceptance rate of both US Dollar and Euro). There is no mention of Bangladesh Taka (BDT) in the study, which arguably signifies its minimal to zero liquidity in the crypto format. Nevertheless, these statements do not mean that either of the countries is free of the threats from illegal use of crypto networks or digital means of terror financing. Organized criminal groups, terrorists, and even small-scale gangs have consciously or subconsciously created this bubble economy of digital transaction in which any currency can get a two or multilevel conversion through different platforms and be used for any legal or illegal purpose.

DIGITAL CHANNEL USED BY MAINSTREAM TERROR AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The use of digital channels by terrorists and organized criminal groups is not something new in Bangladesh or India. Two *Ansar Al Islam* (AAI) militants of Bangladesh who were arrested in September 2019 confessed about financing through bit coin since 2014.²¹ Very recently, on 6 May 2021, a 17-year-old university student and freelancer was arrested for his

involvement with the Neo-JMB militants.²² This new trend also suggests that the use of digital means now requires the involvement of learned and educated members in the groups.

Interestingly, not only the “digital means” is being exploited for this kind of transaction. Often ATM booths and MFS service provider shops are targeted by terrorist groups because they are supposed to store a good amount of cash for serving the clients. In 2015, *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) members snatched BDT 6 lac (USD 7,000 approx) from a Bkash shop in Kaunia, Rangpur. These incidents validate Makarenko’s theory as terrorist groups are taking up criminal activities for an operational purpose which involves the collection of funds involving digital channels.

The same issues can be seen in India as well. On 24 January 2022, INR 30.85 lac (USD 39,900) (INR 4.5 crore crypto value) was stolen from a Delhi businessman’s account.²³ Later, the Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations Wing of Police found out that the money (in crypto format) was transferred to the accounts of *Al-Qassam Brigades*, the military wing of Palestinian organization named *Hamas*. The transnational connections cannot be ignored too. In 2019, Bangladeshi militants were found to be sending money to Kashmir via a digital channel.²⁴

However, when it comes to the crime-terror nexus, drug cartels and their connections with terrorism is a considerable issue. Both narcotics and small arms trade are burning issues in the bordering states of India, i.e., Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan or Punjab.²⁵ It has been repeatedly pointed out by many Indian analysts that there is an unholy connection between the intelligence services and drug lords of Pakistan. In Pakistan, however, the first bit coin robbery case was reported on 19 February 2021 as the Gujranwala police rescued two foreigners taken as hostages. The suspects, supposedly connected with the drug business, stole PKR 14.7 million (USD 83,000) from the victims.²⁶ At the same time, an engineering student named Omar bin Khalid was arrested for siphoning PKR 1 million (USD 6,200) worth of the crypto coin in the form of donations to the militants in Syria.²⁷

It is currently almost impossible to show direct correlations between

these groups, or even the formats being used. But one can easily comprehend that the crypto or digital transaction mechanism in the South Asian region is not working as a polarized means of terror financing. There is indeed, overlap with the traditional transaction formats and erstwhile networks created among terrorist groups and criminal networks.

REMOTE GAMBLING

The basic problem with crypto gambling is that there is a thin line between hacking, gambling and scamming in the digital territory. In most cases, states have to depend on the self-regulation mechanisms of the sites themselves, which repeatedly vouch for circumscribing “suspicious” accounts but there is no clear rule or regulatory framework upon which the countries concerned can lay back.

On 14 June 2021, CTTC, DMP arrested Parvez (27), an engineering graduate who used to control four separate online accounts for remote gambling earning up to BDT 50 lac (USD 58,000 approx) a day for seven months.²⁸ At that time, CTTC listed a number of 2,300 gambling agents involved in this kind of business, casually draining money off the country.²⁹ Interestingly, official crypto gambling sites are often promoted via some official and popular Indian websites. *The Indian Express* countdowns top 5 crypto casinos in one of its articles, namely, mBit, Bitstarz, Trueflip, etc. The way an analyst or cyber security specialist defines gambling might be crucial here, since gambling over bit coin is not something parallel to the traditional ways of gambling, particularly, when there is no supra-authority controlling the investments and usage. Nevertheless, referring to mBit, the site also notes,

“While there is a minimum deposit requirement, it is not high enough to discourage any serious gambler. It is extremely easy to deposit Bit coin or any other crypto currency, and users can opt for a payment method of their choice.”²⁹

The “gambling” itself is not as threatening as it seems. Nevertheless, the regulation or the lack thereof might be something to be concerned about. A man named Sri Krishna was arrested in January 2021 from Karnataka for hacking crypto worth INR 9 crore (USD 1.1 million).³⁰ Two issues are

to be flagged here: When the Police arrested the man, the cryptos “vanished”, which shows the risk of anonymity and fast transaction through the digital platform. And, on the other hand, the issue turned into political strife between the local BJP and congress officials as the latter declared it as a political scam.³¹ Not to forget, crypto currency has a socialist/communist undertone as some of the leftist proponents like to call it “a socialist solution to a capitalist problem”.³² Considering the Naxalite and leftist threats from different groups like the *Communist Party of India* (CPI), policymakers have to be far sighted before the ideological, political, and economic stakes complement one other.

POROUS BORDER AND THE CRISIS OF FALSE INVOICING

False transactions through over-invoicing and under-invoicing are not necessarily cyber-specific. To some scholars, these are usually alternative types of trade-based money laundering which help criminal and terrorist groups channel funds through duty fraud, false invoicing and tax evasions.³³ According to the US-based think-tank Global Financial Integrity (GFI), Bangladesh has been counting around USD 8.7 billion loss on an average between 2009 and 2018 as a result of false invoicing.³⁴

When it comes to the cases of Bangladesh and India, the CTTC officials of DMP provided an interesting insight into a significant issue. While cattle smuggling across the border is a common problem for both countries, there is a culture of over-invoicing and under-invoicing which convolutes the issue even further. The way of changing the “smuggler” status is very easy indeed – just by paying BDT 500 (USD 6 approx) per animal, one can make it legal.³⁵ When there are options for over-invoicing and under-invoicing, it becomes easier.

Looking back at history, the connection between terror and cattle smuggling can be brought to the table. In 2008, two brothers were accused of the kidnapping of a proprietor in Kolkata. Both of the accused were found to have connections with the banned terrorist group *Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami* (HuJI).³⁶ The younger of the two, Azizur, who was serving prison time at the Lucknow jail at that time, was also involved in narcotics and

arms smuggling across the India-Bangladesh border as well as transferring ransom to Pakistan based terrorist Omar Sheikh. But more importantly, even before his involvement in these activities, he along with his three other aides were involved in cattle smuggling.³⁷ Ten Al-Qaeda activists arrested from Murshidabad and Kerala in January 2021 also revealed their cohorts with “cattle smuggling” and “jihadist money”.³⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to newer concerns. In 2020, during the Eid ul Azha festivals in Bangladesh, digital platforms were introduced for marketing sacrificial cattle. These digital *hatt* (market) accepted payments through mobile banking, e-banking and cards.³⁹ The question hence comes, whether this shift in the cattle industry will make it easier for the terrorists to exploit the digital manoeuvres. According to senior officials of the DMP, similar concerns are valid over fish markets and other small scale floating businesses in the bordering areas.⁴⁰

Another critical issue identified by the practitioners was the community factor among the traders and their families on both sides of the border. Two factors work hand in hand here. On the one hand, mobile networks services of both India and Bangladesh are available on each other’s side for a limited geographical expanse; and people from both sides have to engage in transactions on a daily basis. Therefore, these small-scale friendly communities have subconsciously created their own blocs of a digital barter system, which are used by smugglers and terrorists well.

EXPLOITING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

A small focus has to be put on various social constructs which are also useful means for the terrorists. From the interview with an Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) official of Bangladesh Police (BP)⁴¹, it was learnt that organized criminal groups often use female members to withdraw Bkash amounts since traditionally, the role of women is deemed as “less suspicious” when it comes to violence or militancy. Store owners, despite being asked to collect National ID (NID) cards from all the monetary exchanges beyond BDT 10,000 via digital means, would ignore due to this predisposed notion

of both organized crimes being organized through broad and vivid procedures.”⁴²

Like “gender”, similar tricks are used by taking advantage of children. A retired Additional Director of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Bangladesh reminded of the common misconception about terrorist financing that it takes a huge amount of resources to finance or conduct a terror attack.⁴³ A new concern remains regarding the teen gangs, popularly known as the “Tiktok Gangs”, who like to see themselves as the rebels of the society and may be misguided by certain groups. Therefore, to facilitate the financing of terror, every penny counts, and even a small illicit transaction from these sources can turn out to be the means of operation. There is also a very rigorous documentation process being practiced by the terrorists of JMB or AAI⁴⁴, and thus, it is less likely that any portion of the funds will not be used for what it is meant for.

“SMART” HUNDI AND DIVINE DONATIONS

The “digital” or “smart hundi” system is currently an additional problem to the already existing crisis. The term *hundi* is believed to have a Sanskrit root—deriving from the term “*hund*” which simply means “to collect”; often used in line with another Persian term *hawala*.⁴⁵ Withstanding all its definitional problems, more or less, *hundi* is seen as an informal way of exchanging cash through the hands of people. Some scholars identify *hundi* as a “social organization” used mostly by the migrants to exchange remittances without falling into the traditional forms of banking and affiliated duties.⁴⁶ According to GFI statistics of 2017, around USD 7.6 billion money was illicitly drained out of Bangladesh annually.⁴⁷ For India, it was around USD 83.5 billion, the third-largest value-gaps in a year after China and Mexico.⁴⁸

Hawala mechanisms has always been one of the concerning grounds through which illicit financial flows. In 2007, a Bangladeshi Hundi agent named Saidul alias Babu Ghulam Munshi was held in Ahmedabad with suspected affinity with anti-national movements in India as well as with terrorist groups.⁴⁹ According to *The Hindu*, 35 per cent of *hawala* money in

India get channeled through different militant organizations like *Hizbul Mujahideen* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba*.⁵⁰ Another 40 per cent goes to the fund of overseas religious charities.⁵¹

Bowers points out four motivations behind the popularity of *hundi* transaction—absence of formal sector alternatives, cultural familiarity, affordability, and anonymity.⁵² When it comes to *hundi* transactions solely between Bangladesh and India, all of these four points may seem feasible. However, cultural familiarity has to be considered specifically. Cultural familiarity also begets trust and trust is very important in informal channels of transaction.

“Moving money” is a stifling problem, particularly for the state of Kashmir. In 2016, the Jammu and Kashmir government declared that in between 2013 and 2016, around INR 36 lac (USD 48,000) worth of *Hawala* money was recovered.⁵³ The terrorists and separatist groups were targeting that money and trying to route via Foreign Indian Currency Network (FCIN).⁵⁴ Transnational and community networks, particularly diaspora networks, are also important here. In 2013, a militant named Qaiser Sajjad Mir, a former militant, was arrested from the Kashmir Valley with INR 95,000 (USD 1266) worth *hawala* money.⁵⁵ Mir had a cousin in Saudi Arabia who would coordinate the transaction between Mir, himself and another person operating in Pakistan.⁵⁶

A common element of both Bangladeshi and Indian culture is also their reverence towards religion and digital or *hundi* is loosely related to it. For example, the Lakshmi Vilas Bank Limited of India mentions on its website,

“The Digital Hundi platform was developed for Lakshmi Vilas Bank as a CSR initiative for Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) in association with Heptagon Technologies. The main aim of the portal is to provide a digital *hundi* for devotees to donate for different prayers and offerings happening at the Gurudwara.”⁵⁷

In 2020, India’s richest temple Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), also opened up the e-hundi mechanism for the devotees who donated around INR 2 crore (USD 266,500).⁵⁸ When religion is included, the modalities are often hard to be confined into regularities. Bangladeshi

online scamming platforms, during the COVID-19 pandemic, tried to collect funds exploiting the Kashmir issue as well as the changes in Afghanistan, stating that the “Muslim brotherhood is in stake... *Ababil* Birds⁵⁹ are coming to save them from the heaven, funds are needed to feed them”, and people voluntarily responded to the quest by donating money via digital platforms like Bkash.

Not to forget, a number of people from the Muslim communities in both India and Bangladesh believe that their religion prohibits banking mechanisms due to its way of dealing with interests, which according to them, is forbidden. These people, hence, do not have any antagonism against the mobile banking system or e-hundi. In 2017, Bangladesh Bank ordered Bkash to suspend 2,887 accounts overnight that were allegedly involved in money laundering and digital *hundi*.⁶⁰ Taking advantage of various contested elements of religion, therefore, it is easy for the militants to collect money from “the unbanked” through direct donation or by manipulating them.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The purpose of this article was to bring out possible threats and concerns regarding terrorist financing through digital means in India, Bangladesh and across the Indo-Bangladesh border. The basic argument here is that, to understand and address the sources of threat persisting Bangladesh or India, one has to look into the issue through a non-Western lens. Western theories do give valuable inputs to comprehend the basis of crime-terror nexus. However, as the article has shown that social contexts and socio-economic variables are very pertinent along with the commercial or political ones, which was missing in those models. Using Makarenko’s theory, one may understand why JeI or JMB can organize and maintain cross-border financial networks, how they affiliate with different criminal groups, and how they take up criminal activities to finance their operations; but it fails to bring in the social contexts, i.e., how cattle traders are operating through porous telecommunication channel or how religious restrictions on certain banking policy and gender might be important to problematize terror

financing through a digital channel.

This study, nonetheless, has not investigated or evaluated the available policies in responding to the threats. This might be something to look forward to and to be illustrated in future findings in this field. This article may help the policymakers understand this new digital trend in terrorist financing in India and Bangladesh and incorporate necessary measures as per the findings. Neither of the countries, however, still has any national counterterrorism strategy or national strategy on combating terrorist financing. However, both Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) and the Indian Financial Intelligence Unit (IFU) prepare Suspicious Transaction Reports (STRs), in which, both these institutions have identified digital sources of terror financing as of critical factors. The future might arguably be “paperless”, and it might be impossible to completely regulate digital transactions or keep crypto currency transactions in check. Going back to the first sentence of the article, therefore, one can see the dilemma of terror financing belonging to both security and economic pivots. Moreover, given the “social” elements highlighted in this article, it is not possible to “restrict” social communications and networks as well. What can be done, is to be cautious enough so that this concern can be necessitated and securitized before it gets matured and out of control. From policy perspectives and scholarly viewpoints, this article hence tried to provide a ground work for those future steps to be addressed.

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THE INDIA BANGLADESH STORY AT 50

NILOVA ROY CHAUDHURY

As Bangladesh celebrated 50 years of its independence from Pakistan, India entered its 75th year as a free nation. Both landmarks offered an opportunity for introspection on what has arguably been the most significant bilateral relationship between two nations and, looking ahead, what synergies and changes will shape the contours of the India Bangladesh relationship.

Celebrations of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's emergence as a free nation on March 26, 2021 were, perforce, subdued, because of the global Coronavirus pandemic, but it was fitting that the Indian Prime Minister visited Dhaka as guest of honour at commemorative national celebrations.

After all, 50 years ago, India midwifed the birth of that nation, helping to sever its cord with Pakistan and, indeed, challenge the foundation of the two-nation theory. The emergence of Bangladesh was an epochal event, perhaps unparalleled in the annals of modern history. The Cold War was then at its height and South Asia became a theatre where the global superpowers engaged in a standoff, coming close to a direct conflict.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also celebrated 50 years of Bangladesh-India diplomatic relations and paid homage to 'Bangabandhu' (Friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the Father of that nation, whose birth centenary, observed as 'Mujib borsho,' coincided with the golden jubilee of its freedom. India marked the occasion on January 26 when, for the first time, a 122 member tri-services contingent of the Bangladesh Armed Forces led the Indian Republic Day parade.

For India, Bangladesh will always be special, and vice-versa. Their shared history and geography will continue to dictate their intertwined destinies. For people of India's Northeast, this 'Bangladesh-locked' region can have an entirely different future through the gateway of Bangladesh, making it, from that perspective, India's most strategic neighbour.

Sharing its longest border, of 4,096.7 kilometres, with Bangladesh, fifth longest border in the contemporary world, India is literally joined at the hip with Bangladesh. There is much that unites them – strategic imperatives, geographic contiguity, a common heritage, socio-cultural and linguistic linkages and shared cultural icons and passions.¹ "The logic of geography is unrelenting and proximity is the most difficult and testing among diplomatic challenges a country faces. Frontiers with neighbours are where domestic concerns intersect with external relationships." This is manifestly true between India and Bangladesh.²

It is, therefore, important to recall the 'jointness' through broad contours of what happened in the run up to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 and its immediate aftermath, because they have played a significant role in shaping the Bangladesh of today – the psyche of its leaders and its global outlook, particularly vis-a-vis India. Those events have also, subconsciously or otherwise, coloured India's attitude towards Bangladesh and there is a tendency to judge events only through the prism of bilateral relations.

On December 7, 1970, the *Awami League* (AL) under Mujibur Rahman's leadership, decisively won the only real general election held in undivided Pakistan. The victory gave Mujib the mandate to lead the country. However, instead of being conferred the premiership of Pakistan, he was taken to West Pakistan, put on trial for "crimes against Pakistan" and jailed, in Rawalpindi, on March 25, 1971. That night and through March 26, the Pakistan Army stepped out of the Dhaka cantonment, fanned out across the city and, beginning with Dhaka University, unleashed a barbaric crackdown on citizens in what was called 'Operation Searchlight.' As word emerged of the brutality inflicted on the Bengali-speaking populace, there was outrage and people of the erstwhile East

Pakistan rose in a mass uprising against the Pakistan army and Pakistan government.

They had an undisputed leader in Mujib, whose March 7 address served as a clarion call for independence. As word of the horrors inflicted by the Pakistan Army emerged, Bengali members of the Pakistan armed forces, bureaucracy and judiciary resigned in protest, looking to consolidate and channelise the mass support into a more focussed armed and diplomatic effort. On March 27, 1971, Ziaur Rahman, then a Major in the Pakistan Army, “declared” the independence of Bangladesh, in the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the ‘great national leader’ of the Bengalis. The announcement by Zia (who rose to become the first military leader of Bangladesh in November 1975) served as a turning point in the early stages of the War of Liberation against Pakistan and heralded the beginning of a nine-month long struggle for national liberty.³

After Mujib’s powerful leadership and oratorical skills were silenced in jail, Taffazul Hussain, popularly known as ‘Manick Mian,’ then Editor of the leading newspaper *Daily Ittefaq* rallied public morale and spread word about ongoing atrocities, even to neighbouring India, through his polemical writings. The *Ittefaq* served as the media arm of the AL, envisaged broadly as a secular political party within an Islamic country, and also as the authentic voice of the East Pakistani Bengalis and their nationalist aspirations.⁴

People, mostly Hindu, fled to India to escape the brutality unleashed by the Pakistan Army, spreading outward from Dhaka. Over 10 million people, ravaged and rendered destitute by the twin forces of rampaging nature (the November 1970 cyclone was, apparently, the most destructive ever) and the Pakistan army, entered India through the borders of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. It was then that India’s political leadership under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi opted to openly espouse the cause of Bangladesh, in support of the mass uprising; simultaneously providing military assistance to train “muktijoddhas,” (freedom fighters) of the “Mukti Bahini,” (freedom force) in guerrilla warfare, to take on the Pakistan Army, and launching a massive global diplomatic campaign to garner support against Pakistan’s suppression of its own citizens and horrific human rights abuses.⁵

For Indira, then head of a nation just about emerging itself from hunger and the PL-480 food handouts toward some food security of the 'green revolution', to decide to champion the cause of a neighbouring people being butchered and trampled upon by another neighbour of a different ethnic stock, and to stand up to the mighty superpower, the USA, against all odds, was remarkable. Whatever the strategic and domestic compulsions behind it, Indira's decision to battle the odds and deliver the entity of Bangladesh from the brutality of the Pakistani army and administration was, unquestionably, among the finest achievements of post-Independence India. People today, certainly in India, appear to have forgotten what an enormous feat it was and the massive challenges that had to be overcome.

India 50 years ago had little economic heft and very little going for her. So, to manage the manifold obstacles at so many levels; relating to security, the economy or just plain survival; was quite unparalleled. Despite a belligerent USA supporting repressive Pakistan, and haranguing Indian "aggression," even sending its seventh fleet into India's backwaters, India had Mrs Gandhi's leadership, some superlative diplomacy, canny strategic thinking, the Soviet Union's support and great humanitarian empathy. When Pakistan opened military hostilities in December 1971, India responded and, with the help of the Mukti Bahini, the Indian Army swept through Bangladesh, swiftly reaching the capital Dhaka. The Pakistan Army capitulated and surrendered, on December 16, 1971, bringing an end to the war and leading to the emergence of a liberated nation.

Those iconic events, combined with the nature of politics in the region, have essentially determined the nature of bilateral ties over these 50 years. On September 27, 2021, India showcased, during the 76th UN General Assembly session in New York, which the prime ministers of both countries attended, the 50th anniversary of its global diplomatic outreach which turned the tide of global opinion in favour of an independent Bangladesh. Detailing the nature of India's support was intended to reinforce the unique and indispensable nature of the India - Bangladesh relationship.⁶

India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh as an independent nation, and established diplomatic relations on December 6, 1971. India and Bangladesh have since then attempted to incrementally consolidate

their geographic, political, strategic, economic, trade and cultural relations, building on the foundation laid by Indira and Mujib, which found reflection in the 1972 Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace. Except, of course, during periods when the politics has been inimical, particularly between 1976 and 1996 and years between 2001 and 2006.

As Bangladesh's closest neighbour, India has been a vital factor in the country's foreign policy (and domestic politics). Dhaka's perception of Delhi and its approach towards India, has varied under different governments. Periodically, as at present, it has been perceived as positive. At other times, it has been viewed as a threat to security and the cause of the problems ailing Bangladesh. These variations in perception have produced changing patterns of Bangladesh-India relations. The three AL governments (1971-1975, 1996-2001, 2009- to date) for example, have largely viewed India positively and pursued a positive policy of engagement, while non-AL governments; whether military regimes or ultra-religio-nationalist governments; have perceived India, albeit in varying degrees, primarily as a source of insecurity.⁷

Manifold strategic and economic linkages have emerged from their geographical proximity and common historical legacy and are being strengthened such that physical boundaries become near irrelevant while natural, socio-economic, socio-cultural, historical and geographical connectivity retain primacy. These linkages and commonalities have seen India-Bangladesh bilateral relations experience major highs and lows over five decades, coinciding with the ebb and flow of the volatile politics in this densely populated eastern part of South Asia.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, there was euphoria in India which felt it had helped to forge a liberal, secular democratic polity on its eastern front. Post-independence Bangladesh saw the euphoria of freedom and gratitude to India for its help and the political leadership acknowledged its indebtedness to India. But concern soon arose among a section of the polity in Dhaka that Delhi could replace Islamabad and Bangladesh could become an Indian colony.

To dispel such concerns, India and newly-liberated Bangladesh signed

a joint communique agreeing to pull the Indian Army troops out by 31 March, 1972, within three months of the 1971 war. Never in military history has a victorious army withdrawn so quickly. This was hailed as Mujib's first diplomatic success. He also asked that 93,000 prisoners of war of Pakistan's armed forces be shifted to India; this was also agreed upon.

To provide the framework for a viable, functional relationship between them, the visiting Indira and Mujib signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace on March 19, 1972, for a period of 25 years. The treaty was, however, immediately criticised by the Bangladesh opposition as a treaty of Indian hegemony.⁸ The Treaty saw the creation of a Joint Rivers Commission to share and enhance the scope of sharing river waters for agriculture, irrigation, flood and cyclone control. India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers and, as India is the upper riparian state, there has been concern in Bangladesh that it was being deprived of its due share of water. In June 1974, an agreement on the Farakka issue was announced and Mujib asserted that Bangladesh had been given more water than it demanded. The Farakka Barrage was constructed 10 kms from the Bangladesh border, to control the flow of the Ganga before it entered Bangladesh. It soon became a major source of divergence and emotive contention between the neighbours. It took years of detailed discussion, catalysed by the victory of the AL under Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's daughter, in 1996, to reach fruition in the comprehensive bilateral Ganga Waters Treaty, signed by the prime ministers, Hasina and H.D. Deve Gowda, on December 12, 1996. The Treaty established a 30-year water sharing agreement, with guaranteed minimum water supply for Bangladesh, recognised as the lower riparian state.⁹ Waters from the Ganga, Padma and the Teesta, among 54 shared rivers, form the lifeline of the people on both sides, from agriculture and from the marshy swamp lands along the border which allow people to easily cross over to the other side, mostly to earn a livelihood and get better opportunities.

Till the murder of Mujib on August 15, 1975, Indo-Bangladesh ties were broadly cordial, even familial. Farakka was a bone of contention but negotiations continued without rancour. The foundation of relations he

laid with India were based on geopolitical reality and upholding the secular national spirit that had influenced Bangladeshis to break away from Pakistan. His assassination so soon after Bangladesh's emergence was not only a severe blow to Dhaka, but also to Delhi, and abruptly reversed the course of history with a re-emergence of the spirit of the 1947 Partition. For India, Mujib's murder was a setback at several levels; politically and personally for Indira, who had invested heavily in the relationship and in the charismatic leader, it came when she had imposed an internal Emergency and marked a dangerous failure of Indian intelligence.

The return of religious ideology in politics, actually beginning during Mujib's rule, signalled a key point of divergence. By 1974, Pakistan had recognised Bangladesh, and Mujib joined the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), largely seen as a sounding board for Pakistan's perceived grievances on Jammu & Kashmir. This infused an area of concern for Delhi and brought an end to the early, positive phase of bilateral relations.¹⁰

The Farakka issue in relation to Indo-Bangladesh relations was significant because it reflected the change in the foreign policy of Mujib's successors and factors which prompted them to take a rigid anti-India stand. Bangladesh's stand was then dominated by two factors: the post-Mujib governments' policy to denigrate his image (as pro-India, anti-Islam and corrupt) and the compulsions of foreign policy of the new power base, which looked to Pakistan for support.¹¹ This was reflected in statements of Maulana (Abdul Hamid) Bhasani, the octogenarian former Pakistani MP and ideologue, front-paged in *The Bangladesh Times* of October 11, 1976: "... sincere efforts of Bangladesh to reach a solution (on Farakka) failed because of Indian intransigence. The Maulana charged India with trying to regain its lost grip on Bangladesh through border incursions, the Farakka problem and by inciting internal disturbances. These pressure tactics of India posed a threat to the sovereignty and independence of Bangladesh...." This theme of domination was underscored across the media, reflecting popular opinion.¹²

Political moves to create an anti-India hysteria and the "domination fear" played up by the post-Mujib government also had roots in sociological terms. The partition of India in 1947 had led to a quick development of a

substantial Bengal middle class who, by the very nature of their rapid growth, became a power elite with control far in excess of their numerical strength. Sociologically, the emergent Bangladesh middle class was the one which spearheaded the struggle for independence from Pakistan, an outcome with which the post-Mujib dispensation was uncomfortable. Prompted by political necessity the new leaders continued playing up the dormant “domination fear” in the middle class.¹³

The slide in Indo-Bangladesh ties became precipitous when Ziaur Rahman rose to power through bloodshed and mayhem in November 1975. Like many leading figures of the armed forces, he did not move against Mujib’s assassins. Zia loyalists have claimed that Bangladesh’s first military dictator restored multi-party democracy through the general elections of February 1979. This is not so. Spurned by the AL and other secular parties, Zia needed a political base. That base appeared in the shape of right-wing elements rejected by the nation in December 1971 for their collaboration with the Pakistan army.

Multi-party democracy was not inaugurated by Zia, the rehabilitation of communal politics was — through the entry of ‘Bangladeshi nationalism’ and an invocation to Allah in the Constitution. Between 1975 and 1981, the war hero Zia turned his back on the ideals of the war he had joined and fought for Bangladesh’s liberty. His voice inspired a fearful nation on March 27, 1971. But his ambitions were overweening. He left a political legacy that was divisive and veered away from the secular founding principles of Bengali nationhood, ramifications of which are still being felt so long after his death, on 30 May 1981, when Zia was overthrown and killed in a coup in Chittagong. His dictatorship was symbolic of the murder of not just men, but of the history and ideas of a secular Bangladesh.¹⁴ Zia’s emphasis was on building a stronger Islamic identity in place of the earlier emphasis on an ethno-linguistic foundation. This shift also contributed to the creation of a more anti-Indian domestic political climate. In 1977, he amended the Constitution, to allow the state to strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries and promote Islamic solidarity.¹⁵

Bangladeshis still suffer from the dilemma Zulfikar Ali Bhutto tried

to exploit by arguing during the liberation war that if 'Muslim Bangla' was primarily Bengali, it should merge with West Bengal. If it was Islamic, it should remain in Pakistan. The politics of that conflict between religion and language explains why Hasina, whose ruling AL is identified with secular linguistic nationalism, baulks at repealing the constitutional amendment making Islam the state religion. Nearly 91% of Bangladeshis being Muslim, both the Jamaat and the BNP would exploit any diminution of the role of Islam.¹⁶

Hussain Muhammad Ershad assumed office soon after Zia, seizing power as army chief in a bloodless coup against President Abdus Sattar in 1982, by imposing martial law and suspending the Constitution. Despite the 1986 election, his tenure is considered a military dictatorship. Ershad served as President until 1990, when he was forced to resign following a popular pro-democracy mass uprising jointly led by Khaleda Zia (Ziaur Rahman's widow) and Hasina.

Ershad, most significantly, in 1989, pushed parliament to make Islam the state religion, a departure from Bangladesh's original secular constitution. He pushed Zia's foreign policy agenda and saw the founding of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, essentially to provide options for countries in the region, beyond India. "India's approach to SAARC was to set aside the region's differing political and security perceptions and focus attention on economic cooperation. The expectation was that the very dynamic of establishing cross-border economic linkages, drawing upon the complementarities that existed among different parts of our region would eventually help overcome the mutual distrust and suspicion which prevents the region from evolving a shared security perception. SAARC remains largely a consultative body and there is deep resistance to doing anything that could be collaborative."¹⁷ Between late 1975 and 1991, Bangladesh witnessed a political system more reminiscent of Pakistan-era military rule. This had a dampening effect on India-Bangladesh relations. The restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 and the subsequent maturation of democracy with the *Awami League* coming to power in 1996, along with the signing of the Ganges Waters Treaty, revived the positive tenor of bilateral ties. The development of the

Bangladesh economy, alongside the post-economic reform period of growth of the Indian economy gradually heralded a new epoch in relations between Dhaka and New Delhi.¹⁸

Six factors broadly limited and constrained the strengthening of Indo-Bangladeshi relations during that period; Ganges waters sharing, anti-Hindu violence, migration, insurgency, border disputes and trade disputes. On each of these areas, both sides adopted conflicting positions or minimised their relative importance to bilateral relations.¹⁹

Bilateral relations were cool during the first tenure of the Khaleda-led *Bangladesh Nationalist Party's* (BNP), between 1991 and 1996, because of twin issues of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and rise of the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in India and their highlighting the issue of large-scale migration from Bangladesh into India, while Khaleda focussed on the inequity in sharing of river waters and economic issues.

Relations turned positively frosty when, immediately after 9/11, the Khaleda-led BNP returned to power in October 2001, in alliance with the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. The Jamaatis are less a party than an ideology which also finds resonance in some sections of the AL. Concerns related to terrorism dominated the bilateral discourse and the two found little common ground, as New Delhi perceived that forces inimical to India were being encouraged by the overtly pro-Pakistani regime in Dhaka.²⁰

Within Bangladesh, political turmoil played out between the two political ideologies and personalities at their helm, Khaleda and Hasina, in the 21st century,²¹ leading to some years of a neutral, army-headed 'caretaker' regime after 2006. Once the bitter political tensions eased enough to allow polls, Hasina's AL returned to power with a landslide victory in January 2009 and has been at the helm since, with two elections in between.²² Since Hasina reassumed power in 2009, relations have rapidly and substantially improved. Over the past 12 years, the two countries have forged a remarkable understanding and have set up scores of institutional mechanisms in areas of security, defence, including military-to-military cooperation, counter-terrorism cooperation, trade and commerce, power and energy including nuclear power, transport and connectivity, science and technology, rivers and maritime affairs. Hasina's

return coincided with the Manmohan Singh government's second term in Delhi. During her state visit to India in January 2010, Singh outlined the intended course of bilateral ties, saying, "India seeks to build a new future with Bangladesh. The time has come to chart a new path. We are ready to pursue a bold Vision for our relations, based on mutual respect and benefit." The idea was to ensure that less developed neighbours, including Bangladesh, would benefit from the Indian economic growth story.²³

That Vision has seen incremental but definite burgeoning of the relationship, into a partnership. A slew of agreements resulted from that visit and India's unilateral trade concessions. From October 2013, India started exporting 500 megawatts of electricity daily to Bangladesh, for a period of 35 years. The flow of 500 MW daily into the Bangladesh national powergrid has provided a boost to the textile sector, allowing the country's economic profile to rise.

Security has been a major driving force of India's neighbourhood policy. India's sympathies with democratic forces and its aversion to any extra-regional presence are all geared to optimise its security interest, which is enshrined in its belief of a stable neighbourhood. That Bangladesh is the first and most vital link in both India's Neighbourhood First and Look and Act East policies, at the core of its foreign policy doctrine, reflects the country's centrality in India's strategic paradigm.

On the terrorism front, the swift investigation, trial and judgement in the Dhaka Holy Artisan restaurant attack of July 2016 clearly reflected Bangladesh's 'zero tolerance' policy to terrorism. Bangladesh's multi-faceted security and anti-terrorism cooperation with India under Hasina is vital in not only ensuring its own security, but also in making India secure.²⁴ A convergence of security, economic and energy cooperation has transformed Bangladesh's relations with India, especially, in its North-eastern region. Hasina has walked the extra mile to address Indian concerns over Northeast India's insurgency and connectivity issues. Several separatist leaders of Northeast India were deported, militant camps dismantled, and terror-financing bank accounts were frozen. Such efforts have impacted positively on peace building and reduction of the military

in the Northeast Indian states. Since 1975, different governments in Bangladesh had allowed their territory to be used as bases by insurgent groups from Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur.²⁵

In 2012, Bangladesh allowed India's ONGC to ferry heavy machinery, turbines and cargo through Ashuganj for the Palatana Power project in southern Tripura. Recently, bilateral infrastructure projects, including the 1.9-km Maitri Setu (friendship bridge) built over the Feni river between Sabroom in Tripura and Ramgarh in Bangladesh and reopening of railway lines have helped ensure seamless connectivity and economic convenience. The Akhoura–Agartala railway link, finally completed in 2020, has made transportation and development in North-eastern India more efficient. Another significant milestone, in bilateral maritime relations, was the first shipment of container cargo from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong port, in June 2020. These connectivity projects and handing over 10 broad-gauge locomotives to Bangladesh, along with substantial Lines of Credit, are helping to get rid of the 'laggard' tag India had acquired, causing stress in the relationship. Improved physical connectivity between the two countries ensures that intra-Indian connectivity, particularly with the Northeast, is much easier. New trains, named "Maitree," "Bandhan" and "Mitali" and bridges connecting cities in both countries have facilitated trans-border travel.²⁶ Crucially, the long-unresolved border dispute saw resolution when, in September 2011, both countries signed a major accord on border demarcation to end the 4-decades old Tin Bigha corridor issue. The agreement included exchange of adversely held enclaves, involving 51,000 people spread over 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India. The Land Boundary Agreement, in abeyance since 1974, was finally ratified by the Indian Parliament ahead of Modi's first visit to Bangladesh, in 2015.²⁷

India did not contest delimitation of the India – Bangladesh maritime boundary, giving up around 19,467 square kilometres of its sovereign rights in the Bay of Bengal without any challenge when the United Nations arbitral tribunal decided in favour of Bangladesh in 2014. This upholding of international law gave bilateral ties a huge boost, helping Bangladesh gain access to the sea, and to a vast maritime territory rich in hydrocarbons

and opening a new vista for its blue economy. That, and ratification of the LBA, launched the composite ‘ShonaliAdhyay’ in India-Bangladesh relations characterising the phase between 2015 and 2019.²⁸

It is no secret that this ‘golden phase,’ cultivated by both Hasina and Modi, is almost unravelled since 2019, because of politics. Right-wing, majoritarian figures in India are convinced that Bangladesh is destitute and illegal migrants from there illegally enter India. In reality, Bangladesh today is much richer than the depressed Indian states where Hindu nationalist politicians have been railing against Bangladeshi “termites.” The terminology and enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) almost derailed the “sonaliadhyay.” Bangladesh was deeply offended by the ruling BJP leaders’ rhetoric, making it difficult for Hasina to keep up the warm tenor of the ties. Many ministers cancelled their scheduled visits to India to register their concern. That an economic relationship of over US\$10 billion per annum could not curb Indian majoritarian tendencies, was unfortunate in the popular Bangladesh discourse.²⁹ Hasina’s government has also been disturbed with provisions in the Indian CAA, which singles out Bangladesh, along with Pakistan and Afghanistan, as nations which persecute their minorities. Infusing a communal flavour into a highly emotional and cultural relationship has not gone down well with Bangladesh.³⁰

India has scrambled to enhance manifold cultural linkages to regain its place, like the Bangabandhu – Bapu (Mahatma Gandhi) exhibition, jointly showcasing the Fathers of the Indian and Bangladeshi republics, and soft power initiatives, like Covid vaccines, now form a key focus.³¹

In March 1971, Bangladesh’s founders declared independence from richer and more powerful Pakistan.³² The country was born amid famine and war; the country seemed destined to fail: Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State, famously called it a “bottomless basket case,” destined to have the begging bowl as its metaphor.³³ Yet in March 2020, Bangladesh’s Cabinet Secretary announced that GDP per capita had grown by 9% in 2019, rising to \$2,227. Pakistan’s per capita income, meanwhile, is \$1,543. In 1971, Pakistan was 70% richer than Bangladesh; today, Bangladesh is 45% richer than Pakistan.³⁴

India, ever confident about being the only South Asian economy that matters, must grapple with the fact that it, too, is poorer than Bangladesh. India's purchasing power per capita in 2020-21 was \$1,947.³⁵

Today, Bangladesh is among the world's fastest-growing economies; estimated to grow at around 8%, (ahead of India), a remarkable success story set to become a middle-income nation by 2030. It has the world's second-largest garments industry, after China, and is the fourth-largest producer of freshwater fish. Between 2011 and 2019, Bangladesh's exports grew at 8.6% every year, compared to the world average of 0.4%.³⁶

India's bilateral trade with Bangladesh is over US\$10 billion. The trade balance is heavily in India's favour, though Bangladesh crossed one billion dollars in exports to India in 2019. Bangladesh has overtaken the US as the largest source of tourists visiting India: 2.8 million Bangladeshi visitors travelled to India in 2018; 1.2 million for medical treatment, while the rest came as tourists, adding considerable revenue to Indian coffers. Thousands of Indians in the IT, banking, telecom and infrastructure development sectors are working in Bangladesh, which now has five Consulates in India, other than the High Commission in New Delhi; in Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, Guwahati and Agartala. India has, besides the High Commission and the world's largest visa facilitation centre in Dhaka, Consulates in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Khulna.³⁷

On various social parameters Bangladesh is ahead of India, whether infant and maternal mortality, access to safe childbirth and gender representation and parity. Women, as the primary work force in the garment industry, have powered Bangladesh's economic miracle over the past decade and enjoy impressive parity. Not only is the Bangladesh Prime Minister a woman, its Home Minister, Leader of the Opposition and Parliament Speaker are all women, while 40% of the Bangladesh Foreign Service is made up of women.³⁸

Yet the image most Indians have of the average Bangladeshi is of the ragged refugee dying to come to India for personal redemption. While the Indian government understands the vital importance of Bangladesh and accords genuine partnership status, politicians and average Indians must stop being condescending and stop treating Bangladesh as the kid it helped

put in school on the EWS (economically weaker section) quota. It did, 50 years ago and benefited well from it.³⁹ “The first Bangladesh-India bilateral cooperation had started in the battlefield of 1971,” said Muazzem Ali.⁴⁰

Hasina, herself once a refugee in India, has gratitude and great affection for this country. “Fifty years ago, in 1971, India opened up its border for Bangladesh’s people to support their freedom struggle. Today, we are building a prosperous region together,” she said, summing up the state of bilateral ties today.⁴¹ As Bangladesh marks 50 years as a free nation, there is universal admiration for its remarkably successful economic and social transformation. Among the profound geopolitical consequences of Bangladesh’s economic rise is a shift in South Asia’s centre of economic gravity to the east and the reintegration of an eastern subcontinent. Today, Bangladesh is on the cusp of a second liberation—one that would allow Dhaka to end its isolation and play a stronger role in the region and beyond, with new maritime possibilities in the Indo-Pacific.⁴²

Despite the highs and lows, the first 50 years have shown each country to be indispensable to the other, while firmly consolidating the foundation of India-Bangladesh ties. The future can replicate the warmth of the “shonaliadhyay” provided that the leadership of the two neighbours play their diplomatic and domestic cards with maturity and pragmatism, keeping each other’s interests, aspirations and sensitivities in mind and build institutional relationships across the board of the vast-ranging relationship.

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HOW THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AFFECTS CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

GUNJAN SINGH

ABSTRACT

A lot has been written on the China-Bangladesh relations. However, there has been a renewed focus on Dhaka from Beijing since 2016. This paper focuses on the developments in bilateral relations, post-Xi Jinping's historic visit to Bangladesh in 2016 and after Dhaka decided to join the BRI. The paper looks at the Chinese engagements in various areas and also discusses if this has benefitted Bangladesh. It also discusses how these economic and defence ties affect the Bangladesh-China relations, while analysing their impact on Dhaka's relations with other countries in South Asia, with major focus on India.

INTRODUCTION

China and Bangladesh established diplomatic relations in January 1976 and have continued to have good bilateral relations. However, recently, there is a lot of talk about historical contacts between China and Bangladesh. Both the Chinese as well as the Bangladeshi media push the argument that Chinese interest in Bangladesh is not just a contemporary phenomenon. But one cannot ignore the fact that lot of Chinese focus on Bangladesh by China is recent, and this flows directly from the Chinese economic and geopolitical agenda to gain influence. The Chinese side have continuously asserted that Bangladesh and China shared relations through the ancient Silk Route and have the capacity to restart this very trading route. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there have been visits and bilateral relations. This relationship began in

1950s and 1960s. Premier Zhou Enlai had also visited East Pakistan while Mujib Rahman had visited China and met with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and other prominent Chinese leaders. This is what was the foundation of the diplomatic relations later.¹ Bangladesh also adheres to One China Principle.

Chinese interest in using infrastructure to boost bilateral relations is not a new development, especially in the case of Bangladesh. The Chinese constructed the Bangladesh-China Friendship bridge over river Buriganga which connected Dhaka and Munshiganj in 1987.² Starting with this, Beijing has continued to build bridges (almost nine of them in the last four decades) across Bangladesh, the latest being the Padma Bridge which is expected to help in growth of Bangladesh's GDP by almost one percent.

To express the solidarity of this bilateral relationship, the Government of Bangladesh had issued a postage stamp in October 2000 to commemorate 25 years of China-Bangladesh diplomatic relations. In the last forty years, there have been a number of high-level visits between the two sides as well. Prior to the historic visit by President Xi Jinping in 2016 in April 2005, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had visited Bangladesh and met with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. During this visit Wen Jiabao had said, "I believe this visit will further consolidate and strengthen the traditional friendship between our two countries and promote new progress in our bilateral relations".³ Wen Jiabao had a 102-member delegation consisting of Cabinet Ministers, Vice Ministers and businessmen with him during this visit. Wen had also stated that "China defines its relationship with Bangladesh as long-term, friendly, and comprehensive partnership based upon equality and mutual benefits and has carried out a series of cooperation projects of friendship and mutual benefits".⁴ The Bangladeshi leaders from both the prominent political parties have also visited China a number of times. Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia visited China in 2002, 2005 and 2010 while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited China in 2010, 2014 and 2019, underscoring the close diplomatic bond between the two sides.

China and Bangladesh are engaged at several levels, economic, infrastructure, defence and cultural. As argued by Sreeradha Dutta, there

are political as well as geographical factors that help in cementing this relationship. One major aspect is that China does not share a land border with Bangladesh and thus does not have to worry about any influx of refugees. Because of this, they do not have any land border disputes as well. This makes Bangladesh more attractive to Beijing as there are no underlying historical issues which can adversely affect this relationship. To add to this, there is a nuance diplomatic manoeuvring too which has helped this relationship. China as well as Bangladesh, since the 1970s have refrained from making any statements regarding each other's internal affairs. The general stand has been one of non-interference. This has greatly helped and has made Beijing attractive to major political parties in Bangladesh, the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) and the *Bangladesh Awami League*. Bangladesh also helped China become an Observer in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007.⁵

Another major multilateral organization located in Asia, where Bangladesh and China both are part is the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC). BCIMEC which was initially listed as a part of the BRI, was not included in the list of corridors after the Second BRI Forum of 2019. This is because India has not agreed to join the BRI and has also raised a number of concerns about the Chinese proposals under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as some of the projects are located in the disputed territories.

China and Bangladesh relations have been on an upward trajectory for a long time, however, one of the major turning points in this bilateral relationship came in 2016. Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh in October 2016 lent a new strength to this relationship. This was the first visit by a Chinese President to Bangladesh in three decades. During this visit, the Chinese media glorified the prospects of the relationship as the "golden fruit".⁶ This visit also underscored Chinese focus on Bangladesh. The visit took place in October 2016 when Bangladesh decided to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As it is known, the BRI is one of the initiatives promoted by Xi Jinping in 2013. One of the major goals of this initiative is to build and strengthen global trade, infrastructure and routes. Through BRI, China also wishes to be the prime supplier of the demands of infrastructure.

Both sides signed a number of deals covering areas like infrastructure, transport, trade, disaster management, diplomatic relations, climate change, agriculture etc. A total of 8 major projects were signed between China and Bangladesh, financed by China and costing around 9.5 billion dollars. Some of these projects are the Padma Bridge rail link (3.3 billion dollars), the power plant in Payra (1.9 billion dollars), digital connectivity (1 billion dollars) and power grid network strengthening project (1.32 billion dollars).⁷

Apart from economic focus it was during this visit that the bilateral relationship was upgraded to “strategic partnership of cooperation”.⁸ During the visit Xi said, “We agreed to elevate China-Bangladesh ties from a comprehensive partnership of cooperation to a strategic partnership of cooperation.”⁹ Xi also reiterated the idea of strengthening the South-South relations and working towards achieving the goals set in the “two centenary goals” for China and the Bangladesh’s “Sonar Bangla” plan.¹⁰ Bangladesh is also working towards achieving its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) laid down by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015 with the deadline of 2030. It is obvious that Bangladesh is in need of finance and loans and Beijing needs to find a strong and sustainable partner for its ambitious BRI. Bangladesh does provide China with an untapped market which is desperately in need for infrastructure growth, a need which China can fulfil. Bangladesh has also participated in both the BRI Forums conducted in Beijing, in 2017 and 2019, underscoring its commitment towards the Chinese initiative.

But it is not just economics which drives China towards Bangladesh, there is a very strong geo-strategic factor which makes Bangladesh very attractive to China. Bangladesh is also an important country in Chinese efforts to increase its influence in the South Asian region. Beijing has been consistently working towards gaining major foothold in South Asia and Dhaka provides a good opportunity. It also works in Beijing’s favour as India and Bangladesh have had a very challenging relationship and also a troubled border. Given the historical baggage which New Delhi and Dhaka share coupled with their domestic politics, it makes it easier for Dhaka to lean towards Beijing. The situation is further complicated given

the deteriorating China-India relationship since 2016. The regional geopolitical scenario has also a major catalyst in directing the China Bangladesh relations.

Given this backdrop, this paper discusses the rise in China-Bangladesh relations since 2016. It highlights some important aspects of China-Bangladesh relationship after it joined the BRI and also looks at the defence ties. To conclude it analyses as to how this relationship affects regional as well as global position of Bangladesh; and how the Chinese loans and BRI affect other smaller nations in South Asia will be discussed.

CHINA-BANGLADESH TRADE

China-Bangladesh trade has witnessed consistent increase in the last few years. Since Bangladesh has joined the BRI, there has been a lot of talk of strengthening the trade relations. Even in the case of Bangladesh, the pattern of trade is quite like Chinese trade with other developing nations in South Asia. The trade balance is favourable to Beijing. The major component of Bangladeshi exports to China is made up of readymade garments. In addition, it also exports fish, leather hides, jute products, tea, coffee, crab etc. Bangladesh imports a lot of products from China like machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers, iron and steel, mineral fuels, fertilizers, silk, plastic, rubber, aluminium etc. In the year 2015, Beijing was Dhaka's largest trading partner and in 2018 it became the largest investor too. By 2019 China had invested around 1.2 billion dollars in Bangladesh.¹¹ In February 2022, the total exports of Bangladesh to China amounted to around 44 million dollars,¹² while Bangladesh imports from China amounted to 1.5 billion dollars in May 2022.¹³

It is a known fact that Bangladesh became a part of the least developed country (LDC) in 1976 and is expected to officially join the group of developing economies in 2026, i.e., within a few years. The outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic has derailed the global economic growth path and has also adversely affected the Bangladeshi economy. However, the positive trajectory of the Bangladeshi economy is clear from the fact that in 2021 the United States adopted a resolution to change the status of

Bangladesh from LDC to developing country. After the resolution, the Bangladeshi Finance Minister A.H.M. Mustafa Kamal said in a press interview, “This is a historic milestone to the development journey of Bangladesh. This is the reflection of the progress for more than a decade. People of all walks of life are part of this success”.¹⁴

The Chinese have left no stone unturned in their efforts to integrate Bangladesh with their economy. In 2020 China had announced that it will be reducing tariffs on more than 90 percent of Bangladeshi products. This, however, was not achieved given the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. However, China reiterated its commitment to achieve this in March 2022. Beijing announced that it will allow duty free access to 98 percent of Bangladeshi products.¹⁵ This covers more than 8,200 Bangladeshi products. On the other hand, Beijing has been very keen to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Bangladesh, while Dhaka has not been equally forthcoming. Today, the Bangladeshi economy is heavily reliant on China. The trade volumes are constantly rising and there has also been a huge inflow of loans and investments from Beijing. Also, the trade balance is in favour of China and Bangladesh will have to look for options to rectify this soon. But the more these two economies get interlinked, the more difficult this task is going to be.

BANGLADESH AND BRI

The BRI is regarded as the brainchild of Xi Jinping which was announced in 2013. It is also a very ambitious project launched by Beijing with the hope that it would help in expanding Chinese political and economic clout. The proposed geographical space of BRI will be from East Asia to Europe. As per some reports, by 2027 China would have invested around 1.2 to 1.3 trillion dollars in various BRI projects across the world.¹⁶

Bangladesh joined the BRI in October 2016. Since Bangladesh has officially joined the BRI, China and Bangladesh are engaged in a number of infrastructure projects. It is estimated that the Chinese investments in Bangladeshi infrastructure projects amount to around 10 billion dollars.¹⁷ Bangladesh was further integrated into the BRI with the inauguration of

the Bangladesh-China Silk Road Forum (BCSRF) in May 2019. During the inaugural ceremony, the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Mr. Zhang Zuo said, “Bangladesh’s diplomatic policy of “friend to all, malice to none”, and President Xi Jinping’s Thought on Diplomacy, both have provided new opportunities and new ideas for win-win cooperation for our two countries”.¹⁸ During the 2021 virtual forum of the BCSRF, the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming underscored the benefit of ‘looking east’ for Bangladesh. He argued that for developed future of Dhaka it needs to look at ‘east’ (China). Even though the West is still powerful, the future lies with the east as it is becoming the growth centre.¹⁹ China thus hinted at the benefits for Bangladesh in its economic engagements with Beijing.

There are a number of infrastructure projects under construction in Bangladesh under the BRI banner. One of the major projects is the Padma Bridge with the investment of 3.3 billion dollars. What is interesting about this project is that the World Bank had refused to invest in the construction of this bridge, and this is when Beijing extended its help and agreed to invest 70 percent of the cost.²⁰ The Padma Bridge is an important project for the Bangladeshi government. This bridge will help in boosting domestic economy and connectivity. It connects various southern cities of Bangladesh to Dhaka and also reduces the travel time. It will also help in boosting the tourism industry and thus help Bangladesh economically.²¹ The bridge was opened in ending June 2022 .

Beijing has also invested in a number of projects. Other landmark project which has been successfully completed is the Payra Power Plant. This plant which is a joint project between China and Bangladesh was inaugurated in March 2022, at an estimated cost of around 2 billion dollars. This project is a collaboration between North-West Power Generation Company Bangladesh Limited (NWPGCL) and China National Machinery Import & Export Corporation. With its inauguration, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina declared that Bangladesh has full electricity coverage.²² The major achievement here is that Bangladesh has become the first nation in South Asia to actually achieve this feat.

The maritime runaway in Cox’s Bazar is another important project

under construction, works on which began in August 2021. It is a joint venture between Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) and Changjiang Yichang Waterway Engineering Bureau (CYWEB) and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). The deal was signed in February 2021. The project is delayed due to the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. However, by February 2022 almost 20 percent of the work was completed.²³ This shows that the Chinese projects are getting back on track and will be seeing fruition. Though the Covid 19 pandemic did derail and delayed some of the projects, however, Beijing seems committed to its promise.

In October 2018, the Chinese firm Tianhe Mechanical Equipment Manufacturing Co Ltd., announced that it will be exporting largest shield tunnelling machine to Bangladesh. This will help in the reducing the travel time between Chittagong Airport and other parts of Bangladesh.²⁴ In January 2022, China and Bangladesh decided to construct a four-way expressway under the public private partnership (PPP). Under this deal, the Chinese side will construct and maintain this expressway for the next 25 years.²⁵ These projects are clear indication of the Chinese engagements in Bangladesh's infrastructure development plans.

Apart from infrastructure, the relationship has further strengthened at the people-to-people level as well. As per reports, in the year 2019 around 35,000 Bangladeshi tourists went to China, while the number of Bangladeshi students studying in China stood at 5,000.²⁶ The Confucius Institutes in Bangladesh are also helping the Chinese influence. An article in Xinhua quotes Bangladeshi students as saying, "Great help and support have been given to us by the Chinese government, people, Chinese companies and Chinese teachers. My friends, we should work hard on our study so that we can return their help and contribute to Sino-Bangladesh friendship".²⁷ Such media reports indicate that the Chinese propaganda machinery is using the Chinese presence in Bangladesh to project a very positive image of Beijing among the people of Bangladesh.

Given the fact that most of the projects in Bangladesh have been nearing completion or have been completed, proves that China-Bangladesh engagement is one important example of success of the BRI. In the last

few years, Beijing's investments in the smaller countries of South Asia have come under major criticism because of the debt trap challenges, especially in the case of Sri Lanka. Bangladesh is also one of the few countries where there have been no red flags of debt trap and Chinese loans affecting the economy adversely. Most of the projects which the Bangladeshi government has initiated and completed, are focussed towards helping the overall economy of the country and strengthening its position. Dhaka understands that it is a developing economy in need of investments and money, however, it has managed to steer the loans in the right direction. The focus on joint ventures with Beijing has worked towards Dhaka's advantage and it has helped Bangladesh in becoming one of the fastest growing economies in South Asia.

CHINA-BANGLADESH DEFENCE TIES

China-Bangladesh defence ties are not very new, and the ties are also very strong. Bangladesh is the second largest customer of Chinese arms and military technologies. In November 2016, Bangladesh bought two 035G class submarines from China. Bangladesh named the submarines 'BNS Nabajatra' and 'BNS Joyjatra' and Bangladesh paid around 203 million dollars.²⁸

One of the prominent visits to Bangladesh by a Chinese high ranking defence official recently was in April 2021 by Wei Fenghe, the Chinese State Councillor and Minister of National Defence. During this visit, both sides discussed ways to strengthen the bilateral military cooperation.²⁹ No surprises that Wei Fenghe was quoted saying, "To jointly maintain regional peace and stability.... the two sides should make joint efforts against powers outside the region setting up military alliance in South Asia and practicing hegemonism".³⁰ Well this also indicates that Beijing understands the importance of Bangladesh in establishing its foothold in South Asia and wants to use its position to wean Dhaka away from getting closer to the United States, especially after the international discussions on the Indo-Pacific. China perceives the Indo-Pacific as an anti-China grouping.

Another major defence cooperation was announced in February 2022. Beijing announced that it will be setting up a maintenance facility in Bangladesh for the FM-90 surface-to-air missiles. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Bangladeshi Army both use the missile system. In 2011 China supplied these missiles to Bangladesh which have a 25 kms radar range, and is now keen to help Dhaka to service them.³¹ While in 2019, Beijing had declared that it will be building the first submarine base for Bangladesh. It was reported that the Chinese company Powertech Technology Inc, will be constructing a permanent submarine base in Cox's Bazaar.³²

However, all is not fine when it comes to the defence relations. Some of the major military equipment supplied by China to Bangladeshi navy has faced quality issues. In the last decade, Dhaka has spent 2.6 billion dollars in buying equipment from China.³³ Given that China is Bangladesh's largest defence supplier, the issue of faulty equipments can become a major challenge for the overall security of Bangladesh. If such challenges continue with the Chinese defence technologies and arms and ammunition, Dhaka may be forced to look at some other alternatives. If Beijing hopes to continue monopolizing the Bangladeshi defence market it will have to upgrade its manufacturing structure.

COVID PANDEMIC AND CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

The outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic has adversely affected the global community economically. It has put strain on bilateral relationships as well. The fact that the virus originated in Wuhan, China, has also affected the Chinese position internationally. There has been a general mistrust towards Beijing, as it is believed that China did not disclose the existence of the virus and the outbreak on time, an act which could have prevented a lot of damage to people, economy and countries. Naming the virus as the "Wuhan virus" has further intensified the anti-China feelings globally. In some cities there were instances of violence against Chinese nationals, which indicates the level of anger and frustration the world and generally people harbour towards China. Because of the pandemic, the global

community has suffered economically, emotionally and personally as well and the path to recovery is going to be long and difficult. The pandemic also underscored the intense interconnectedness in the globalized order, especially when it comes to the economy and the supply chains of production.

One of the major tools used by Beijing to counter the anti-China narrative vis-a-vis the Covid 19 outbreak has been to engage in developing a positive outlook. So during the pandemic, Beijing continued to engage in positive diplomatic manoeuvres. China did donate testing kits and respiratory humidification machines to Bangladesh in addition to 3 million medical masks, 500,000 N95 masks, more than 100,000 protective suits.³⁴ In June 2021, China donated 600,000 doses of Chinese Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine as a sign of friendship. China also gave 500,000 doses in May 2021.³⁵

Beijing decided to use this outbreak to further strengthen the bilateral relationship, when in August 2021 Bangladesh signed a deal to manufacture China's Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between China's Sinopharm Group, Bangladesh's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Incepta Vaccine Ltd.³⁶ In keeping with the spirit of friendship, the Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka stated in September 2021 that China will continue to support and stand by Bangladesh. He was quoted saying, "Let China and Bangladesh keep our hands joined on the way to our dreams, to a peaceful and prosperous Asia, and to a brilliant shared future of mankind".³⁷

The Chinese media also published a number of news report highlighting how Beijing had helped Bangladesh overcome the need for vaccines. In a news report published in Xinhua, a number of Bangladeshi officials and people were quoted as thanking Beijing for its help and care. The article quoted Mushtaq Husain, an advisor to the Bangladeshi Ministry of Health saying, "We appreciate all of China's great contribution to our effort against the pandemic and hope our friendly cooperation will continue for years to come," said the official.³⁸ Such reports were regularly published to portray the Chinese efforts in positive light and with the hope that they will counter the anti-China narratives and feelings. It also

generated a positive image of the Chinese government domestically, by showing the Chinese citizens that the government was engaged in more than just economic and defence engagements. It was trying to focus on the efforts undertaken by the Chinese government to help its partner nations battle the Covid 19 pandemic successfully.

However, everything did not go as smoothly as China would have expected. After the initial donation of vaccines was over and Bangladesh decided to buy the Covid 19 vaccines from China, there were some issues related to the price. The details of the deals were not disclosed, and the vaccines were priced higher than the cost of Indian and other vaccines available, which did create some bitterness towards China and generated unease among the Bangladeshi people towards the closeness between Bangladesh and China.

CONCLUSION

If one analyses the bilateral relations in a silo, it can be argued that the growing closeness between China and Bangladesh has proved to be beneficial to both sides. What is impressive is that even though China did not recognize Bangladesh initially and snubbed the overtures made by Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman initially, today Xi Jinping's 'China Dream' and the Bangladesh's 'Sonar Bangla' goal, are being pitched as inter-dependent.³⁹ The large number of infrastructure projects constructed by China has helped Dhaka improve the overall connectivity for trade. Such developments help in the overall improvement of the economic status of the country and help people have access to jobs and employment. But it would be naive to imagine that the Chinese interests are solely economic. In the last few years, one has witnessed that the increasing investment in Bangladesh has given Beijing higher leverage, and this is reflected in China's attempts to interfere and influence Dhaka's diplomacy.

Also, all is not as smooth as it appears. Some projects have come under scanner and Bangladesh has decided to terminate them. One prominent example is that in 2020, Bangladesh decided not to go ahead with the development of the Sonadia port with China, citing its effects on

the existing biodiversity.⁴⁰ While one can accept this argument, there was unease in India given the advantage this could have provided to Beijing. Recently, Bangladesh also declined the Chinese proposal to build a high-speed railway line between Dhaka and Chittagong,⁴¹ even though this would have helped in the overall connectivity of the country.

Another major challenge which the Chinese investments are facing within Bangladesh are corruption and tax evasions. There have also been reports of Chinese companies being involved in corruption in Bangladesh. The Chinese government has expressed concern regarding these developments. It is believed that the Chinese companies engaged in the construction of roads and bridges in Bangladesh have been involved in tax evasions.⁴² Such news reports greatly harm the image of the Chinese companies involved in projects in Bangladesh.

The fact that Chinese interests are not purely economic and have other goals than just strengthen the Chinese soft power, was obvious when in 2021 Beijing asserted that Bangladesh should refrain from joining QUAD, which it perceives to be anti-China grouping. It “warned that participating in such groups will result in substantial damage to the bilateral relations”.⁴³ As a response to this, the United States issued a statement that Bangladesh is a sovereign nation which can make its own decisions and that the United States and Bangladesh shared good diplomatic relations. Dhaka’s response indicated that it was not very happy with the Chinese stance. The Bangladeshi Foreign Minister called the statement by the Chinese Ambassador as “aggressive and very unfortunate”.⁴⁴ Such statements provide an insight into the long-term Chinese goals in South Asia. Beijing will continue to use its investment as a leverage to gain political and geo-strategic mileage.

Other than Bangladesh, these investment and increasing Chinese inroads in South Asia have proved to be a major security and diplomatic challenge for India. The Chinese government, given its deep pockets, can invest heavily in smaller nations and when time comes can use these investments for geo-political and strategic leverage. Most countries in South Asia are in need for infrastructural growth and financial investments, which Beijing has used to its advantage. However, recent developments

in the region, especially, the challenges faced by Sri Lanka have become a major warning for other nations and a lesson against unchecked Chinese investments. One of the factors that adversely affected the Sri Lankan economy, is the Chinese loans which has aggravated the ongoing financial crisis. Colombo is in a major debt-trap and is unable to find a way to get out of it. The leasing of Hambantota Port for a period of 99 years to Beijing, has also raised the debates around the sovereignty of the smaller nations. It also makes it easier for the Chinese military to set up base in South Asia.

Given this backdrop, in the last few years several smaller nations have been declining to go ahead with some BRI projects. Apart from Malaysia, Bangladesh is one country which has done so. In addition to this, Bangladesh also must manage a diplomatic balance between China and India. India and Bangladesh are intertwined historically, geographically and culturally, something which cannot be changed. Even if Dhaka wants, it is impossible for it to tilt fully towards Beijing. Foreign Minister of Bangladesh AK Abdul Momen made it clear, when he said, "We have a historical rock-solid relationship with India while China is a development partner. Further, we want to develop a solid relationship with all the states of India".⁴⁵ With rise in Chinese investments, this will be a tight rope to walk.

New Delhi has also shown keenness towards further strengthening its relations with Bangladesh. The year 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh. In March 2021, Indian Prime Minister visited Bangladesh, which was his first international visit since the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. In April 2022 the Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar also visited Dhaka. Bangladesh has also paid its attention towards India and has been keen to reciprocate. Such high-level exchanges underscore the fact that India considers Bangladesh as an important neighbour. However, New Delhi knows that it does not have similar financial capabilities as Beijing and is thus unable to undertake massive infrastructure projects. On the other hand, one major lesson which New Delhi can and should learn from recent Chinese inroads is the necessity to fulfil its promises to its neighbours.

Bangladesh is a key country in South Asia and is today closer to

China. However, given the developments of last few years in the region and the increasing assertion by China under Xi Jinping, one cannot positively say that it will continue to be on an upward trajectory. Beijing under Xi has abandoned the cautious dictum of Deng Xiaoping of 'hide your strength and bide your time'. Under Xi, China is ready to show its new found financial and military strength and to propel China to the centre of international order. Bangladesh being a small nation will be conscious of its sovereignty and may not want to give unchecked access to Beijing. The developments in Sri Lanka prove to be a warning too. The way Beijing is using its financial clout to push countries to tow its political line, may prove to be an impediment.

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**CONTRIBUTIONS FOR PUBLICATION AND ANY ENQUIRIES
SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO :**

Prof. K. WARIKOO

Editor and Secretary General

Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation

B-6/86, Safdarjung Enclave

New Delhi - 110029 (India)

Tel. : 0091-11-41651969

E-mail: kwarikoo@gmail.com

Website: www.himalayanresearch.org

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Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers R.No. 67256/97

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HIMALAYAN RESEARCH AND CULTURAL FOUNDATION

B-6/86, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110029 (India)

Tele : 0091-11-41651969

E-mail: kwarikoo@gmail.com Website: www.himalayanresearch.org