

# A New Dawn In India-Bangladesh Relations?

**Habib Siddiqui**

Bangladesh and India share waters from 54 common rivers and share common land and maritime boundaries. Just to put into perspective, two countries share 4096 km of land boundary. Even after the signing of the Mujib-Indira Pact of 1974, there remain 51 enclaves of Bangladesh, measuring 7,083.72 acres, which are land-locked inside India whose residents live in abysmal conditions, with a lack of water, roads, electricity, schools and medicines. That situation is simply unacceptable in the 21st century and needs immediate redress. Six kilometres and a half of border along the Comilla-Tripura area still remain undemarcated. This must change.

In the past, Bangladesh government has frequently protested BSF incursions inside Bangladesh, and shootings which resulted in deaths of many unarmed Bangladeshi citizens. As of last month, the death count alone in Bangladesh territory since 1990 stands at 1090. There is hardly a week when Bangladeshis living along the border are not victims of BSF shootings, thus souring relationship between the two peoples. Such an aggressive and utterly irresponsible practice on the part of BSF must come to an halt. The tradition in the sub-continent dictates that people value life and cannot therefore accept practices that are grossly criminal and inhuman.

The crucial water share issue is like a life and death issue for the people of Bangladesh which is a lower riparian country and is, therefore, vulnerable to any unilateral action on her common rivers by India. While Bangladeshis understand the increasing energy demands within India, they simply cannot welcome any initiative that devastates Bangladesh. Already Bangladeshis have suffered enormously from the adverse effects of dams and barrages that were constructed on many common rivers. Whereas during the lean seasons, the water flow in the Teesta River used to be 4,000 cusec at the minimum before the Gajoldoba barrage was constructed some 70 km upstream from Dalia point in Nilphamari in 1985, Bangladesh now gets less than a thousand cusec. Bangladesh is not getting its agreed upon due share of water flow.

To meet energy needs, in the last few years India has also constructed several dams across the Teesta. Such measures have resulted in loss of navigation during the dry season and flooding during the wet season, let alone causing loss of livelihood of millions of Bangladeshi people that depend on water. Instead of poverty alleviation, these structures are forcing poverty onto the people of Bangladesh.

As to the Farakka Barrage, it has been described, as the Death Trap for Bangladesh. A walk along the coast of the Padma and Teesta Rivers inside Bangladesh is sufficient to prove the claim. It will surely pain any conscientious human being, seeing the irreversible damages done on Bangladesh side.

As per 2007-08 statistics, Bangladesh imported \$ 3.7 billion worth of goods from India while Bangladesh exported \$35 million! (Informal trade is estimated to be at least double these numbers! The smuggling of contraband items from

India goes unnoticed!) As is quite evident, there is a huge trade imbalance between the two countries, which needs to be corrected as soon as possible. One of the prudent ways to resolving this trade deficit would be for Indian government to lift the Tariff, para-Tariff & non-Tariff barriers, which are currently imposed on goods imported from Bangladesh. The people in Bangladesh would also welcome direct trading facilities with India's seven eastern states. The import of Bangladeshi goods to those eastern states can also have a positive impact in not only closing the trade deficit with India but also reaping multi-faceted benefits to India in an area that is vulnerable to outside influence.

Everybody understands India's priorities to contain insurgency in her north-east corner, close to the Bangladesh border. The recent extradition of the ULFA leaders to the Indian government has demonstrated, Dhaka is very serious about ensuring that Bangladesh's soil is not used for terrorist and anti-state activities against India. Suffice it to say that Bangladeshis too expect similar reciprocities from India. For years, India has had sponsored and assisted subversive elements in the hilly districts of Bangladesh to destabilize Bangladesh. There are some 40 Santi Bahini camps inside India. There are even Bangasena terrorist camps operating inside the state of West Bengal today whose objective remains the disintegration of Bangladesh and the creation of a Hindu state called Bangabhumi, curving out 1/3 of Bangladesh in the south-western part. Such hostile activities should stop immediately for developing good bilateral relations.

Bangladesh is genuinely interested in the Asian Highway that allows regional states to be connected with each other. True, there is rationale in Indian government's request for transit routes that connect its north-eastern states with West Bengal via Bangladesh. For instance, the direct transit route from Kolkata in the state of West Bengal to Agartala in the state of Tripura via Bangladesh would reduce the distance from 1880 km to merely 740 km. For one thing for greater good of the entire region, a more comprehensive scheme is needed that allows connecting Bangladesh to India, China, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan through transit routes inside India. Because of regional security concerns, such transit routes ought to be used purely for tourism, trade and commercial use. Also, Bangladeshis expect connectivity to all their enclaves inside India. In accordance with the Mujib-Indira Treaty of 1974, and following the due process (Supreme Court order and constitutional amendment), the Government of Bangladesh promptly handed over the Berubari enclave to India. Sadly, India has neither ratified the treaty nor met its obligations, including the transfer of the Tin Bigha corridor. The enclaves of Dohogram and Angorputa near the border have to have 24/7/365 corridor facility. Denying such transit rights to people living inside the enclaves is simply criminal, inhuman and unacceptable.

According to the 1974 Mujib-Indira Treaty, midstream of border-rivers defines the boundaries of the two countries. However, subsequent dykes and embankments that have been constructed by India have had some adverse effects. These have led not only to severe soil erosion on the Bangladeshi side but also changed the course of those rivers. The erosion on the Bangladesh side gives way to new chars (or islands) on the other side which Indian villagers illegally occupy in no time with the help of the BSF. Bangladesh is losing thousands of

acres of land to India in this process, and this must stop. The 1974 Treaty stipulated that the line of separation between Bangladesh and India is defined along fixed lines and not shifting lines, which happens as a result of shift in the movement of common rivers along the border. It is more than urgent to ensure that the common border along those rivers remain physically where it was back in 1974 when the treaty was signed between the two governments.

Also, the maritime boundary demarcation in the Bay of Bengal remains a major contentious issue, especially in the light of offshore oil and gas explorations. Bangladesh Government is genuinely concerned about claims made by India and Myanmar that appear to Bangladesh to be exaggerated, unscientific, irrational, ill-intentioned and illegal, and aim at sea- or zone-locking Bangladesh. As evidenced from direction of the rivers to the Bay of Bengal, there is every reason to believe that natural prolongation of continental shelf is from north to south and not east to west. Bangladesh has recently registered its objection with the UN to India's and Myanmar's claims over certain areas in the Bay of Bengal.

It is disheartening to see that the status of the Talpatty Island, formed by silts brought by southward flowing river Hariabhanga in south-western Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal, still remains disputed between the two nations. Is India's might becoming the right to her exaggerated, unscientific claims and illegal possessions? Should not such disputes be resolved mutually and justly between the two countries? □□□

*[source : <http://www.countercurrents.org/siddiqui050110.htm>]*