

# Realities of Bangladesh-India relations



**THE OVERTON WINDOW**  
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

In an interview published by *The Daily Star* on October 27, Dr Ahsan Mansur, while discussing the recent IMF revelation that Bangladesh is set to surpass India in terms of per capita GDP, said something very interesting. He said, "in the recent Indian political narrative", one highly influential political leader and the current home minister and BJP head, labelled Bangladeshis as "termites and alleged that poor Bangladeshis were invading India by migrating en masse." We suspect he is not alone in holding this view and propagating it. The IMF disclosure debunks the myth of Bangladesh always being the poor, underperforming, help-needing, threat-posing neighbour and should make him, and others who may harbour similar views, reassess their positions.

India's poor economic performance of late undoubtedly calls for serious introspection within the Indian society, including the way it thinks about its neighbours. The best way forward would be to come out of their own myths about Bangladesh.

The overriding myth that generates many others is that of Bangladesh not being a dependable neighbour, that we are an ungrateful lot and have forgotten the role India played in our birth, and that we need constant watching lest we go astray. This myth of undependability makes India look with suspicion every time we take a step that does not meet with its own narrative as to what Bangladesh should do. The issue at hand concerns our relations with China. Every time it accepts Chinese

funds or aid, Bangladesh is looked upon with suspicion by India. Or counterintuitively, such relationships with China is seen as not being a good neighbour to India. But politicians and the media in India should recognise that Bangladesh, because of India's historical role in its Liberation War of 1971, always considers India its greatest friend—and that has been made explicitly clear under the current administration.

Some Indian pundits do recognise this. According to journalist Shekhar Gupta, "Bangladesh is India's most friendly neighbour". However, due to much of the Indian mainstream media's failure to fully recognise and appreciate the importance of its relations with Bangladesh, it is India that has pursued policies—such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and National Register of Citizens—that risks alienating its "most important neighbour".

According to Ali Riaz, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Illinois State University, Bangladesh has "assiduously met India's demands of providing free transit to Indian goods"—without even asking India to cover for the increased cost of maintenance for Bangladesh, arising from granting India the facility; it has allowed India "the use of Bangladesh's ports, setting up a coastal surveillance system radar in the country", permitted "withdrawal of water from the Feni river," as well as played an important role in supporting India's counter-insurgency efforts in the northeast.

A lot of these facilities might have seemed over the top, had Bangladesh provided any of them, under the conditions that it did, to any other country. However, in India's case, it didn't seem much of a problem because Bangladesh sees itself as having a special relationship with India.

On the other hand, many "legitimate claims against India by Bangladesh have been brushed aside [by India]." Among these is the most obvious—India's failure to finalise the Teesta River water sharing deal with Bangladesh. But that isn't the only one. India has recently passed an amendment to its citizenship laws which made it easier for non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh (as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan)

against it from Indian businessmen, have been disappointing. India's reasoning, in all these cases, was that it was looking after its own interest. But then, why can't Bangladesh accept Chinese funds for projects that serve Bangladesh's interests? Why must Indian political elites—while propagating how special India's relationship with Bangladesh is—question Bangladesh's loyalty and friendship with India at the same

China and India are Bangladesh's biggest trading partners, with annual trade deficits of USD 12 billion and USD 8 billion, respectively—Bangladesh exports around USD 1 billion to each country. Bangladesh, therefore, would most certainly like to have good relations with both—and perhaps going a step further, hope for good relations between China-India. But the reality, which Bangladesh cannot help, is that there are legitimate tensions between the two Asian giants. However, as Lailufar Yasmin, professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, explains: "Bangladesh is not leaning towards any country. Bangladesh is India's largest trade partner in South Asia while China is equally influencing Bangladesh and Indian economies."

Bangladesh cannot escape the geographical reality that it is almost completely surrounded by India with a 4,096 kilometre shared border. As such, cordial ties with India is critical for Bangladesh's economic development and national security. At the same time, it is in Bangladesh's interest to also reach out to its Chinese neighbour—or any other country that is willing to help for that matter—for developmental assistance and economic support. And that is all it has been doing. In some cases, what happened was that China offered to help, where India did not—or could not, for whatever reason.

To take one example, it was reported in August that Bangladesh had reached out to China for funding worth USD 6.4 billion for nine infrastructure projects. What dominated media reporting in India was the inclusion of one project in particular—to better manage the Teesta's water within Bangladesh's own territory. India for years has failed to deliver on its promise to settle the Teesta dispute with Bangladesh, mainly, as is understood,

because of domestic reasons. So what was Bangladesh to do? Not seek alternative ways to minimise the resulting problems?

While one could argue that this was a case of China playing realpolitik, Bangladesh was doing nothing of that sort. And as far as Bangladesh and China are concerned, it isn't like the two countries always see eye to eye. For example, in June 2019, Bangladesh asked China for support in what Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen termed "the safe and dignified return of Rohingya Muslims to their own land in Myanmar." Many commentators, however, believe that is unlikely to happen due to China's strategic interest in Myanmar—Myanmar is the only country that provides China with direct access via land to the Indian Ocean.

India, however, has no such interests. Yet it has refused to take Bangladesh's side—despite Bangladesh being on the right side from a humanitarian perspective. There seems to be no logical explanation for India's reluctance to support Bangladesh on an issue that has gotten as far as the International Court of Justice.

Thus, if the Bangladesh-India relationship (which is good as it is) is to reach the next level, it is India that has to take more of an initiative. Instead of making provocative remarks about its neighbour, India should talk to Bangladesh, and try to figure out mutually beneficial pathways that can help both countries to carve out a better and more prosperous future for their people. At the end of the day, the two countries share many similar challenges—which means mutual cooperation is in both their interests. But the ball, quite clearly, is in India's court.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina shakes hand with her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi in India's New Delhi on October 5, 2019. PHOTO: COLLECTED

to acquire Indian citizenship—which has garnered some controversy. That, along with its registration programme in the north-eastern state of Assam, which some fear could spark an exodus of Muslims in India into Bangladesh, prompted a number of questions and concerns in Bangladesh. Its delay in granting Bangladeshi goods duty free access to the Indian market and the sudden imposition of import restrictions on Bangladeshi jute, despite protests

time? Even when it came to Chinese involvement in the development of a deep-seaport in Bangladesh, Bangladesh took India's concerns into consideration, and went ahead with Japanese assistance, instead of China's. But India still showed reservations or gave objections to other instances of Bangladesh-China cooperation, even though such cooperation posed no direct threats to India's security.

# US elections: Who will the minority communities vote for?



GEMINI WAHJAJ

In the last four years, President Donald Trump has defunded social programmes, rolled back civil rights protections, and overturned federal

protections of land at lightning speed, while carrying on an unrelenting spectacle of suffering. His hires to cabinet positions have been disastrous. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos proposed billions of dollars in cuts to

Security Advisor John Bolton was a warmonger who brought the US to the brink of war with Iran.

Trump's presidency was spectacularly bad for people of colour, including policies such as the Muslim ban, family separation at the border, raids on undocumented immigrants, and calls for deploying the National Guard to quash protests against police killings of Black Americans. However, as another election comes around, not all people of colour are rushing to the polls to vote for the Democratic candidate Joe Biden either.

In Florida and Pennsylvania, Black and Latino voters did not turn out in sufficient numbers during early voting. In Philadelphia, people are out in the streets protesting the police killing of a mentally ill Black man named Walter Wallace Jr. When a reporter asked Joe Biden to respond to the shooting, Biden chose instead to criticise the protesters: "What I say is that there is no excuse whatsoever for the looting and the violence."

Many young Black voters feel angry about being told to save America by voting for Joe Biden, whose policies have ravaged Black communities for over 40 years. Biden was the architect of the 1994 crime bill that led to the mass incarceration of Black men and the decimation of Black communities. Biden was also responsible for passing the bankruptcy bill, which denied college graduates from claiming bankruptcy if they were unable to pay back their loans. The Obama/Biden response to the 2008 financial crisis was to bail out Wall Street rather than homeowners, leaving Black families to lose their homes. Middle class Black



Demonstrators clash with riot police during a rally after the death of Walter Wallace Jr, a Black man who was shot by police in Philadelphia. PHOTO: BASTIAAN SLABBERS/REUTERS

Americans lost most of their wealth under Obama and Biden.

No matter who wins, many young Black voters feel that they will lose. Michelle Alexander and Keeanga-Yamahtta-Taylor have written about how Black communities have been brutalised by a racialised criminal justice system and cut off from wealth in a white supremacist society, in which the majority of Black Americans still do not have access to decent housing, good public education, healthcare, or a college education. Angela Davis has written about how a capitalist, racialised justice system profits off the imprisonment of Black bodies.

The most brutal aspect of the Trump administration was his family separation policy, which led to the separation of children from their parents at the borders. We now

know of 545 children who have still not found their parents. Yet, Biden has the lowest support among Latino voters. Obama and Biden deported three million people and also separated children from their families.

Professional South Asians tend to be reliable Democratic voters. South Asians working for Silicon Valley, oil and gas, or Wall Street are financially comfortable and benefit from a liberal Democratic Party that values diversity and favours corporations. They loathe Donald Trump's hateful rhetoric and xenophobic policies. Hate crimes against Muslims and other minorities have been rampant and brutal under Donald Trump, and there are fears that a Trump reelection may lead to a rising tide of fascism and efforts to denaturalise citizens. Yet, there are South Asians who support

Trump, as evidenced by the visual spectacle of the 50,000 Indians who attended the Modi-Trump rally in Texas. Mehnaaz Momen, Associate Professor at Texas A&M International University, Laredo, says, "A Trump reelection will probably mean a huge economic and health crisis nationwide. It would also mean the rise of white supremacist power. On the other hand, in a Biden presidency, I see upcoming foreign wars." Many Yemeni voters will not vote for Biden because the US supported the Saudi-led bombing of Yemen. Other Asian voters worry about what any US president could do to other countries, from invasion to regime change to bombing and Tuesday kill lists.

Working class people of colour are the least likely to support either candidate. A Pew research study shows that almost half of the non-voters in 2016 were people of colour. More than half of non-voters make less than USD 30,000 a year. In Michigan, Florida and Wisconsin, Black non-voters who did not vote in 2016 hailed from communities ravaged by incarceration, police brutality, and unemployment because of trade deals that exported jobs overseas.

This may be the easiest year for a Democrat to win an election, with a pandemic raging on. More than 230,000 people have died, the economy has been savaged, and people have lost jobs. But most working-class people of colour think that they will continue to suffer under either administration.

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public education. Scott Pruitt, formerly in charge of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was a climate change denier who persuaded Donald Trump to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement. His former National

**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

NOVEMBER 4, 2008  
**FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESIDENT ELECTED**  
Democratic politician Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected President of the United States.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**  
1 Church doctrine  
6 Yell "boo!" at  
11 Snowy wader  
12 Lost color  
13 Spooky  
15 Toe count  
16 Squeak stopper  
17 Plaything  
18 Odor  
20 Tremble  
23 Party prep  
27 Llama's land  
28 Arbor climber  
29 In a fitting way  
31 Evil spirit  
32 Clothing brand  
34 Money machine  
37 Beanie or beret  
38 Farrow of  
"Rosemary's Baby"

**DOWN**  
1 Skilled  
2 Storybook monster  
3 Amused look  
4 Sister of Jo, Amy and Beth  
5 Not out  
6 Hexes  
7 Soup buy  
8 Stepped down  
9 Nevada city  
10 Tense

41 Heading toward dawn  
14 Suit accessory  
18 Skeleton part  
19 Flat  
20 Masseur's place  
21 Cool, to jazzmen  
22 Museum focus  
24 Director Burton  
25 One, for Juan  
26 Farm enclosure  
30 Marina boats  
31 Rely  
33 Halloween flyer  
34 Basics  
35 Easy run  
36 Silent performer  
38 Lode setting  
39 Machu Picchu native  
40 Like some wines  
42 Ruby or garnet  
43 Neither follower

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

L	A	S	P	O	P	U	S		
L	A	N	C	E	D	O	N	N	A
A	S	C	O	T	D	E	L	A	Y
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S	E	T	S	A	N	T	E		

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT