

Bilateral ties must go beyond reciprocity

Former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Deb Mukherjee tells M Anwarul Haq

DEB Mukherjee was the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh for more than five years. His tenure saw two governments in Dhaka and three in New Delhi. His association with Bangladesh, however, began way back in the early-1970s as an official in his country's mission.

Just before he left Dhaka, Mukherjee discussed at length various issues with The Daily Star. We received replies to the question we had earlier sent him and later he gave answers to several supplementary questions. (Supplementary questions are denoted as SQ and supplementary answers as SA)

The Daily Star (DS): You are the longest serving Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh. Give us an overview of your tenure here.

Deb Mukherjee (DM): I have been extremely fortunate in representing India in Bangladesh during an eventful period in our bilateral relations. The major irritant in our relations was resolved and progress has been made in different areas of interaction. There has been a surge in people-to-people relationship and interaction, which, of course, is one of the main pillars in constructing a durable relationship.

DS: You served in Bangladesh during the mid-1970s and then in the mid-1990s. What were the major changes you found in Bangladesh-India relations during the intervening two decades?

DM: Bangladesh was a very young country when I was last here. She is now an important member of the international community. Our bilateral relations during the fifteen years separating my two assignments in Dhaka, for part of which I was also on the Bangladesh desk in Delhi, were proper and friendly. We were not able however to move forward adequately in developing the kind of linkages which might have been of greater benefit to our peoples. Meanwhile, of course Bangladesh had initiated the SAARC process and that itself subsumed some elements of bilateral relations.

DS: What is the state of our bilateral relations compared with the situation when you arrived? What are some of the major stumbling blocks in Bangladesh-India relations today?

DM: With regard to the first part of the question, I think I have already answered this in response to your first question. I am very clear in my mind that there are no major stumbling

blocks in Bangladesh-India relations. What needs to be understood is that when two neighbours densely populated on either side share more than 4,000 kilometres of land and river border, where interactions take place at various levels in a variety of ways, there will be problems from time to time. This is inevitable.

Such problems should be anticipated where possible and handled with understanding in a spirit of mutual co-operation. These must not be blown out of proportion. I think at least responsible sections of the media have an important role to play in this regard.

DS: The water issue had been a long-standing problem between the two countries. How did things begin to change? What factors led to the Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh? How did the two sides converge towards an agreement?

DM: Informal discussions had been going on between Dhaka and New Delhi in trying to find a solution to the vexed problem for a number of years. The major areas of concern to both sides were, I think, identified. There was a realisation in both the capitals for quite some time that it was necessary to set this issue at rest. What we saw in December 1996 was therefore the culmination of a process. It goes without saying that appropriate political direction was received from both sides in coming to a conclusion.

DS: Were there any other factors that contributed to the signing of the water accord?

SA: The visit of the Chief Minister of West Bengal at that time was extremely important. It must be remembered that India is also an aggregate of small states. So when we look into relations between India and Bangladesh, this matter should also be looked into. I think the Ganges Water Treaty would have been very difficult without the co-operation that was received from the West Bengal government.

DS: Similarly, what were some of the key developments that led to the CHT Accord?

DM: This was, of course, essentially an internal problem

of Bangladesh. India's involvement was to the extent of the 50,000 refugees who had taken shelter there.

I think it was a matter of winning the confidence of the people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the refugees in India. I personally visited several refugee camps in Tripura immediately after taking up my assignment in Dhaka and met with some of their leaders. I did so because the Bangladesh government had impressed upon me the importance they attached to the resolution of the problem and the return of the refugees. On our part, we always tried to persuade the leadership among the refugees that they should co-operate with the Bangladesh government in working out a reasonable formula for their return. Things seem to have fallen in place in the agreement reached in the latter part of 1997.

DS: It has been said that India waited for the AL to come to power to make the Water Treaty and the CHT Accord, otherwise these problems could have been solved earlier. How far is this true?

DM: This is of course entirely and absolutely untrue. It seems to be forgotten that the first agreement on sharing Ganges waters, though of a short duration, was signed between India and a non-AL government. This line of thinking also implies that these agreements were only of benefit to Bangladesh. This again is not true. If a long-term water sharing agreement was important for Bangladesh so was it important for India to get a major irritant out of the way. Also, as I have already said, discussions on Ganges waters had been going on for some time. May I say that within days of my arrival in Dhaka in March 1995, I was discussing possible sharing formulae with your government.

DS: With these two major accords, one may think that Indo-Bangladesh relations

should have advanced much further than these actually have. What do you think prevented our relationship from advancing further? Why is our relationship not progressing fast enough at the moment?

DM: Given the sensitivity of our relations, I do not know if I would recommend very rapid movements. It is important to demonstrate the mutuality of benefits. At the same time, time lost is opportunity lost and it is perhaps arguable that we could have moved forward at a somewhat greater pace. Having said that we must not also lose sight of many forward movements that have taken place and a certain positive ambience that has been built up. But we must construct further on this, particularly in issues relating to the economy.

I believe that at a recent discussion organised by a leading Bengali paper where the participants were former Bangladeshi Foreign Secretaries, it was felt that Bangladesh needed to have a consensus on the kind of relationship that it wishes to develop with India.

DS: There is often talk about "reciprocity" or the lack of it from Bangladesh side. What is actually meant by it from the Indian perspective? How, in your view, could Bangladesh show "reciprocity"?

DM: I have a problem with the indiscriminate use of the word "reciprocity". Certainly, you can have reciprocity in matters like civil aviation or some specific arrangement or package. But the development of relationships has to go beyond reciprocity at every step. India should have a stake in the well being and prosperity of Bangladesh. The same should apply to Bangladesh. I believe that it should follow from this that neither country would do anything that would be inimical to the interests of the other and should also take positive steps which are beneficial to both or even only to the other if it causes no harm to itself. International relations is a matter of identifying win-win situations. I am sure neither India nor Bangladesh would only seek unilateral advantages when addressing the interests and concerns of the other. It is of course true the relations between nations, as between individuals, cannot be entirely one-sided. What is important is to proceed on the basis of mutual benefit in the totality of relations.

SA: I do not know that there is any stumbling block. I think there is no issue with a capital "T". When there is such a border, there would be things (incidents) at times. But it can be sorted out through goodwill.

DS: I believe that Bangladesh needs to have a consensus on the issues. It is you that have to reach it. I will leave it at that. As for India, we would like to move on.

DS: What about the 25 categories of duty-free items that you were supposed to allow from Bangladesh to go into India?

SA: As for the 25 items, there is a joint committee which is supposed to look into several issues. And those issues have been identified. Please, check your records of Mr. Tofail's Ahmed visit. So the joint committee has to meet and discuss those issues. Unless it does so, we are not getting anywhere.

DS: If Bangladesh does not export gas would India look elsewhere?

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