

# Indo-Bangladesh relations: the importance of perception

For improvement of relations the ball is now squarely in Indian court with a very short time span to change perception in Bangladesh that is crucial to forward movement. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister could determine which direction relations go.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh

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The excitement spun by the Bangladesh government about a paradigm shift in Bangladesh-India relations following Sheikh Hasina's state visit to India in January is receding. The promises made by India have either been slow in coming or where given, the Indian concessions have not been properly reflected in the media, particularly in Bangladesh.

It is to Bangladesh's credit that it has made the first move towards resolving the decades old problems with India just before and during Sheikh Hasina's visit to New Delhi. First, Bangladesh handed the top ULFA extremists to India, thus unequivocally backing India on its security concerns. Second, Bangladesh accepted India's long standing demand on land transit by signing an agreement on a US1 billion soft loan for mainly infrastructure development to build roads, railway lines, improve river ports, etc not just to help inland connectivity but also between India and its north-eastern provinces. The old concept of transit that was very sensitive for Bangladesh has now been positively replaced as an issue of connectivity in which Bangladesh has been promised to become the sub-regional connectivity hub with great economic promises.

The economic reasons forwarded by India and Bangladesh on connectivity are strong. Unfortunately, in the context of Bangladesh-India relations that have suffered from lack of trust, economics cannot be the sole rationale for moving relations forward. In fact, economic rationale will fall by the way side unless the political and other substantive issues from Bangladesh side such as water sharing, trade, resolution of land boundary, demarcation of the maritime boundary are handled first because the dividends of economics are not instant. In most cases such dividends would come after years of initiatives and actions. The people of Bangladesh would not have the patience to wait particularly because Bangladesh has already met India's security concerns and on way to meet its transit needs.

For Bangladesh, the impatience is also enhanced from the nature of its politics where even foreign policy is contentious. When it comes to India, the contentious nature is more intense where the opposition BNP does not see much good in India's intentions towards Bangladesh. Although there has been a shift towards reality in Bangladesh about India with the people no longer willing to oppose India just because of the BNP stand, the perception that India is the BNP trustworthy still persists

because of past experiences. This is a very important reason why both India and Bangladesh must address the perception aspect that is deep rooted before expecting the people to believe that the relations are ready for a major thrust forward where there would be great economic dividends for both, particularly Bangladesh.

The perception factor is in fact crucial to the outcome of what the Bangladesh-India relations promises following Sheikh Hasina's historic visit. On the Indian side, there has been a clearly move in perception about Bangladesh; that Bangladesh is genuinely interested in improvement of bilateral relations and that it has given India more than it expected on the security concerns. By unequivocally agreeing in the Joint Communiqué to support India's Security Council candidature, Bangladesh has accepted India as the regional power to calm past Indian concerns. On connectivity, Bangladesh has shown the willingness to let its territory be used for India's interests.

The positive Indian perception about Bangladesh is acknowledged in Bangladesh but differently. The perception that is growing in Bangladesh is that it has given to Indian demands without reciprocal gestures. The connectivity issue has not been explained in Bangladesh in a transparent manner. Hence public opinion in Bangladesh may not remain optimistic for long for the economic dividends to accrue and may move towards the BNP. Even within the AL, there is a certain amount of restlessness at India's inability to respond so far on issues of concern to Bangladesh, the promises to do so in the Joint Communiqué signed during Sheikh Hasina's visit notwithstanding. The window of opportunity may thus not remain open for too long.

A group of us who had the opportunity to interact at important levels in New Delhi have returned with positive impression about Indian intentions, something not easy to perceive from Bangladesh. At the same time, we found on the Indian side a lack of proper awareness of politics and perception in Bangladesh. The Indians are convinced that economics would remove the negative perception and take Bangladesh-India relations forward on sustainable basis where Bangladesh, by becoming the sub-regional connectivity hub, would reap the benefits of cooperation with India. Such a perception fails to consider the political divisiveness in Bangladesh where it does not have the luxury to wait for economics to launch bilateral relations; where delay would be playing into the hands of the opposition that has already asked for scrapping of all agreements signed during

Sheikh Hasina's visit.

The forward movement of relations would now depend a great deal on the return visit of the Indian Prime Minister that is expected to take place early next year. The Indian Prime Minister must make major concessions on transboundary waters where an accord on the Teesta would be crucial. The Issue of land border demarcation that has been held up for lack of political will on Indian side and has contributed greatly to negative perception about India must be resolved during this important visit. The demarcation of maritime boundary is difficult but India must show positive attitude to negotiate on a basis of mutual benefit because Bangladesh's economic future is largely dependent on a fair settlement of the issue.

There must also be concession on trade where Bangladesh does not expect the huge gap to be reduced dramatically. It does however expect India to dismantle the tariff and NTBs to increase Bangladesh's exports to India. After our New Delhi visit, I had a chance conversation with a top executive of an important business chamber. I failed to convince him about India's intentions for improvement of relations, particularly in making Bangladesh the sub-regional connectivity hub. Individuals like him have a major role in changing perception and such individuals would be interested only if India would unilaterally lower its trade barriers to show the political will for friendly relations with Bangladesh. For a world economic power, Indian attitude on trade has contributed largely to the negative perception. Allowing Bangladesh even the best opportunity of a non-reciprocal tariff free trade regime would not even scratch India adversely but could lead to a sea change in the negative perception in Bangladesh.

For improvement of relations the ball is now squarely in Indian court with a very short time span to change perception in Bangladesh that is crucial to forward movement. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister could determine which direction relations go. In fact, if India cannot make major concessions on Bangladesh's needs and demands then his visit would be futile.

There is a postscript on perception and reality. Bangladesh is convinced that on the border, Bangladeshis are being indiscriminately killed by BSF. We were told in New Delhi that 70% of those killed are Indians and all are related to failed smuggling negotiations!

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to Japan and Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.



## Pakistan steps up nuclear construction

WASHINGTON: Pakistan appears to have stepped up construction of a new atomic reactor that could help the country produce easier-to-deliver nuclear weapons, a US research institute said Tuesday.

Pakistan appears to have stepped up construction of a new atomic reactor that could help the country produce easier-to-deliver nuclear weapons, a US research institute said Tuesday. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is a highly sensitive topic for the United States as it tries to improve relations with its frontline partner in the campaign against Islamic extremism.

The Institute for Science and International Security, a private US group which is critical of nuclear weapons, said it observed progress at Pakistan's tightly guarded Khushab site which is key to plutonium production.

In a September satellite image of the site in Punjab province, the institute said it observed a completed row of mechanical draft cooling towers at a third reactor, where construction began in 2006.

It marks a faster pace than for the second reactor, where such towers appeared after six years of construction, it said.

"Based on what I see in the image, it wouldn't surprise me if they started it up in 2011," said Paul Brannan, a senior analyst at the institute.

The institute noticed steam from the second reactor in a December 31 image, indicating it was running. It did not see steam in the latest image, but said reactors were not operated continuously during early phases and that weather conditions may have reduced visibility.

Pakistan declared itself a nuclear weapons state in 1998, days after its historic rival India carried out similar atom bomb tests. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal originally was based on highly enriched uranium.

Western analysts believe that China assisted Pakistan is developing Khushab nuclear site to produce plutonium, which can be miniaturized for cruise missiles presumably aimed at India.

Plutonium bombs give the ability to make smaller, lighter or more powerful weapons, and also more deliverable weapons, and I suspect that's what Pakistan wants," Brannan said.

Pakistan has been adamant that its nuclear weapons are in safe hands and President Barack Obama has publicly concurred, although US officials are said to have drafted a contingency plan in a worst-case scenario.

## Taiwan faces rising China threat despite warmer ties

TAIPEI: Taiwan's vice defence minister warned that China represented an increasing threat to the island's security despite improving ties between the former bitter rivals, Taipei-based media reported Tuesday.

Andrew Yang, currently visiting the United States, was quoted as saying that there was no sign that China had been relaxing its military deployment against Taiwan regardless of a warmer relationship between the two sides.

"The security threat we face is not falling, but actually growing," he was quoted by the state Central News Agency as saying in a speech to a Taiwan-US defence conference in Maryland.

Yang was referring to comments by Chinese defence minister Liang Guanglie that the mainland's military buildup retains its focus on Taiwan, it said.

Ties have improved markedly after Beijing-friendly Ma Ying-jeou became Taiwan's president in 2008, but China still refuses to renounce the possibility of using force should the island declare independence.

Yang again urged Washington to sell F-16 fighter jets and diesel submarines to the island to help maintain the balance in the Taiwan Strait, the report said.

Taiwan has repeatedly pressed the US for the sale of F-16C/Ds, saying sufficient weapons would make the island more confident in dealing with Beijing.

Washington early this year announced a weapons package for Taiwan that includes Patriot missiles, Black Hawk helicopters, and equipment for Taiwan's F-16 fleet, but no submarines or new fighter aircraft.

Analysts have said they doubt Washington would risk angering Beijing by approving more sensitive items like F-16C/Ds and submarines.

Source: defencetalk.com

# Muslims and the contemporary challenge

Muslims, therefore, need to understand the liberal and moderate emphasis of the Qur'an or else this religion, which does not believe in priesthood, will continue to be exploited by those whose agenda is based on violence. But here one encounters a formidable problem because, despite Islam's emphasis on knowledge and learning, the level of literacy and education is alarmingly low in Muslim countries.

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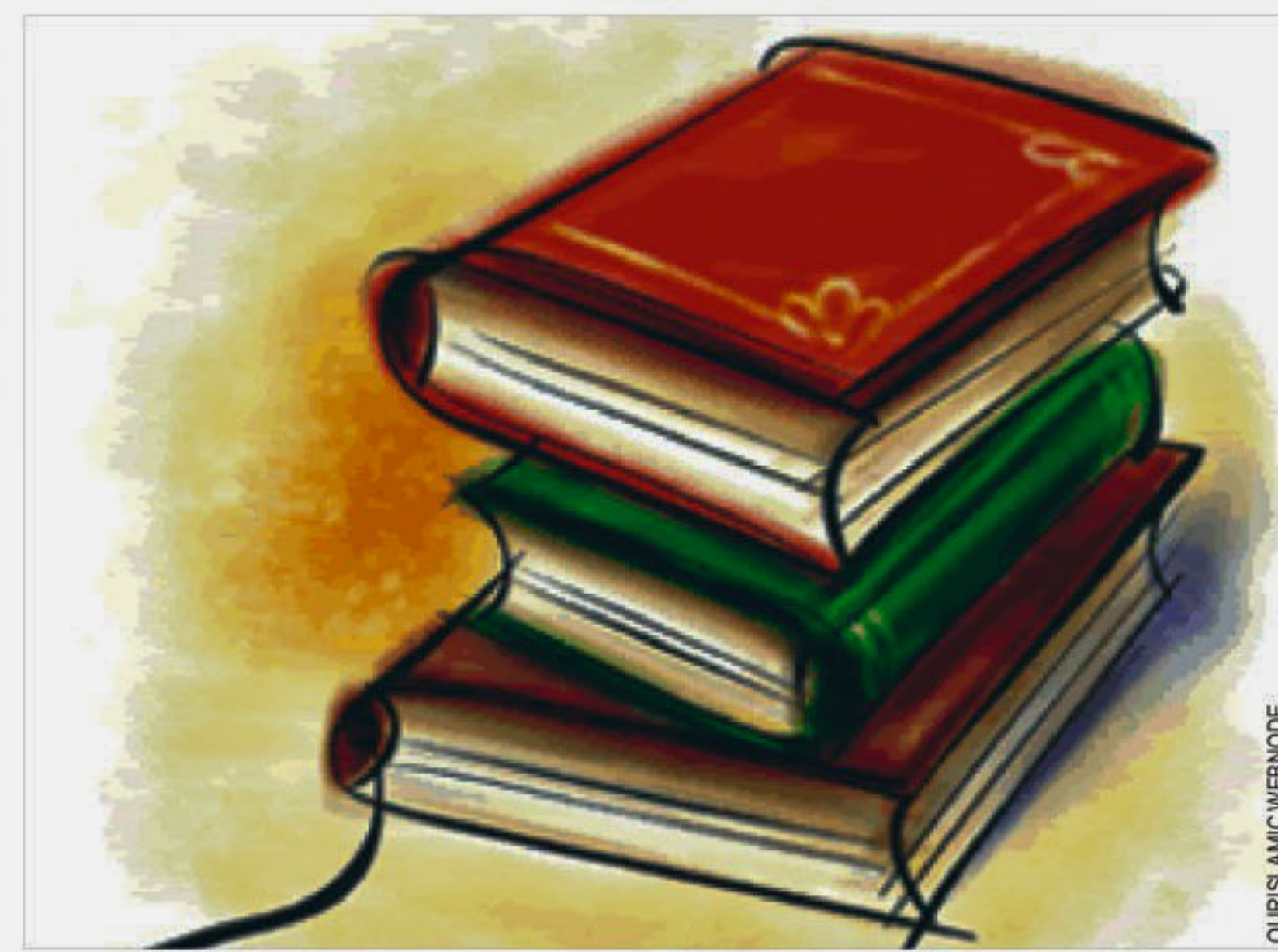
WHEN the Egyptian-born theologian, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, died on 18 October 1505 it is said that, "his reputation as a scholar and the aura of godliness which were already his during his lifetime, then reached their zenith; his clothes were bought as if they were relics." Although he lived for only sixty years, a 1983 study credits him with the authorship of 981 works the central message of which was "everything is based on the Qur'an."

The Qur'an is Islam and there cannot be a more precise definition of the religion. In the early phase of their history when Muslims adhered to its injunctions, they were able to bring progress and enlightenment to the world. When they deviated from its teachings, the civilization they had built crumbled. Civilizations, as Toynbee said, are born and continue to grow so long as they are able to meet the challenges of their times but they decay when they fail to respond. Muslims were able to contribute to the intellectual ascent of man through the spirit of scientific enquiry but the complacency, which often accompanies success, rendered them incapable of confronting the new realities and all that they had achieved withered. About four hundred and fifty years after Suyuti's

death, the nineteenth century reformer, Jalal ad-Din Afghani, wrote, "Every Muslim is sick, and the only remedy is the Qur'an" but to some writers in the West, such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, "the sickness gets worse the more the remedy is taken."

This perception has been reinforced after 9/11 and the continuous wave of terrorist violence perpetrated mostly, but not exclusively, by a radicalized minority who profess Islam. As a consequence, the Qur'an's doctrinaire emphasis on non-aggression has been obscured and strengthened the erroneous belief that it encourages violence.

For their part, Muslims constantly refer to the hatred of their religion as a recurrent theme of history. They feel that the political and military violence against them did not end with the Crusades or even with the successful completion of the Reconquista in Spain when, on 2 January 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella received the keys of the Alhambra, the Muslim palace in Grenada. On 3 August of that year the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus sailed west as the leader of a small fleet provided by Isabella and reached the Bahamas, which he thought was near China. The voyage symbolized a new phase of European expansionism. In so far as the Islamic world was con-



The Qur'an is the basis of all Islamic understanding and the correct understanding of the Qur'an requires education.

cerned, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed aggression against and occupation of Muslim territories in the Middle East and North Africa. In 1830 the French colonized Algiers, the British captured Aden in 1839. These colonial powers between them took Tunisia in 1881, Egypt in 1882, the Sudan in 1889 and Libya and Morocco in 1920. They promised independence to these countries but, in effect, divided the region between themselves into spheres of influence and occupation. The end objective of the colonizers was the perpetual subordination of the occupied territories through subtle cultural imperialism long after the latter regained their independence.

Through all this and much more the "crusader" attitude towards Islam continued to prevail in the West. On entering

Jerusalem in 1917 General Allenby boasted that "the crusades had been completed" and when the French troops reached Damascus their commander went straight to Saladin's tomb in the Great Mosque and declared: "We have returned, Saladin!"

From 1945 till the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the US-led West was selective in its approach to the Islamic world. It supported those countries that could promote its Cold War objectives but was, at best, indifferent to those it did not need to defeat communism. The Islamic countries supported by the West during the Cold War era were ruled either by autocratic republican regimes or by absolute monarchies. Despite their horrendous human rights track records, they were considered "moderate" because they were anti-communist.

The arms race between the Cold War superpower rivals sapped the Soviet Union of its economic lifeblood and presaged the collapse of communism. The decisive battle of the Cold War was fought and won for the West in Afghanistan by Muslims. They were trained, indoctrinated, armed and given financial assistance with the approval and support of the West and the more affluent "moderate" Islamic countries, notably Saudi Arabia. Thousands of volunteers from Muslim countries and particularly the Arab world were flown to training camps in Pakistan and sent into Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation forces. They were acclaimed as the "mujahideen" or holy warriors and were lionised as the heroes of the liberation struggle.

The Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of what President Reagan regarded as the "evil empire" dealt an irreversible body-blow to the communist ideal. The triumph, however, was short-lived because of the emergence of a new threat to global peace and security in the form of religion-motivated terrorist violence. The same extremists who had been trained, indoctrinated, financed and equipped by the so-called free world to defeat the Soviet forces in Afghanistan now had a freehand to pursue an agenda of their own. They distorted the tenets of Islam and ironically their primary victims have been Muslims.

Muslims, therefore, need to understand the liberal and moderate emphasis of the Qur'an or else this religion, which does not believe in priesthood, will continue to be exploited by those whose agenda is based on violence. But here one encounters a formidable problem because, despite Islam's emphasis on knowledge and learning, the level of literacy and education is alarmingly low in Muslim countries. Even more discon-

cerning is that little is being done to rectify this problem. The extent of regression is evident from a telling comment in a survey done by the United Nations Development Programme in July 2002: "in the 1,000 years since the Caliph Mamoun...the Arabs have translated as many books as Spain translates in a single year."

A recent study shows that 57 Muslim majority countries have an average of ten universities each. This means that there are not even 600 universities catering to 1.5 billion Muslims. In contrast, India has 8,407 universities and the US, 5,758. No less appalling is the finding that there are less than 300,000 Muslims who qualify as scientists i.e., 230 scientists per one million Muslims. In comparison the US has 1.1 million scientists (4,099 per million) and Japan 700,000 (5,095 per million). It is revealing that in the past 109 years the world's 1.5 billion Muslims have produced only 9 Nobel laureates while a mere 14 million Jews have produced 167 Nobel Prize winners.

The twin plagues of obscurantism and violence in the name of Islam can only be defeated through the Qur'an. Religion is not merely the opiate of the people as the Marxists believed but if wrongly interpreted it is the poison that destroys society. The correct understanding of the Qur'an requires education and this must be the first step in the reformation of Islamic societies. The process is long and there are no quick-fixes. The Sher-e-Bangla, A.K. Fazlul Haq, once described life as "the eternal struggle which man wages on behalf of himself, against himself" and this is precisely the struggle that Muslims need to wage if they are to retrieve even a semblance of the glory that once was theirs.

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