

## 'OUR DESTINIES ARE CLOSELY INTERLINKED'

THE INDIAN PRIME MINISTER TALKS TO EDITOR, PROTHOM ALO

## Welcoming Manmohan

*We are shocked but still hopeful*

**N**OTWITHSTANDING the shock over the news that there will be no Teesta water-sharing accord, Bangladesh is ready to extend a warm welcome to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's much-awaited visit to Dhaka. This is the first such summit to be held in Dhaka since the Mujib-Indira meet in 1974 and that way it raised great hopes for a definitive value addition to the bilateral ties on a stronger foundation.

We would, however, like to say that the non-signing of the much-vaunted Teesta accord casts a shadow on the trip that was looked upon as a great opportunity to take the bilateral relationship on to a new trajectory.

Even so, we would like to believe that in the backdrop of our disappointment over Teesta some significant developments will occur in terms of economic cooperation and investment, balancing bilateral trade, settling boundary demarcation issues and stoppage of border killings.

Also of importance is sustained political will for improvement of ties including the nurturing of people to people contact between the neighbours. Many points can be taken up to this end, including less stringent regulations on movement between citizens of the two nations.

With the Teesta agenda consigned to the backburner, we hope that the outcome of the visit in other areas will be proportionate to the interest generated and expectations created by the long-drawn-out preparations preceding the trip.

Implementation of any past and future pledges by the countries' leaders may also mean having to put those political decisions over and above the bureaucratic tangle which often hinders and delays the implementation process. A follow-up mechanism will also be necessary in ensuring that whatever commitments are made during the visit are followed through.

The first step towards building on the Indo-Bangladesh relationship was taken by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina through her Delhi visit 20 months ago. She created an ambience for intensifying cooperation by addressing the security concerns of India. Much as the latest development could bring under shadow a comprehensive vision of a forward movement, it is the same factor that should oblige India to deliver in different other areas. We are shocked but still hopeful of a successful outcome of the visit.

## Women workers being shortchanged!

*Why this discrimination?*

**I**T is a fact that in spite of the commitments made by the government, NGOs and social workers for gender equality and ensuring the rights of the weaker section of the society, women continue to be discriminated against, and in various ways too.

It is unbelievable, but true nonetheless, that such an instance of blatant discrimination against women, this time in terms of wages, has come to light through a report in this newspaper recently. Reportedly, women labourers in the district of Lalmonirhat are being paid much less than their male counterpart despite putting in equal work hours and performing similar job as men, in various workplaces. And the wage at times is only one-third of their fellow male workers. And then there are the middlemen preying on their wages.

We are quite certain that what is happening in Lalmonirhat is fairly representative of the situation all over the country. And this is not happening in the private sector alone, where women workers in farms and brickfield, and even hotels and restaurants, are getting a raw deal, it is also occurring in government projects.

What has the authorities got to say about some women labourers, working at Teesta Bridge construction site in the Sadar upazilla, getting Tk 100 to 110, while a male labourer working at the same site was given Tk 250 to 300 per day? And this is happening despite the fact that the women workers have been found to be more sincere, energetic, and generally have better output than men, according to the employers.

Several things emerge from this which the government should address. Firstly, such acts of discrimination against women must be dealt with firmly. Secondly, oversight mechanism should be put in place that would be

**Question (Q):** In Bangladesh we have special expectations from you and love for you.

**Prime Minister of India (PM):** It is mutual. India and Bangladesh have centuries old civilisational links rooted in culture, language, religion, and shared visions of a place of our two countries in the comity of nations.

**Q:** Sir, in 2005 when you were in Dhaka during the SAARC Conference, we took interview which was published on the front page. At that time you expressed that you were not very happy with the situation between Bangladesh and India and it was not developing in a very positive way. How is the feeling now?

**PM:** I think there has been considerable change since then, particularly after the visit of Her Excellency the Prime Minister in January 2010. Our Joint Communiqué's set the roadmap of our relationship as we visualize them to develop in the future. Let me say that I think considerable progress has been made in realizing that vision. But we cannot be satisfied with the status quo. Both our countries must strive to renew, to reaffirm our dedication to work together in the common service of our two countries and their peoples.

**Q:** Is there any special context for which you mentioned something about Bangladesh in a meeting with editors?

**PM:** I was trying to develop the argument that our two countries have very good relations but we cannot be satisfied with the status quo; that we must constantly strive to renew, to reaffirm our relations. This is true among indi-



viduals; this is also true among nations. My primary concern in that meeting with the journalists on our side was to emphasise to them how much effort the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had made to deal with our security concerns; and that we owe it to the people of Bangladesh to constantly strive to improve relation. If there are any grievances that the people of Bangladesh

have in their relations with India, it is our bounden duty to work together to resolve all outstanding issues.

**Q:** Sir, security was the major issue from your side which the present Bangladesh Government dealt with very strongly.

**PM:** We are very grateful to Her Excellency the Prime Minister for the firmness with which she has addressed

our concerns.

**Q:** But there still remains a problem in Bangladesh, you understand very well. When there is a change of Government, things change.

**PM:** I hope that we will make an irreversible shift in the direction of our relations, that Governments of course will continue to matter, they matter in both our countries, but our effort is to strengthen people-to-people contacts between our two countries, that change in political fortune should not affect the development and direction of our relationship which are rooted in the common good, the common mutual benefit of our two peoples and our two countries.

**Q:** Finally, Sir, we want strong, stable, and good Indo-Bangla relationship.

**PM:** I assure you. I was in Bangladesh very soon after Sheikh sahib came to power in December 1971. I and Bangladesh officials, particularly Sir Noorul Islam who was then the Chairman of the Planning Commission, jointly worked out an economic vision of our relationship. Since that time I have been very much involved in the development of India-Bangladesh of relations, and it has been my effort to strengthen this relationship in every possible way. Our destinies are closely interlinked. Therefore, whatever I can do as Prime Minister of India to strengthen, widen, deepen our relationship with the friendly people and Government of Bangladesh, I will do all that is necessary.

**Q:** Sir, thank you very much.  
**PM:** Thank you.

## DR. MANMOHAN SINGH REPLIES TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS BY PROTHOM ALO

**Q:** Dhaka has extended its supportive hand to New Delhi to deal with its North Eastern insurgency. Bangladesh also agreed to provide transit facility to India. But Bangladesh is yet to receive reciprocal steps from the Indian side. Don't you think this kind of situation will prolong barriers to improving bilateral ties?

**A:** We are extremely grateful for all the help the Government and people of Bangladesh have extended in tackling Indian insurgent groups. Cooperation in this area and joint efforts reflect the maturity of our relations and are in the enlightened self-interest of both countries. They enhance the security of both countries and help to create a peaceful environment for economic development and growth.

I do not think that we have, in any way, been wanting in our actions to develop a strong and multi-faceted partnership with Bangladesh. We have and will go the extra mile to do so in all areas.

We have made concrete progress on all the decisions we took during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in 2010. These include issues relating to sharing of river waters, dredging of Ichhamati and other rivers, inter-grid power connectivity to facilitate power transmission from India to Bangladesh, addressing issues of tariff and non-tariff barriers to Bangladeshi exports to India, improvement of border infrastructure such as land customs stations, border haats, 24 hour access across the Tin Bigha corridor and several other areas.

I therefore do not see any barriers in improving our bilateral relations.

**Q:** Your govt. has pledged \$ 1 (one) billion Line of Credit (LOC) for the infrastructure development of Bangladesh. But the implementation has not been possible for last one and a half year. What is the assessment of your government about the slow implementation process. Will it not contribute to lack of confidence in Indo-Bangla relations?

**A:** The US\$ 1 billion line of credit for developmental projects in Bangladesh is the single largest line of credit extended by India to any country. We are committed to the full and early implementation of the Line of Credit for projects identified by the Government of Bangladesh.

We are working closely with the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that the projects are implemented efficiently following open and transparent procedures.

Projects worth over USD 750 million have been identified and are ready for implementation. These include supply of dredgers, buses, railway infrastructure and rolling stock. Two contracts for supply of bases and railway tank wagons have already been signed. In addition, a number of infrastructure projects are in an advanced stage of consideration.

I am confident that these initiatives and projects will become visible symbols of India-Bangladesh cooperation.

**Q:** Bangladesh, as a lower riparian country is adversely affected by any withdrawal of water upstream in any of the big rivers. What kind of steps your government is going to take to reach a workable formula for sharing waters of all the common rivers?

**A:** Water is an important natural resource and a key lifeline for peoples of both countries. It is our common and precious heritage. The strain on rivers has increased due to increase in population in both countries and the impact of climate change. As friendly neighbours, we appreciate each other's requirements and the need for water from common rivers for legitimate consumption. The Ganga Waters Treaty of 1996 is an outstanding example of our cooperation and is working very well.

There is a considerable forward movement on other water related matters, including sharing of the Teesta and Feni Rivers. The dredging of the Ichhamati river along the common stretch has been successfully completed and work on river bank protection and embankment repair is progressing well.

The Joint Rivers Commissions and other mechanisms such as the Joint Committee of Experts and Technical Level Meetings have held extensive deliberations to seek solutions, including on the question of sharing of common rivers. We are on the right track and I am hopeful of progress on all these fronts.

We will not do anything which will adversely affect the interests of Bangladesh.

**Q:** It is been said that the two countries are going to settle the longstanding issues like exchange of enclaves and adverse possession of land and demarcating borders of 6.5 kilometers. How do you want to solve these issues? Despite repeated pledges from New Delhi, killing of 'unarmed' Bangladeshi is going on along the border. When will we see the porous Indo-Bangladesh border as a frontier of 'zero killing'?

**A:** It is most unfortunate that these issues have not been settled for so many years. We are not happy with this situation, and it does neither of our countries any credit. It is because of this that in January 2010, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and I agreed to comprehensively address all outstanding land boundary issues keeping in view the spirit of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement.

A lot of work has since been done and significant progress has been made towards resolution of the various pending issues. Both sides have made considerable efforts to undertake joint surveys of the adverse possessions and the remaining undemarcated parts of the boundary. The joint headcount in enclaves on both sides has been completed in July 2011. The process of signing the boundary strip maps of the already demarcated India-Bangladesh boundary has commenced. These are all positive developments, which deserve to be welcomed on both sides.

As far as incidents on the border are concerned, I wish to reassure you that we have 'zero tolerance' for excessive use of force. Strict instructions have been issued in this regard. Border incidents have come down significantly in the last one year. Our Home Minister had a successful visit to Dhaka in July 2011, and I am glad that a Coordinated Border Management Plan had been signed between the two border guarding forces. These steps will improve the management of the border on either side and minimize, if not eliminate, the use of disproportionate force while dealing with illegal activities.

The India-Bangladesh border should be a border of peace and amity. For this, both sides must work closely together and exercise due restraint.

**Q:** What steps Indian government will take as trade facilitation measures to enhance bilateral trade? How the longstanding NTB's (Non Tariff Barriers) will be removed?

**A:** Bangladesh's exports to India in the last fiscal year have grown by 68%, but there is still a large trade imbalances. Currently, duty concessions have been extended to Bangladesh under SAFTA, and there is zero-duty market access to all SAARC Least Developed Countries for all but 480 items on the sensitive list. Bangladesh is also eligible for the Duty Free Tariff Preference Scheme for LDCs that India had

launched in April 2008. We are ready to consider further steps to encourage Bangladesh exports to India.

I recognise that for our trade to be sustainable in the long-term, we have to address the trade imbalance between us. I am confident that we can deal with this problem through joint efforts and mutually complementary policies, including improved market access and investment friendly policies.

We must also resolve non-tariff barriers on both sides. For this purpose, we are developing infrastructure at border points including Land Custom Stations at a cost of \$125 million to facilitate bilateral trade. Bangladesh also has similar plans. Other initiatives like border haats, port infrastructure, Integrated Check Posts etc. will also help to facilitate two way trade. The border haat in Meghalaya at Kalaichar-Balimari, for example, was inaugurated in July 2011. India is assisting 3ew Bangladesh in improving the testing facilities under the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution. A Joint Working Group on trade has also been formed to address issues of para-tariff and non-tariff barriers.

**Q:** It is often said that Indo-Bangladesh relation is characterised by regime centric perception. Do you think your government and the govt. of Sheikh Hasina will be able to build a durable relationship that will be sustainable? What kind of qualitative change in Bangladesh-India relations do you expect from your forthcoming trip?

**A:** There is no option but for us to build a long-term and durable relationship. We are neighbors and face similar problems and challenges. We should look ahead to the future. We respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bangladesh and are committed to non-interference your internal affairs. We envision a long-term and mutually advantageous partnership with Bangladesh, where both sides are sensitive to each other's concerns and developmental aspirations.

I see my visit as building upon the historic visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in 2010, and opening a new chapter in our bilateral relationship. The people of India have nothing but the best of goodwill for the people of Bangladesh. I will be satisfied if my visit can open new vistas of cooperation and strengthen the bonds of friendship, understanding and trust between the two countries.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 6

**1669**  
The siege of Candia ends with the Venetian fortress surrendering to the Ottomans.

**1965**  
War of 1965: India retaliates following Pakistan's Operation Grand Slam which resulted in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 that ends in a stalemate and follows the signing of the Tashkent Declaration.

**1991**  
The Soviet Union recognizes the independence of the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

**1997**  
Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales takes place in London. Over a million people lined the streets and 2.5 billion watched around the world on television.