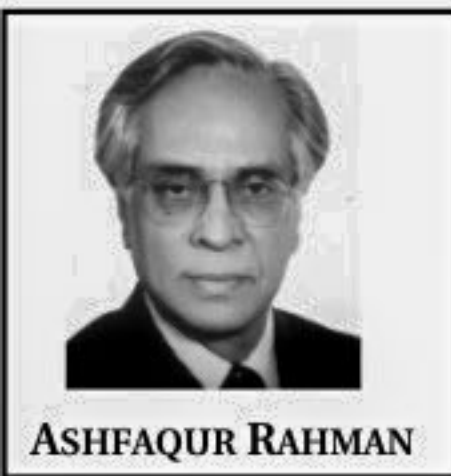


Manmohan visit not a failure but a disappointment



ASFAQUR RAHMAN

So the jamboree is over. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left Dhaka yesterday after an eventful two-day stay. His footprints have left a mark on the future of Bangladesh-India bilateral relations.

Earlier, there were lots of expectations in Bangladesh. But when the Indian prime minister opened his gift hamper on the first day of his visit, there was a big surprise. Only one agreement and nine deals were to be signed, instead of several agreements.

First, where was the trumpeted temporary agreement on sharing the water of the Teesta and Feni rivers? Then, where was the MOU on liberalisation of trade under the Bilateral Trade Agreement? And also, where was the agreement on joint investment in electricity generation in Bagerhat? Did we hear wrong or we were just led up the garden path?

On the second day of his stay here, the Indian prime minister addressed the students, faculty and distinguished guests of the Dhaka University on the prospects of future relations between India and Bangladesh as well as among countries in South Asia.

Then he left to meet the leader of the main opposition of Bangladesh. In between and later, there were visits to the National Martyrs Memorial, to the house of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as well as a courtesy call on the Bangladesh president.

The prime minister was accompanied by four chief ministers of the neighbouring Indian states of Assam, Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya. The Paschimbanga chief minister was missing. Affectionately known as Didi (sister) by the people of her state, Mamata Banerjee decided at the last minute not to accompany the prime minister to Dhaka. She was reportedly registering her protest with her union government at Delhi that the temporary agreement to be signed for sharing the waters of the Teesta river was inequitable and therefore was politically unacceptable.

This was quite in keeping with Mamta's nature and did not come as surprise to many. She is a political animal and she could not behave otherwise. More so,

Manmohan knows how powerful she is within his political coalition. But it was definitely disappointing for us. The deal, even if it prima facie looked inequitable to her, was not as fraught with as much political and personal risk as the Bangladesh prime minister took last year to ensure the security of Indians against insurgents in North East Indian states. Didi, you could have done better!

Thus, there was initially euphoria here. It was thought that this visit was another turning point in our upward swing of relations with India. But it was a disappointment on several counts.

Water is a matter of major concern to Bangladesh. It is a natural resource that we have to unfortunately share with India. We thought that if we conceded willingly to deny any sanctuary to the Indian insurgents from North East India, she would indeed look to our needs here. But it seems petty political points, including the one on not being consulted on the final draft of the share, were being scored by Mamata Banerjee by denying Bangladesh her rightful share of the Teesta. So no agreement could be inked. We wonder how we will negotiate with India the sharing of the waters of all the 54 common rivers?

The signing of documents to reverse adverse possessions of land by either side, the exchange of enclaves as well as demarcation of the remaining boundary meant implementing what generally was agreed between the two countries under the Indira-Mujib Agreement, way back in 1974. However, signing of these papers during the visit would now mean return to normal life for thousands residing along this fault-line of distrust. However, the taste of the pudding will be in the speedy implementation of what has been agreed to.

The Comprehensive Framework Agreement on Co-operation is something new that has been introduced in our bilateral relations. This was the only Agreement signed. We need to study it closely. If, like the previous 25-year Friendship Treaty, it brings together elements that would try to subsume national interest under a broad rubric of co-operation, then we are to be tardy.

It is said that the best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up. We need to just do this now.

We are told that Bangladesh has initiated this document. Is it our government's intention to call forth this umbrella agreement whenever contentious matters like transit etc are requested by our neighbour? Quite ingenious though, keeping an eye out for elections here in 2014.

But now that the Mamata drama has allowed us to withdraw from exchanging letters which would have allowed India the use the Chittagong and Mongla ports, we need to contemplate how we should use the transit card to our benefit in future. Perhaps our government has at last realised that access

to these two ports was a major bargaining chip which can after all be used in the diplomatic game with India. The civil society and others had insisted on their use for a long time now.

The remaining understandings which we can euphemistically call deals were on protection of the Sundarban forest, exchange of government TV channel programmes, cooperation between two premier universities -- Dhaka University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

Three other deals, the one on the biodiversity of Sundarbans, cooperation on renewable energy and cooperation in fisheries between the two countries should not have occasioned the visit of Indian prime minister. They could have been done at the level of joint secretaries of both the countries.

However, it is to the credit of our government that it had tried its level best to improve relations between the two countries and to see that the interest of Bangladesh is protected as much as it could be.

But, with people in our government hierarchy having little experience of dealing with India, it is no wonder that our leaders were not forewarned of the silly reason why the most important Teesta agreement of the visit was scuttled. Why did our High Commission in Delhi fail to keep our government informed of the last minute developments? And how is it that the prime minister's advisors dealing with the matter did not get a sense of

what is likely to happen and inform her? It was she who handled the matter admirably till the end.

The fact that the opposition parties in Bangladesh, the media and the civil society played a seminal role in debating the issues and disseminating them to the public before the visit was important. It kept the government in cinch in the absence of any debate within our Parliament.

Now the tasks before both the governments are many. The temporary loss of face of the Indian government due to the antics of Mamata has to be redeemed. India must seriously work with Bangladesh to settle the issue of Teesta and Feni waters as soon as possible. It must start negotiations for joint river management of the remaining rivers.

We must look into building adequate physical and other infrastructure for ensuring connectivity, not only to India but to our other neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and even China. We must revisit transit to ensure that Bangladesh becomes the sub-regional hub of connectivity.

Let India now do its homework to liberalise its trade with Bangladesh. Giving 45 more items duty free entry, as announced during this visit, is not going to remarkably boost our exports to India. We need to eliminate all the non-tariff barriers at the earliest to make this happen. India should be seen to be proactive here.

Prime Minister Manmohan is welcome again to Bangladesh. But our leaders may also venture to India soon, to realise the hopes our people lost this time. It is now time for India to start acting like a regional power which they are wont to be, and not stand on the Mamata syndrome. It should be able to give and give generously to her smaller neighbours. In return, India may get what she bargains for. The world, including the USA, is keenly watching India and to see whether she has the qualities to become a leader in Asia. China is also watching.

It is said that the best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up. We need to just do this now.

The report card, however, is: The Manmohan visit was definitely not a failure but a disappointment.

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IN CONVERSATION WITH Akbar Ali Khan (PART-II)

DS: Any specific ideas you have about developing water resources? First, protecting and then developing them?

AAK: We have done a lot of things in the past which we shouldn't have done. Large infrastructure will not solve our water resource problems. We will have to find solutions through small infrastructures because our land is small and it is very densely populated.

DS: Could you look to India, China, and Nepal to cooperate in these areas?

AAK: Everybody is interested in their own causes. Why would they want to share. Water is a very precious resource. In India the provinces are fighting with provinces.

DS: But there can be huge benefits for the region if we can tap hydel power from the rivers or cooperate in flood control. Why are we not having regional cooperation for water resources development?

AAK: It is a zero sum game. Take the case of hydroelectricity projects. Now if Nepal agrees to set up a plant and sell power to us, and to India, we will be very happy. But what happens to Nepal itself? How will they handle the environmental damages? Many say hydroelectric station set up in Tipaimukh will make Bangladesh a desert. Not true. When you set up a hydroelectric station, you continue to let the water flow, you don't store it.

There was a talk of building a barrage for irrigation but Indian government is not proceeding with it because there are many shallow tubewells working there. They have found they can do it much cheaper with shallow tubewells. So they are just going to do the hydroelectric project.

The problem is that this is a very big project. More than 1,500MW of electricity will be produced. And the dam that will be set up will be much deeper than the Tarbela or Mangla dam. We have two problems there. This is an earthquake-prone region. I think one of the ten devastating earthquakes in the world took place in Assam. So there is no guarantee another won't happen in Assam. Then there is a bigger problem; in many cases, if there is too much rainfall, there is overtopping, water flowing over the dam. And when that happens the entire dam collapses. In China, there was a dam called Banquiao dam, where within an hour 10,000 people died; ultimately more than one lakh died. You know Cherapunji is located in this region and it is very likely that some day the dam will be overtopped by rain and there will be huge destruction and devastation in the area below Tipaimukh. There has been environment assessment by the government of India and they said this dam cannot proceed unless

protection is taken against overtopping and allocation of fund for meeting these kinds of disaster within the project itself is made.

So the problem is real for Bangladesh, because there might be overtopping. Experts in India are saying that they are not opposed to construction of hydroelectric station within Assam area. What we want is that this should be small, not 1,500MW, but 300-400MW power stations. Devastations caused by earthquake or overtopping will be much less, so we will not be harmed.

In India there were many dams that were overtopped. And this possibility of overtopping is not my brain child; I am quoting from the Indian government's assessment.

In the Ganges there is a problem of a different nature developing. If India doesn't solve it, nature perhaps will. Between the old and new channels at Farakka there is a gap of four miles. The way river erosion is taking place every year Farakka channel will be bypassed and the old channel will be activated.

DS: Your experience as an advisor to the president Iajuddin led caretaker government. If you have more to add to the public knowledge.

AAK: I think it was very easy to hold the elections under the caretaker government. It basically involved appointing one or two neutral election commissioners and transfer of four secretaries. The president said that he would appoint two people who were totally neutral.

DS: And would you have got the approval of the political parties?

AAK: No, basically this did not happen because BNP did not agree.

DS: In view of the possible shift in our relationship with India, how do you think the outcome can be safeguarded vis-a-vis the vagaries of political fortunes experienced by the political parties. How can the agreements, when reached, be made durable?

AAK: To make these durable, we should start small and move into big things. And if we start big they will probably not be durable.

There are two things important about the Indo-Bangla relationship. Firstly, for economic development we must have normal relationship between India and Bangladesh. Secondly, in the past, some of the governments made mistakes. We have to remember that we are the successor states of British India. And any change in these successor states will not be a good thing. So we should stand by the government of India against the secessionist elements because our

overriding interest is to safeguard the boundaries that were demarcated by the British. If these issues are reopened there will be no end to it and it will be a Pandora's box.

Once these two principles are accepted I think we can have a durable relationship with India.

But from India's side, there are some major problems. Indians have given us many promises but never fulfilled them. Example is the enclaves. Why this problem should have persisted for so long. More importantly, there is a serious problem with their rhetoric and what they are doing. We are being told we need transit for connectivity. You don't have connectivity with the people. You have this problem with the west dotted on your frontier with barbed wires. You have BSF killing people in the border areas. And you have one of the most inefficient visa systems in the world so people suffer if they want to go to India. And you talk about connectivity! Connectivity with what? So these are serious issues. If they want to win the friendship of Bangladeshi people, they should give more visas, they should withdraw these barbed wires and there should be no shooting in the border. If you do these then whatever you say nothing will come out of the efforts. Then they should show some gestures. They shouldn't build dams like Tipaimukh. They should build smaller dams in Assam. They should show sensitivity to and understanding of the problems of Bangladesh. And lastly, many of the promises they make are stalled at the bureaucratic level.

DS: Is it possible to have a win-win transit?

AAK: You see there are three issues in regard to transit. One, as the BNP talks about the legal issue of what is transit and what is not. I don't want to enter into the legal semantics. You can give transit in two ways. One is through the Asian highway. The other is point-to-point transit. For example, India wants to enter through a point and wants to go out through another point. The Asian Highway transit is very important for us. It means India will use my land and I will also use Indian land to go to the other areas. I can export things to Europe through the Asian Highway and Southeast Asia. The other approach is you build roads according to Indian specifications and needs, but that involves money. I don't think we should enter into that arrangement because toll is no solution. If I give road access to India in certain places and ask for toll to use it, and if they don't, what will happen to me? I don't have any other buyer for this. In this environment two things are needed. If for the Indian needs we have to construct any infrastructure, India should fund it on grant basis and

not loan basis. And if on loan basis then India has to guarantee some minimum tariff.

Say we build a road with Tk.300 crore as loan from India, then even at 1% interest, in 30 years we will have to pay Tk.10 crore a year. Say, operational cost is 5%, then we need another Tk.15 crore. We need to generate at least Tk.25 crore worth of revenue. So it's not just the toll, we need a minimum guarantee that India will bear the minimum expense incurred if not covered by transit tolls. Otherwise, if India needs transit to move goods, then they should give us a grant. This is where we suffer because of our bureaucratic weakness. We should say travel as much as you like using the Asian Highway in which we along with other countries will invest. To do things according to India's benefit, it must either be grant basis or there must be guaranteed revenue. Otherwise this will be a liability for the poor people of Bangladesh,

DS: What do you think about the Kunming-Bangladesh and Myanmar rail and road links?

AAK: Well, if these are economically viable, they should be welcomed.

DS: What are your thoughts on deep sea ports and their use?

AAK: We should build our ports. We should be owners of our port. I would like it to be financed by not one country but by multilateral institutions. Otherwise it becomes subject to control of one particular country. With multilateral deals, we have access to more clients and customers.

DS: Maritime delimitation is becoming problematic for Bangladesh in view of differences with India and Myanmar. What approach do we take?

AAK: This can't be solved without bilateral negotiations. The countries will have to proceed on a give-and-take basis if they want durable friendship.

DS: What are your points of pride about Bangladesh?

AAK: Patriotism and creativity of the Bangladeshi people and their capacity to face any kind of adversity.

DS: Your vision?

AAK: The way we have moved forward in the last four decades in the face of all odds, gives us confidence that we shall move forward. In 1971, many people cast doubt on our economic viability. Here we are resilient and on the roll -- by virtue of the inner strength of our people.

DS: Thank you for your time.

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