

Be patient: Tripura CM

*It was an exciting time for Bangladesh as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit was expected to galvanise bilateral ties between the two nations. However, outcomes hardly matched the hype over the visit. Perhaps, expectations were too high. Tripura Chief Minister **Manik Sarkar (MS)** sat with **The Daily Star (DS)***

DS: *At the last moment, the Teesta deal collapsed. What were the setbacks that led to the debacle?*

MS: For me being the chief minister of a state, it is difficult to answer such questions. But if there had been any scope to avoid the failure to sign the Teesta water sharing deal and win Bangladesh's consent for transit, I think the central government would have acted upon it. So the scope to interpret this way is limited. I would rather say it was a learning experience. There were high expectations among people. I wouldn't call it a failure but it has strained relations between the two nations -- to some extent.

Our prime minister made it clear in the Dhaka University Senate speech that the matters would be settled in a logical manner and the interest of all would be protected. I also believe the two countries would reach sensible solutions.

Our main strength is that we, the people of both nations, want to deepen the relations. This is the main thing for us to move forward. This spirit will help us reach a solution.

DS: *It was expected that the visit will take bilateral relations one step forward. How do you see the last-minute backtracking by India?*

MS: There is no reason to believe our bilateral relations have gone a step back. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India last year created scope to take the relations to higher levels. Any agreement creates encouragement, and the fulfilling of the promises creates a ground for trust to take relations further.

During this visit, it was expected that these promises would be realised. And I believe we will find ways to make this happen.

Except for one or two issues, we more or less have positive achievements in other areas. We should not undermine those achievements. It's not right to look at our achievements as minor successes and focus only on the deals that failed.

We have successes on some issues. But it would have been better if we could have reached agreements on the remaining issues as well. This is not the last. We hope to see the other issues realised as well.

DS: *How do you, being a member of Manmohan Singh's delegation, evaluate the roles of the central government and Paschimbanga government in the collapse of some deals?*

MS: In our country, water is a subject of the state government. Everybody needs water. I don't know the objections that the Paschimbanga government raised. We all raise our issues with the central government. The Paschimbanga government understands the situation much better than us.

The state government of Paschimbanga must have thought that it requires further consideration and based on that, they raised some points. It may be that they raised some issues (Teesta water) that cannot be solved quickly.

That is why our prime minister said acceptable solutions for all will be reached. So we will have to wait for some more time. People should not get frustrated by his stance.

The central government wants some more time to settle the issues. Give them time. We will have to wait to come to a reasonable solution by protecting the interests of both Bangladesh and Paschimbanga.

DS: *Failure to sign the Teesta deal puts brakes on the agreement on the Feni water sharing by Tripura and Bangladesh. Any comment?*

MS: As it is a water issue, the Feni issue remained unresolved along with Teesta. If the deal (on Teesta) had been completed at this summit, it would have been wonderful. As there was no outcome at this summit, we will have to be patient.

But Bangladesh agreed to address



Manik Sarkar

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the problems on Feni River. I think it will be settled along with Teesta. Let's wait for some time.

DS: *Does the last-minute opposition by Paschimbanga Chief Minister Mamata Banarjee embarrass the central government of India or dent bilateral relationships between the two countries?*

MS: It would be inappropriate for me to answer this. The central government will be able to answer these queries better.

DS: *Did the Indian prime minister talk to all of you about the issues?*

MS: We discussed our individual state issues with him, not these issues.

DS: *Does the collapse of the deal affect the interests of India's north-eastern states?*

MS: I won't judge the issue this way; it is better to look at the matter from the perspective of the two countries -- from a greater perspective.

There have been some solutions related to the states. These were long-pending issues. But there have been some agreements and memoranda of understanding on which concrete steps would have to be taken later.

If we look at the framework that both prime ministers signed, we can identify ten areas of cooperation. These are fundamental things that include all the issues. So, the two countries can take concrete steps to address these. There will be a number of ways to resolve the unresolved

issues.

DS: *Will the delay in a transit deal affect the development plans taken by Tripura and the other north-eastern states?*

MS: It is not that we will be able to get all the benefits the moment we get transit. For this, we will have to develop some infrastructure. We are doing that. We are improving the roads and railway network and emphasising electricity generation. Works are on and will continue. In the meantime, we are trying to make progress on our unfinished jobs.

Transit did not shape this time, but it will -- later. Transit and preparations to make use of the benefits of transit will converge at a point. It is not that it has been dropped. None of the governments said that.

DS: *Was it a diplomatic failure?*

MS: There is no reason to perceive that the absence of a resolution means that the process was a failure. It is also an experience. The initiative was taken suddenly and came to a halt suddenly. Efforts don't stop here. Questions have been raised and discussion will continue. Our prime minister shared his confidence and determination to carry it forward. We will have to continue to be confident about the Paschimbanga government.

DS: *What's your take on Bangladesh's gains from the Indian prime minister's visit?*

MS: We have signed agreements and memoranda of understanding.

DS: *Bangladesh has taken sincere steps to address the security concerns of India. It raised expectations among Bangladeshis to get something in return from India. What's your view?*

MS: Efforts are on. For example, the agreement on border in 1974 did not proceed in absence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It will be resolved now. Besides, there is progress in trade and business with which Bangladesh's prosperity is linked.

Your business community is very much encouraged. The duty-free access to 46 garments opened the door. It's a big achievement. We should not think that it will be limited to 46. It has just begun. There will be a snowballing effect of it.

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DS: *Is there any proposal from Bangladesh businessmen to invest in Tripura in a separate economic zone?*

MS: There is no such proposal. But some of them want to invest in Tripura and we welcome it. But there are some restrictions in Bangladesh on investing outside the country. I requested your prime minister to relax the law so that they can invest in Tripura. She assured me that it will be done.

We want to give Bangladesh power from our share (Tripura). But we cannot give whatever we want. Our rules require consent from the central government. We do not reject the pleas made by Bangladesh but there are some procedural matters that need to be followed.

DS: *Our business community complains about the non-tariff barriers imposed by India as they restrict exports to Bangladesh's market in northeast India. Has Tripura taken any step to remove the NTBs?*

MS: We buy goods worth Rs 257 crore from Bangladesh but sell Rs 1.76 crore worth of items to Bangladesh. We informed our National Development Council and North East Regional Council that trade and business with the northeast and Bangladesh must be increased. For this, tariff and non-tariff barriers should be removed.

There is no reason to think that we have no role in helping Bangladesh receive duty-free access for 46 items. We have also asked our offices to put a stop to the hassles that business people face in visa issuance.

At our forum, I suggested that they should not take a 'big-brother' attitude. The matter should be looked at equally. No-one is big or small. Without this attitude, there will be no good relations.

DS: *What are the benefits for Tripura and the other north-eastern states from the duty-free access for Bangladeshi clothing items?*

MS: It cannot be said right now. It could be understood after the exports begin. But of course, there will be benefits. We buy many products from our mainland. We can get the same quality products that are produced in Bangladesh without transporting them over 1,600 kilometres. It will cut our transportation costs if we buy items from Dhaka, which will lower prices.

And transit will make it easier to transport the goods.

As the Teesta issue remains unresolved, it will be settled later. We should not discount other achievements. There are people who do not want good, longstanding and deeper relations between Bangladesh and India. We should not let them take advantage of any negativity.

The state government of Paschimbanga must have thought that it requires further consideration and based on that, they raised some points. It may be that they raised some issues (Teesta water) that cannot be solved quickly. That is why our prime minister said acceptable solutions for all will be reached. So we will have to wait for some more time. People should not get frustrated by his stance