

# The enigma of Bangladesh-India relations

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BD ANGLADESH'S relations with India may well be weighed up by their geographical locations -- a weak little mouse in a mighty cat's paw. Three-fourths of Bangladesh is surrounded by India, and one-fourth by the Bay of Bengal. If India is a big banyan tree, Bangladesh is a twining tendril around it.

Bangladesh took on this shape as the result of a rash and inequitable political Caesarian done in 1947 in the name of the so-called "Two-Nation theory." Its arms and legs were amputated, and it was severed from an indistinguishable land, and a millennium-old culture. We are greatly endangered for the loss of our organs. The neighbouring demi-super power tries to use our lost organs against us. This is where lies the crux of Bangladesh-India relations.

Another thing that matters in this relation is India's role in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Bangladesh owes a debt of gratitude to India. For this deep sense of gratitude on one hand, and the vulnerability of geographical location and other concomitant weaknesses on the other, Bangladesh cannot always negotiate strongly with India over different bilateral issues. India's big-brotherly attitude and hegemonic control over the neighbouring countries sometimes work as a hindrance to the smooth functioning of relation building agenda. Besides, the change of governments in both the countries largely affects the relations.

The Mujib-Indira Pact could have been the best possible catalyst for the best possible relations between the two countries, if it had been fully realised. But, after Mujib's assassination in 1975, Bangladesh-India relations have been more or less a source of continued disappointment, especially for the people of Bangladesh. The building of many upstream dams, the Ganges water share deprivation, indiscriminate killing of



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Bangladeshi nationals along the border, sufferings of the land-locked people of Bangladeshi enclaves in India have hugely frustrated the people of the downstream delta -- Bangladesh.

The people of Bangladesh have now come to realise the importance of the improvement of relations with India. India is one of the four countries (BRIC) in the world that could lead the world in the foreseeable future. So, it would be very prudent of Bangladesh to develop an amicable relation with India, and benefit from it through trade, commerce, investment, technical and scientific cooperation, and education. We should not be obsessed with the geopolitical stereotype of a regional Cold War between the Sino-Pak and Indo-Soviet alignments, and be worried about our own vulnerability.

It is no wonder that India is developing its relationship with China and America, moving away from Saarc and opening new

windows on regional and sub-regional cooperation. The Manmohan Singh government unequivocally reaffirmed India's commitment to Saarc and regional cooperation during the last Saarc Summit. Ever since then, there have been a number of developments in the whole process of regional cooperation. So it is time for Bangladesh to settle the differences, and develop fresh relations on the basis of friendship and mutual trust.

Although the Indian premier's last visit to Bangladesh has been a mixed blessing, it may mark a new dawn in the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations and break fresh ground in bilateral ties in future. Though the Teesta water sharing issue has cast some aspersions on it, and upset the people of Bangladesh, still there is hope against hope. Both the premiers expressed an unambiguous willingness to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the water sharing of Teesta and Feni rivers.

The two countries have inked framework agreements on land boundary demarcation, and exchange of adversely held enclaves, which may help settle the decades-old border disputes. Prime Minister Singh announced the access of the Bangladeshi nationals to Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves through the "Tin Bigha corridor" round the clock, which made the people very happy. They have signed some other agreements which are also important.

Although the dramatic cancellation of the Teesta and Feni river water sharing deal has cast a cloud over the bilateral relations, every cloud has a silver lining. There are chances of a better deal on it. Despite the opposition of Vallabhbai Patel, Nehru concluded the historic Delhi Pact with Pakistan. The way the present two premiers, Sheikh Hasina and Manmohan Singh, have reassured us about the signing of the water treaty in the near future, we can easily hope against hope.

For whatever reason, it is most unfortunate that both the countries have failed to improve their relationship. The state principles of both the countries are almost identical. There should not be any room for doubt and distrust between them. But how can they achieve this? All the disputes between the two countries should be settled by diplomatic means.

The agreements signed during the visit of Mommohan Singh should be properly and quickly implemented so that there remain no fears of a hidden agenda. There should be a clear time frame for the implementation of boundary demarcation and enclave exchange agreements. It has to be ensured that the Bangladeshi products that have duty-free access to Indian market are not faced with any unpredictable non-tariff barriers.

On the other hand, Bangladesh should, for obvious geographical exigencies, provide connectivity for the countries of the region, especially for Nepal, Bhutan, and India. The India card players in Bangladesh should no longer hoodwink the people into believing in the story of "Indian hobgoblins" who are lying in wait to eat up Bangladesh. Through successful accomplishment of the agreements so far concluded, India can win back the confidence of the Bangladeshi people.

The people of Bangladesh should also reciprocate, and secure a win-win situation. India should get rid of its hegemonic role, and Bangladesh should come out of the shell of any kind of unfounded xenophobia. Only through the exercise of liberal and unprejudiced views and benevolent attitudes can the two countries earn each other's trust. Failing this, Bangladesh-India relations would continue to remain in the doldrums.

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# Should the Constitution rise above conscience?

RUBY AMATULLA

NOWADAYS, we often hear in Bangladesh that if one criticises the Constitution or law of the land one cannot be patriotic. With this understanding, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Nelson Mandela would all lack patriotism. But, in fact, they were all extremely patriotic, deeply in love with their societies and committed to correcting their respective societies' wrongs.

If there existed only blind submission to existing laws, many transformative changes enormously benefiting mankind would not have taken place within various sociopolitical conditions in history. The abolitionist movement, the collective bargaining movement, the civil rights movement, the women's suffrage movement, and all the major revolutions including the American Revolution began with steps to defy then-extant unjust laws.

In the context of the Bangladesh debate over the caretaker government, policymakers need to ensure that popular trust and confidence in the system of governance reigns paramount. This trust remains essential for accountable and good governance, and thus for establishment of a healthy republic. Bangladesh has demonstrated consensus and general satisfaction with the performances of past caretaker governments.

However, in the present context in which the nation is succumbing to excessive corruption, mismanagement, partiality, and extreme and narrow partisanship -- noticed both by foreign dignitaries and domestic observers -- it is a moral imperative that caretaker governments hold free and fair elections in the country in order to maintain people's confidence in the system.

In order for a republic to remain healthy and progressive, citizens must constantly remain vigilant about deficiencies of existing laws. This vigilance requires citizens to collectively analyse, criticise, raise public awareness and help change laws or amend them. These actions are complementary, not contradic-

tory, to their duties and responsibilities as citizens of the country.

A society and good governance need laws to maintain safety, security, and common welfare in a society, but not edicts that are prone to cause injustice and mischief, instability, conflicts, and polarisation in a society. Therefore, citizens should, on the one hand,

or to handle a unique and difficult situation the law should be changed accordingly to help achieve the fundamental goals of stability, continuity, fairness, social integration and welfare.

National consensus and dialogue should favour the change. Resistance from the establishment might lead to "civil disobedience" in which citizens choose not to comply with unfair or counterproductive laws until they are changed. To carry out peaceful demonstrations and other protest activities are part of the fundamental rights of citizens in a democracy. The American thinker Henry David Thoreau first articulated this concept in the middle of the 19th century, which later influenced Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Thoreau claims that human conscience should be the highest judge of whether a law is just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, contributing towards societal welfare or detriment. His famous paper "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" states that when a person's conscience clashes with societal laws, that person must follow his or her conscience. In even more extreme cases, citizens might have to resort to movement in order to confront governmental abuse of authority and tyranny, such as we see in the current conflicts in Libya and Syria and other struggles throughout the Middle East and the North Africa region.

In the absence of constant vigilance and civic participation, negative forces work relentlessly to subvert the government of the people. It is time that the people of Bangladesh take the necessary steps to change the law to maintain a caretaker transitional arrangement to ensure fair elections so that the people feel confident that their collective will prevails.



MAHABUB ALAM KHAN/DRINK NEWS

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be respectful and compliant about laws in general, and on the other be diligently watchful and vigilant about the inadequacy or unfairness of a particular law.

The broader goal of a society is to establish peace, justice and progress. Laws of a land should be designed to help achieve these goals. Instead, if a law becomes a barrier to achieve these objectives it should be amended or even abandoned altogether.

Laws are not written in stone. They are interpretations of fallible human beings. No matter how visionary a group may be that drafts the constitution or a part thereof or amends it, might not be able to envision future changes that render previous laws inadequate. To address the needs of a society

## LEST WE FORGET

### Prof. Noman and the meaning of modernity

HAIDER A. KHAN

I first met Prof. Noman, or (as we invariably called him) Noman Sir in 1969. It was not an auspicious meeting. There was to be an interview for the selection of the Dhaka College team for participating in the national television quiz show "Bolun Dekhi". I was not too keen on joining the fray at the beginning. But my friends all insisted that unless I tried the reputation of our college would suffer. So, against my better judgment, I went to the interview.

There were three rather severe looking professors in the interview panel. One was Principal Jalaluddin. Sitting next to him was a fat, bald person. Farther away was Noman Sir, looking severe but calm.

I no longer remember the questions I was asked, or my replies. I do recall Noman Sir asked me several times to elaborate on issues, forcing me to think on the spot.

After this encounter, I was surprised to learn that I was one of the three chosen to represent Dhaka College. I was also surprised when Sir not only recognised me in a class of almost 400 students, but also took the time to answer some of my impertinent questions about literature. One of the questions had to do with the definition of poetry.

I can still remember his brilliant lectures on the origins of English romantic poetry. He characterised Blake as a precursor and focused on Coleridge and Wordsworth. He was particularly fascinated by the Lyrical Ballads. At one point I asked: "Could we not counterpose to their definition of poetry which values nothing but emotion, a deferent one?" There was a hushed silence in the class. I had challenged the most famous Professor of English in Dhaka College. Noman Sir paused, looked at me sharply and asked: "What would that alternative definition be?"

Nervously I responded: "Well, you could define poetry as perception defined, rather than as emotion recollected in tranquility." I was ready for a sharp rebuke, ending with a curt sit down! Instead, Sir asked me to elaborate. I gave a ten minute long, not-too-coherent account of my fairly immature view of poetry. After the class Sir asked me to write down my ideas as an essay. After I had written those half-baked ideas down and shown it to him he took great care in reading and criticising them, treating me almost as an equal.

I mention this to emphasise the quality in Noman Sir that was very rare in our teachers, many of whom were excellent as teachers. Unlike them, Noman Sir was a thoroughly modern individual, in the best sense of this expression. He respected and nurtured the individuality of his students. He helped them grow according to their own capacities.

I found this to be an enduring quality in Noman Sir throughout all the years I knew him. In the classroom, in debates and other cultural events and in day-to-day encounters he was the first to notice whatever was worth salvaging in students' fledgling contributions.

He could, of course, be a rigorous critic. When I took my essays to him he would always point out the weakness first. But then he would offer the most constructive suggestions for improvement. From him, I learned that writing was indeed destiny because writing showed one's character. Noman Sir was a deeply moral man who clarified for me the connections between ethics and writing. And he did this not with a cold intellect or dry scholarship, but with the warm heart of a caring, passionate human being. Will there be teachers like him anymore?



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