

Warm welcome to PM Modi

Heightened expectations, matching outcome hoped for

INDIAN Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarks today on his august visit to Bangladesh, 'with a sense of enthusiasm and delight', to borrow his own words. A hospitable Bangladesh is ready to reciprocate his spirits with a very warm welcome. But expectations are running very high in Dhaka, and quite naturally so.

The heightened sense of expectancy in Bangladesh can be attributed to two contrasting reasons: first, the dashed hopes during Manmohan Singh's premiership when in 2011 the stage looked all but set in Dhaka for tangible breakthrough on Teesta accord and LBA. But that was not to be, and we all know the reasons why. Our disappointment was enormous. Secondly, in contrast, with Modi as prime minister on a massive mandate could inject a fresh dynamic into consensus-building process which started yielding results commensurately raising the level of expectations in Bangladesh.

Modi didn't want to come to Bangladesh empty-handed; and so he hasn't, with LBA signed, sealed and dusted having been delivered 41 years since Dhaka had ratified it. Now the expectations surround the still elusive Teesta water sharing accord. Mamata is here accompanying part of Modi's visit so that a firm signal of a definitive time-line assigned to the solution of the issue can be given to Bangladesh to allay its concern over Teesta waters.

Modi being a man of action and vision raises the hopes across the board for balanced and equitable relations at the bilateral, subregional and regional levels.

Notably, a plethora of new deals will be signed on coastal shipping including cooperation between two coastal guard squads, new bus services improving connectivity, cooperation between BSTI and Indian Standards Institute for certifying products manufactured in Bangladesh, prevention of human trafficking, cooperation on sea based Blue Economy, among others. These are indicative of the seriousness that Modi government is showing in giving practical dimensions to our bilateral relationships.

Racing bus drivers

Bring them to discipline

THE 'race' between two buses that killed one and injured ten passengers on Wednesday evening at Karwan Bazar put a spotlight on the issue of road accidents, the alarmingly high frequency of which makes Bangladesh one of the most accident prone countries in the world.

According to some reliable sources, road accidents claim on average more than 10,000 lives annually and cause about three times more injuries, although the numbers released officially is much lower.

Even such a high number of casualties has not awakened us to such fatalities most of which are avoidable. The causes—mainly, old vehicles, bad driving, poor condition of roads, lack of enforcement of traffic laws and, sometimes, carelessness of pedestrians—remain largely unaddressed.

In the case of the Karwan Bazar 'race', the driver of the bus that tried to outrun the other did so despite repeated warnings from frightened passengers. Violation of traffic laws has reached a high level with traffic signals reportedly not working properly at several important intersections, motorcyclists frequently using pavements to the disadvantage of pedestrians and traffic police often turning a blind eye to buses stopping at undesignated places.

The traffic authorities must play a more active role in identifying and holding accountable reckless driving, speeding and unfit and overloaded vehicles. Dissemination of information on road safety to transport operators and users through media and exemplary punishment for violating traffic laws are some of the key areas that need to be worked on rigorously by the authorities.

The Modi Factor



VEENA SIKRI

IN less than one year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has walked the talk on his forward-looking and visionary 'neighbourhood first' foreign policy. The unanimity with which the 100th Constitutional Amendment Bill was adopted in the Lok Sabha on 8th May 2015, operationalising the 1974 India Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (together with the 2011 Protocol to this Agreement) has been a game-changer in South Asia for several reasons.

First, this has, with one stroke, established PM Modi's credibility as a leader who keeps his word. After all, at their very first meeting, in September 2014 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, while discussing the LBA (Land Boundary Agreement) Narendra Modi had assured Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with the words "Aap mujh pe bharosa rakhiye (have faith in me)".

The operationalisation of the LBA has resolved issues that date back not just to 1974, the year when, on May 16, the Agreement on the Demarcation of the Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh was signed between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The issues involved date back to 1947, when the state of Bengal was partitioned into India and (East) Pakistan on the basis of the Cyril Radcliffe Award. The Radcliffe Award was hastily drawn up, with hardly any reference to or consideration of the ground-situation, since there was no time for field-visits. The acts of omission (and commission) in the Radcliffe Award in respect of East Pakistan led to such serious differences that in September 1958, following a meeting between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, the Nehru-Noon Agreement was concluded. To implement this Agreement, the Indian Parliament adopted, in 1960, the Constitution 9th Amendment Act and Acquired Territories (Merger) Act. However, implementation could not be effected because of a series of writ petitions filed in the Supreme Court of India challenging this legislation. The State of West Bengal was firmly opposed to the implementation of the Nehru-Noon Agreement, especially as regards the transfer of any portion of Berubari to Pakistan. The Supreme Court's decisions made it clear that the Executive could not on its own cede any portion of Indian territory, and the necessary constitutional amendment for approving changes in the boundary/territory of India required, along with two-thirds majority, that the agreed maps of the territorial changes be placed before Parliament. It was not till 1971 that the matter was finally settled through the Supreme Court, but by that time, all of East Pakistan was aflame, and following the nine-month Liberation War, Bangladesh was born.

The 1974 LBA, popularly known as the Indira-Mujib Accord, covered three distinct issues: exchange of enclaves, exchange of adverse possessions and settlement of 6.5 kilometres of undemarcated land-border. The 1974 LBA was ratified by the Parliament of Bangladesh. In India, the required Constitutional Amendment Bill could not be presented for approval because the process of delineation and demarcation of the proposed changes in territory had not been completed by India and Bangladesh. After the tragic and brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15th August 1975, followed by fifteen years of military dictatorship in Bangladesh, all movement towards implementing the LBA by completing the processes of demarcation and delineation were, in effect, indefinitely postponed.

It was only in 1996, when Sheikh Hasina began her first term as Prime Minister, that LBA issues were revisited once again through revival of discussions between India and Bangladesh. In April 1997, for the first time ever, the list of enclaves along with maps was jointly reconciled, signed and exchanged between the two governments. In early 2001, both governments agreed to establish the Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG). It was under the aegis of the JBWG that the crucial decision on joint visits to all disputed border areas and territories, including enclaves and adverse possessions, was taken. This greatly facilitated the process of consensus-building based on consultations with the people living in these territories. These joint visits began in 2007, but picked up pace and momentum only in 2009, after Sheikh Hasina's election for her second term as PM. Years of painstaking work paid off by August 2011, when India and Bangladesh were able to agree upon and sign joint border maps, settling decades of differences relating to each of the LBA issues. The Protocol to the 1974 LBA was signed in September 2011 during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka. Once again the Bangladesh Parliament ratified the 2011 Protocol. However, as the result of differences expressed by key State governments, the process of passing the necessary Constitutional Amendment Bill through Parliament, was not initiated in India till December 2013, by which time the national general elections in India were too close to permit smooth passage. The people of Bangladesh repeatedly expressed their great disappointment over yet another three-year delay in adoption of the LBA.

This rather detailed account of the LBA brings out why the people of Bangladesh have responded so well to the completion of a process that started with the partition of the Indian subcontinent. This is the real value and worth of PM Modi living up to his assurances of trust, friendship and cooperation so sincerely extended to PM Sheikh Hasina.

Secondly, the unanimity of the final vote on the LBA in the Indian Parliament highlights the successful outcome of PM Modi's balancing act in bringing together state governments, opposition parties and sections of his own party, especially the BJP's state unit in Assam. The Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, the Indira-Mujib Accord of 1974 and even the 2011 Protocol to the LBA, could not be brought to fruition through Parliament because the governments of the day were unsuccessful in bringing these three elements together. Each time, there were uncertainties about securing the mandatory two-thirds majority in parliament needed for passage of the required constitutional amendment, either because there were strenuous objections raised by the opposition parties of the day, or by one or more of the state governments. PM Modi, on the other hand, crossed a historic milestone when he successfully ensured the unanimous passage of the LBA Bill in both houses of Parliament, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. Furthermore, in order to ensure smooth and early implementation of the provisions of the LBA, he has already provided the West Bengal government with adequate financial resources.

The unanimity of the vote on the LBA reflects strong national support for PM Modi's 'neighbourhood first' foreign policy. And most significantly, it reflects the national consensus and bipartisan support across India on good relations with Bangladesh. Public opinion, whether in the media (print and electronic), in academia or in corporate circles, has welcomed Indian Parliament's unanimous decision to bring the 1974 LBA into effect. The only questioning relates to why this was not done earlier.

Finally, it is important to highlight the crucial role of



priorities will provide the leitmotif for talks and agreements during PM Modi's visit to Dhaka on 6-7 June 2015.

The land boundary settlement with Bangladesh has come into force less than a year after the maritime boundary between our two nations was finalized through the July 7 2014 landmark judgment of the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration, bringing closure on yet another issue that was hanging fire for decades. Taken together, these provide the solid foundation for fresh initiatives aimed at taking India's friendship and cooperation with Bangladesh to new heights, and working towards new paradigms of bilateralism and regionalism across South Asia.

India and Bangladesh have agreed to work together to build networks of prosperity, connectivity and development that will link the BBIN sub-region, comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India (focused on West Bengal and the seven states of Northeast India).

Bangladesh is poised to form the hub and the business centre of these networks, be they by rail, by water or by road. Ultimately, through a series of bilateral and sub-regional agreements, we can hope to have seamless multi-modal transport arrangements in place, connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia and beyond. Linked with this is the high priority given by both India and Bangladesh to digital connectivity, including the training and human resource development needed to ensure success for Bangladesh in this technical and highly skilled sector. The unique example of the power-grid connectivity and the resultant energy cooperation between Bangladesh and India is set to scale new heights of success. Mutually beneficial and forward-looking collaborative programmes of connectivity are essential for transforming our four-thousand kilometre common land-border from its present hubris of poverty and illegal activity into centres of shared prosperity and growth. This is the best border-management scenario we can envisage, akin to what one sees when driving unhindered through the European Union (EU). When goods and people can move freely across borders, ille-

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India's border-state governments in creating consensus about and overcoming differences on sensitive issues with Bangladesh (this applies equally to the states sharing land-borders with India's other neighbours). The five states sharing land borders with Bangladesh are West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Whether in concluding the 1996 Ganga Water's Treaty with Bangladesh, or in agreeing upon how to tackle the politically volatile issue concerning land held under adverse possession, it is the cooperation of the state-governments that has ultimately clinched the issue. Even though foreign policy, and concluding international agreements falls squarely within the prerogative of the central government, with India's neighbours the cooperation and support of the border-state governments is indispensable in the implementation of any such agreements. The reasons for the delay, in 2011, in signing the agreement on sharing of the Teesta river waters, are still fresh in everyone's memory. That is why PM Modi's Team India approach, which includes Chief Ministers of State governments as part of policy-making and policy-implementation structures, has brought in a breath of fresh air, yielding rich dividends in operationalizing the long-pending LBA between India and Bangladesh. PM Modi's new paradigm, his concept of 'cooperative federalism', is an essential and indispensable component of his 'neighbourhood first' foreign policy.

PM Modi is the first Indian Prime Minister to link success in achieving his national priorities so directly and closely with improvement in relations with India's neighbours. PM Modi emphasizes economic development, national security, and strengthening of democratic institutions based on the Indian constitution as three key pillars for domestic growth and prosperity. He unhesitatingly adds that achieving success in these domestic priorities is intrinsically linked with building up good-neighbourly relations through an environment of friendship, understanding and trust based on mutual benefit. Modi recognizes that for Bangladesh, too, the national priorities are very similar, based, of course on the constitution of Bangladesh. These shared

gal activity withers away. When exchange of goods and services are computed together, as is the world-wide practice, Bangladesh's negative trade-balance with India will quickly transform into a huge surplus.

India and Bangladesh will certainly discuss the shared threats to their national security. They will focus on specific combined efforts to overcome the challenges posed by illegal activities of all kinds, including human trafficking, and by activities of extremist, fundamentalist and insurgent groups. There is the expectation that a Special Economic Zone for India will come up in Bangladesh, to facilitate investment by Indian entrepreneurs, for manufacturing facilities to supply the Bangladesh market, the Indian market and third-country markets as well. The role of Bangladesh is intrinsic to the success of India's 'Act East' policy. For this, India and Bangladesh should work together to revitalize the activities of BIMSTEC, and to strengthen Bangladesh's involvement in ASEAN, both as a dialogue partner, and as a member of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation.

All these potentials can now be unlocked, because PM Modi has kept his promise and cleared the long-pending LBA. Certainly there is need for progress on issues of water-sharing, especially on the Teesta river. The disappointment of September 2011, when there was every hope that an Interim Agreement on the Teesta would be concluded, is still fresh in many minds. The concept of joint river basin management was agreed upon in September 2011, but little has been done to carry it forward. The Joint Rivers Commission, which should be mandated to meet much more regularly than it has been, should agree upon specific steps and cooperative measures for augmentation, conservation and effective use of our shared rivers. The people of Bangladesh should trust PM Modi, that with his focus on cooperative federalism within India and positive bilateralism with India's neighbours, the Teesta water-sharing agreement will soon become a reality, perhaps on PM Sheikh Hasina's next visit to India!

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Has Mamata lived up to our expectations?

ABDUL HANNAN

BY all indications from Delhi and Kolkata, it is now clear that there will be no deal on Teesta during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Dhaka. A deal any time soon seems to be a distant mirage. When asked by an Indian Tribune correspondent about a Teesta deal, Modi remained silent. When asked by a Daily Prothom Alo correspondent if Mamata was visiting Dhaka, she said she okayed all the agreements about trade and transit by road railways and coastal shipping. She conspicuously remained silent on the Teesta deal. Her education minister was also reticent on the matter. Now Sushma Sawraj, the Indian Foreign Minister, has confirmed that no Teesta deal will be signed during the visit as they failed to bring Mamata on board.

Yet, during her February visit to Dhaka, the West Bengal chief minister showed unstinted support and sympathy for Bangladesh and genuine concern about a Teesta deal, as she assured Bangladesh about a resolution of the issue soon. She categorically, and without

ambiguity, reiterated that Bangladesh could repose its trust on her. The apparent shift of her stance on the issue is unintelligible. It raises more questions than answers. Is it merely her domestic political compulsion? What happened to the study report on Teesta prepared by river expert Kalyan Rudra? Was then her visit with a star studded delegation a mere charm offensive to keep us spellbound only without meaning any substance? Whatever her intentions might be, this decision is uncharitable if not a downright betrayal.

A done deal on Teesta water sharing reportedly providing for equal water sharing by both West Bengal and Bangladesh was aborted at the eleventh hour by Mamata during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's September 11 visit to Dhaka. Now the flow of the river during the lean period between mid March and mid May in Teesta down the Gajoldoba barrage in Jalpaiguri has been reduced to a trickle of 500 cusecs of water from the previous 10,000 cusecs, rendering districts of the Rangpur division into an arid and sterile wasteland with devastating conse-

quences for ecology, agriculture, fishery and navigation. During the monsoon when the flood gates of the Gajoldoba barrage will open, there will be a deluge in the northern districts of Bangladesh. This is an annual ritual. To keep the issue on the backburner of the existing status quo on the pretext of 'technical glitch' is not a good neighbourly behaviour from a supposedly friendly neighbour.

Bangladesh has given - with no holds barred - everything India asked for but what have we received? The ratification of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement by two giant politicians of the subcontinent, Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was long overdue. India dithered, prevaricated and dragged its feet for over forty years to ratify the agreement. Thanks to the initiatives of Prime Minister Hasina and Prime Minister Modi, a long festering sore in bilateral relations has now been healed and a grave injustice and wrong righted.

Prime Minister Modi will inaugurate the Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati and Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus service. The Dhaka-

Agartala bus service and Dhaka-Kolkata train service is already in operation. A train line between Agartala and Akhaura is in the offing. Modi will sign an agreement on coastal shipping services to facilitate transport of Indian goods and passengers to avoid pressure on roads in Bangladesh. India is likely to provide another tranche of \$ 2 billion dollars credit line in addition to the earlier \$ 1 billion dollar credit line to foot the bill to develop the roads, railways, river ports and waterways infrastructure in Bangladesh precisely to facilitate the transit of Indian goods and passengers to its North Eastern states, saving money, time and distance by avoiding long route travel through Siliguri.

Bangladesh provided transit facilities through Ashuganj port for the transportation of heavy-duty equipment for Palatona Power Company in Tripura. Bangladesh agreed to transport ten thousand tons of food grains for Tripura through its territory. Bangladesh agreed to allow 100026MW electricity generated from 429 dams in Northern states through Bangladesh to be allocated to West Bengal and other places in India. Bangladesh

has also responded positively to Indian security concerns in its Eastern states and is also cooperating to stop cross border terrorism.

These are all Indian agendas and concerns of connectivity with its eastern states and not our priorities which are burgeoning trade imbalance with India and killing of innocent Bangladeshis by the BSE, besides water sharing of Teesta and other rivers.

Yet, Bangladesh cooperated with India in good faith in a spirit of promoting good neighbourly relations. We beseech Prime Minister Modi who is forthcoming to improve relations with neighbours, a distinct departure from his predecessor Congress governments, to intervene and try to bring Mamata on board to clinch a mutually satisfactory Teesta deal which is essentially a humanitarian issue now.

For India, the visit may be a crowning success. But for Bangladesh, the visit without a Teesta deal, will be a deep disappointment and a defeat of our diplomacy.

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