

# Many in Bangladesh now see India validating two-nation theory and abjuring secularism

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TARIQ A KARIM

SINCE Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's game-changing visit to India in January 2010, bilateral relations between the two countries have been reconfigured phenomenally, in qualitative and substantive terms. The two countries amicably resolved, completely, their long-festering land boundary dispute and equally long-troubling maritime border dispute (although, surprisingly, after ratification, India appears to have revived issues that had been considered settled by both sides earlier, post signing the Protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement in September 2011, and having accepted the award of the ITLOS on the maritime boundary demarcation); trade has registered a quantum jump, with Bangladesh exports to India having crossed the psychological USD 1 billion mark; India has extended over USD 8 billion line of credit to Bangladesh, of which USD 200 million of the first tranche was converted to outright grant while most of the rest will feed into massive infrastructure development projects, restoring historical connectivity that had been closed following Partition in 1947, and power projects for Bangladesh's energy security.

The two prime ministers enjoy excellent personal rapport. If India today has one good friend standing steadfastly by its side in her often-troubled neighbourhood, it is Bangladesh. So, what could go wrong? Several things.

What could still inject jarring tones and notes into this narrative are matters of public perception and mismatched expectations, more on the Bangladesh side than India's perhaps (but that could well be a matter of hyper-sensitivity on the part of one and relative absence of it in the other!). For starters, the unresolved matter of Teesta waters sharing is galling for Bangladeshis across the political divide (an MoU was inked by the Water Resources Secretaries of India and Bangladesh in December 2010 but was never signed by the respective ministers because of obstruction by the government of West Bengal). Since September 2011, this matter has grown exponentially in public perception in Bangladesh and dominates the narrative, both loud and whispered, of naysayers in Bangladesh sceptical of India's intentions and opposed to seeing any good coming from bilateral relations being strengthened further.

Bangladesh was also disappointed when India appeared to back away, after having accepted in 2010, from the principle of addressing questions of shared rivers on a basin-wide basis (that is, graduating from

rigid bilateralism to including Nepal in talks on the Ganga and Bhutan in talks on the Brahmaputra).

The launching of the BBIN process has almost lurched to a halt with the BBIN MVA (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement), inked in May 2015, still remaining unratified by Bhutan even though the other signatories have completed ratification, completed trial runs along identified routes and agreed to the SOPs to govern movement of passenger and cargo traffic. Result: the MVA is yet to be fully operationalised. There is another unintended consequence from this stalling of the BBIN MVA—increasingly, (and I grant perhaps irrationally) people are beginning to view BBIN MVA as a ploy engineered by India to ensure achievement of its long-cherished goal of transit and transshipment facilities through Bangladesh; now that it is happening

years of internal debate within Bangladesh, been placed at the top of the agenda in Bangladesh's Delta Plan, an ambitious blueprint that the ruling party hopes will be its defining legacy (and pathway to continuation) in power in the future. At the very least, Bangladeshis, whether in or out of government, will hope there will be no foot-dragging by India.

In the meantime, a couple of other issues have catapulted to the fore in the last couple of years, and are likely to severely damage the fabric of bilateral relations if not addressed meaningfully, and quickly. Foremost among these is the problem of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (over 1.1 million at last count, but trickle-in continues and numbers in camps have swelled by almost one lakh by new births in camps since September 2017) now guests, perforce, in Bangladesh. This refugee crisis is evocative of why 10

support from China and India has deepened Bangladeshi resentment. This is particularly directed against India but there are some questioning China as well (though China's image in Bangladesh is better than India's). There is no TV channel or media outlet that does not feature a discussion on this subject on a continuing basis and the net fallout is toxic for Bangladesh-India relations.

The second issue is that of the NRC (National Registry of Citizens) conundrum in Assam—and some fairly incendiary remarks on illegal migrants (or termites, as unfortunately described by India's Union home minister)—that has raised the decibel level in questioning Indian intentions towards Muslim Bengalis delisted as citizens by the NRC and speculation about their likely fate. From media reports (official clarification is elusive), of the 1.9 million people in Assam excluded from the NRC, about 10-12

Unfortunately, on top of the above, a development internal to India has deepened Bangladeshi disquiet and scepticism: the recent actions relating to revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir. Bangladeshis till now had paid scant attention to Kashmir. They had long felt, when part of Pakistan, that they were being used by Islamabad as a convenient cat's paw. In 1971, Bangladeshis kicked in the teeth the infamous "two nation" thesis (of the thirties) as the basis for state formation and walked away from Pakistan to form their own nation state. But in drawing rooms and in media across Bangladesh, the abrogation of Article 370 has suddenly become a topic of heated discussion. Coming as it does in the wake of widely reported media stories of lynching of Muslims and the cow-slaughter ban issue across several Indian states, Bangladeshis hearts are suddenly bleeding and many see India forcefully now validating the "two nation" thesis it had decried so robustly for well over 70 years.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to the media next to his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina before their meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, India, on October 5, 2019. PHOTO: REUTERS/ALTAH HUSSAINI

"All politics is local" is an oft-repeated truism but in South Asia, with its bitter Partition legacy, the distinction between local and regional is blurred and very fuzzy. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is unquestionably the most astute politician that Bangladesh has produced to date, a true inheritor of the mantle of her illustrious statesman-father, the late Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Like her revered father, she has her finger (and instincts) honed to the pulse of her people. She cannot remain undisturbed by this latest development.

India and its leaders would do well to remember that despite Partition, some strands or remnants of the umbilical cord remain still attached to the main body. The neo-Westphalian states in South Asia that were birthed so violently in the post-colonial disorder that emerged after World War-II, while continuing to nurse uneasy to hostile relations with each other, still react to what is happening across each other's borders for good or for bad. Such viscerally-driven relations, now apparently being fuelled by populist politics, are not good for any of these countries, nor indeed for larger regional relations. Fledgling regional cooperation efforts now underway would very likely take a palpable hit from these worrisome dynamics.

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a major statement delivered at the recently held India Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum in New Delhi on October 4, had clearly asserted that South Asia must shun "and move beyond the majority-minority mind-set", and instead "celebrate South Asia's regional, ethnic and linguistic diversity". She emphasised: "Pluralism has been the strength of South Asia for centuries", and was fundamental for ensuring better relations among the South Asian countries enabling them to remain "connected, always ready to make bridges with other regions for mutual benefits of the nations." Through these words, she not only forcefully voiced her deep misgivings reflective of how much of her people feel, but effectively upped the ante in her country's diplomatic interlocking with India.

There is no gainsaying, nor escaping, the fact that if the Indian state today is redefining itself as a Hindu Rashtra (ironically portraying itself as a mirror-image to Pakistani self-vision), it will end up losing its long-touted credentials as a champion of secularism. In the event, it may well trigger questions in Bangladeshi minds as to why the latter should continue to remain secular, as indeed secularism comprises one of the four pillars of the Bangladeshi state as asserted in its own Constitution. It is worth noting that a recent Bangladeshi media report suggests a significant increase in the madrasah education enrolment of children, not just by poor parents but significantly by affluent parents as well. If people's opinion sways away from this hallowed principle, can the political leadership ignore that?

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bilaterally, mischievous people feel India is not really bothered if Bhutan stymies the process. Both Bangladesh and India would do well by working together to assuage whatever fears Bhutan may have and assure that while ratifying the quadrilateral agreement, it need not operationalise it until it feels reasonably comfortable doing so. Addressing the domestic ramifications of this within Bangladesh is of critical importance—the transit and transshipment facilities to India must be palpably demonstrated as being part of greater regional and trans-regional connectivity as envisaged first by UN ESCAP and supported by the ADB, the World Bank and numerous donor countries.

This stalling of the BBIN MVA has stymied progress on other ambitious goals set by the BBIN joint working group as far back as 2016: such as working towards integrated railways connectivity sub-regionally, an integrated sub-regional waterway, and energy and digital connectivity.

However, addressing issues related to common rivers as shared commons (basins) still appears a far cry because of perceived (and incomprehensible to Bangladeshis) reluctance on India's part. Similarly, India's long silence on Bangladesh's desire to build a Ganga Barrage within Bangladesh has perplexed Bangladeshis. It has now, after

million Bangladeshis fled the genocidal onslaught by a brutalising Pakistani army in East Pakistan in 1971 and sought sanctuary in India. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the people of Bangladesh, not unmindful of their own previous crisis and India's generous treatment, opened their arms to give the traumatised Rohingyas refuge inside Bangladesh.

But India and China are both perceived as having stabbed Bangladesh in the back. Public perception of India and China's unhelpful stand continues to fester and grow, more so against India than China which has played its PR cards far more skilfully than India. India's seemingly knee-jerk response in favour of Myanmar (that militated against Bangladesh), reportedly in response to Myanmar's allegations of Islamist terrorists ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) attacking and killing Myanmar's police (which, some intelligence experts suspected, could well have been contrived and carried out by Myanmar's own agencies to justify their contemplated actions), was viewed by a broad swathe of Bangladeshis as being Pavlovian in nature responding to key words "Islamist terrorists".

Over the last two years (since the Rohingya influx took place), frustration over Myanmar's flagrant obduracy and apparent continued

lakhs are Hindu Bengalis, about 4-6 lakhs are reportedly Muslim Bengalis, about one lakh are Nepali-speaking people, and the remaining are of tribal origin (Bodos and others). Since the ruling BJP-led government's official stance was that it would absorb and give citizenship to all Hindus originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, one may assume that Hindu Bengalis excluded from the Assam NRC will eventually be absorbed as citizens; but then what would happen to the non-Hindus?

The ramifications of this widening groundswell of public apprehension (that the NRC drive is mainly ethnic and more exactly against minority communities in Assam) were taken seriously enough by the government. Sheikh Hasina raised the matter personally with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York, reportedly for the first time. Despite soothing noises by Mr Modi, the sense of disquiet remains. However, reports that camps for interning the so-called illegal persons delisted from the NRC serve to fuel public perceptions and mistrust of Indian goals and intentions. One would do well to remember that the internment of the Japanese in camps by the US government during WW-II still rankles with the Japanese (and many Americans) today, seven and a half decades after the event.

Tariq A Karim was High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India between August 2009 and October 2014 and Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi from June 1984 to August 1988. He was also responsible as Additional Foreign Secretary for South Asia for finalising the Bangladesh-India Treaty on sharing the Ganges Waters in December 1996. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MAYA ANGELOU**  
(1928-2014)

American poet, memoirist, and actress whose several volumes of autobiography explore the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression.

*Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Charity events
- 6 Give over
- 11 Banish
- 12 Not called for
- 13 Bolshevik leader
- 14 Ratchet wheel parts
- 15 Almanac fill
- 17 Base on balls
- 18 Fluffy wraps
- 20 Docking site
- 22 Volcano product
- 23 Breaks, in a way
- 26 List of candidates
- 28 Abattoir waste
- 29 Big hit
- 31 Olympics jersey initials
- 32 Travel stops

**DOWN**

- 2 Firefighting tool
- 3 "Terminator" franchise actress
- 4 Rap sheet name
- 5 Dispatched
- 6 "Nope" opposite
- 7 Impressed by
- 8 "Terminator" franchise actor
- 9 Temporary calm
- 10 Cubicle fixture
- 16 Zoo creature
- 18 Wild party
- 19 Ibsen's home
- 21 Computer symbol
- 23 Laura of "Blue Velvet"
- 24 Naturalness
- 25 Diner side dish
- 27 Muscle connectors
- 30 Try out
- 33 Did hay work
- 34 Punch ingredient?
- 35 In the past
- 37 Race finish
- 39 Tiny
- 41 Low bill
- 42 Flowed into

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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

DOFF RIDEUP  
ERIE ATEASE  
CANS CAFTAN  
OLDSTYLE  
FUR INLET  
SOAPY ADORE  
EMULESIN  
MALES LEEKS  
INTROINS  
MUDVILLE  
ASPIREGEAR  
BOUNCEMEMO  
ESTEEMAPPS