

Bangladesh-India Relations: A Tangled Skein



TARIQ KARIM

INDIA'S biggest challenge when dealing with its immediate neighbours is, first and foremost, the sense of its sheer size that dwarfs the combined size of all the others. This huge size, in combination with the fact that India is the only country that has contiguous borders with all its neighbours—except Afghanistan (which has a somewhat dubious advantage of separation from the Indian landmass by intervening Pakistan)—adds to the psychological complexity in all when viewing their respective relationships with India, as indeed it explains, not a little, India's own behavioural pattern in its relations with the neighbours it towers over! Viewed through this prism, size matters, for better or for worse.

Having described generically the dynamics that very likely drives or defines the different sets of relationships that each of India's neighbours perhaps harbours towards the South Asian behemoth, I will focus here more on the relationship between Bangladesh and India than on the others.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Bangladesh's struggle for its independence from Pakistan in 1971 would have been far more prolonged, painful and bloody, or perhaps even rendered impossible, without India's support to it politically, economically, militarily and diplomatically, not to mention the whole-hearted support of the Indian people. Yet barely three and a half years after that defining moment, this relationship, haloed by the blood of martyrs co-mingling in the soil as they fought a common enemy, turned not only sour but became increasingly protean, with more downs than ups in the period between 1975 and 2008. Why?

Many in Bangladesh find Indian official attitude patronising, hectoring, insensitive and largely, if not entirely, self-serving. The propensity to shift goalposts to suit their own convenience is a repetitive theme. There were honourable exceptions to this behavioural pattern, notably during the years of initial bonhomie in the early post-Liberation years (1972-75), during the respective stewardships of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu in Bangladesh and Mrs Indira Gandhi in India; during the pre-midterm period of the Deve Gowda-Inder Gujral government in India and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's first term in office in Bangladesh, when the signing of



Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (L) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) listen to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during an agreement signing ceremony after a meeting in New Delhi, on April 8, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

the landmark 30-year Ganges Water Sharing Treaty (1996) and the treaty on ending cross-border insurgency (1997) were signed; and notably, in more recent times, during the UPA-2 government led by Dr Manmohan Singh in India with Sheikh Hasina as prime minister in Bangladesh, both displaying extraordinary vision and boldness. These were the periods when remarkable events happened.

It was following the elections in Bangladesh in December 2008 that a significant turn-around took place. Winning a massive landslide victory that also gave her a massive mandate, Sheikh Hasina demonstrated a visionary leadership matched equally by great boldness and political courage, embarking on pro-active engagement with the INC-led UPA government headed by Dr Manmohan Singh, also regarded in great esteem and respect by most Bangladeshis. Within the short span of two years, she addressed India's security concerns palpably to India's satisfaction; successfully concluded the Protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement that had been entered into by her illustrious father in 1974; resolved the maritime boundary dispute by willingly referring it to arbitration by the ITLOS under the UNCLOS; got sweeping (and practically one-way) trade concessions from India; and signed the historic Framework Agreement for Cooperation and Development in September 2011 with her Indian counterpart, which enabled Bangladesh, together with India, to launch the dynamic initiative for commencing meaningful

discussions with Bhutan and Nepal for sub-regional cooperation that was to become known as BBIN.

India and Bangladesh agreed upon the first post-Partition cross border trade in power and energy cooperation, with India supplying 250mW of power to Bangladesh (this power trade has since grown exponentially) and allowing India transit of Over Dimensional Cargo of power plant equipment across IWT protocol route from Haldia to Agartala. Having broken the ice, Bangladesh persuaded India at the highest level to agree to embark on a joint-venture hydro-power generation in Bhutan for importing-wheeling into Bangladesh using Indian grid. India also agreed to discuss rivers on a regional, holistic basin-wide management basis rather than piecemeal sharing of individual rivers. This was a major shift in Indian position since 1947, enabling Bangladesh, India and Nepal to discuss the Ganges basin; and Bangladesh, Bhutan and India could similarly optimise management of available waters in the lower Brahmaputra.

West Bengal's persistent intransigence on the Teesta issue and the Indian Centre's continuing adversarial relations with the recalcitrant state since then has served as impetus to growing disenchantment with India in Bangladesh. This was accentuated steadily after the BJP-led NDA Alliance came to power in 2014 with overwhelming (and subsequently, in 2019, sweeping near-total) majority. The first near-casualty was the ratification of the LBA and its protocol, with

the BJP government first insisting on only partial ratification (without Assam, a key component of the carefully crafted package deal). The next jolt came when India abruptly shifted the goalposts on cross-border power deals in the region, by insisting on strict bilateral arrangements between all interested regional parties. India would purchase power from Bhutan and sell the same to Bangladesh, under the infamous Guidelines for Cross-Border Power Trade promulgated in December 2016. Effectively, this killed any chance of any sub-regional power trade or energy investment taking place, reviving India's hegemonic reputation robustly.

This served to fuel further distrust among Bangladeshis about Indian reliability and deepened suspicions that the narrative (and initiatives and works thereunder) of sub-regional connectivity were essentially an Indian ploy to get Bangladesh to accede to long-standing Indian demands for transit and transshipment across Bangladesh to India's landlocked north-eastern states and to enable the operationalisation of Mr Modi's robust "Act East" policy.

With these body blows to the newly established bonhomie were then added, as grist to the mill, Indian policies and actions on three significant issues that have regional fallout. First was India's equivocal position on Myanmar's genocidal actions on its Rohingya nationals in Rakhine state in August 2017 which resulted in a mass outflow of nearly 1 million refugees into Bangladesh. The Myanmar regime screamed "Islamist terrorism" when Mr Modi was visiting that country to which his government's response was Pavlovian, as viewed by most Bangladeshis. The subsequent actions by India on the NRC in Assam have only served to deepen anxiety and distrust about real intentions behind what India has repeatedly asserted as being an internal matter of India. Many Bangladeshis are convinced that this is an anti-Muslim drive by India's present regime espousing Hindutva, and India is now increasingly viewed as jettisoning all pretensions to secularism and unabashedly embracing the redefining of the Indian state as a Hindu majoritarian Rashttra (mirroring, ironically, Pakistan's Muslim majoritarian Islamic Republic).

Why anti-Muslim? Because the BJP leaders in pre-poll campaign speeches and subsequently after assuming power had asserted that all Hindus from anywhere, particularly from the neighbouring states, would be granted Indian citizenship if they so sought it in India. This was reinforced by the cow-slaughter ban and numerous reports

of vigilante actions by Hindu revivalists across several states in India. The recent actions in Kashmir (revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution) have served to feed this anxiety and added much grist to the mill, pushing fears into the realm of deep-seated conviction. The present NDA Alliance's credibility is, therefore, increasingly being tested by its own acts of commission and omission, when compared to the soft, inclusive and conciliatory approach to neighbours of its predecessors in power, the UPI Alliance.

The shift in emphasis on various issues has also had its fallout on the various regional cooperation measures, processes and institutions like SAARC, BBIN and BIMSTEC. Since 2014, it is clear to many observers that India is now least interested in having anything to do at all with SAARC, considered dead for all purposes. India has demonstrated less than enthusiasm for pursuing the BBIN agenda, focusing its energy and efforts on getting connectivity on road, rail and waters between India and Bangladesh foremost, while letting sub-regionalism proceed at its own pace, if it will or can. India is clearly now viewed as having shifted focus and concentrating energies entirely to activating BIMSTEC.

However, one should not lose sight of two issues here. In the 7-member BIMSTEC, the 4-member BBIN countries comprise the majority. To my simple-minded view, BBIN's inability to demonstrate palpable success in any truly regional cooperative/collaborative venture would serve as a dampener on enthusiasm being generated among the remaining three members about the continuing viability of the BIMSTEC venture. Secondly, two BIMSTEC members, Bangladesh and Myanmar, constitute the western and eastern spans of the bridge that they form to link the South Asian region with the Southeast Asian region and beyond further east. As I see it, both these spans are now on fire where they meet, and the flames are growing stronger by the day due to continuing and persisting intransigence of the Myanmar regime to amicably resolve the refugee crisis that it unleashed on Bangladesh. Unless these flames are doused quickly, the bridge will collapse and BIMSTEC too may become another patient in the regional ICU.

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The Age of Alternate Reality



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

COMMON sense tells us that life's experiences should help us acquire a degree of certainty about most issues. However, I seem to be the exception to this conventional wisdom. With age I am becoming increasingly unsure about my beliefs. While I was growing up, there were certain social norms and truths that remained indisputable. One of them was that lying was wrong—even misleading people with white lies was unacceptable. Today we live in a "post-truth" era, where powerful leaders like Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin and Boris Johnson are creating an alternate reality based on a gross distortion of facts. The general purpose is to gain either political or business advantage.

Politicians have always twisted facts and lied for a variety of reasons: to camouflage or inflate security concerns, or cover up personal scandals, or overstate their achievements to win approval. But these spins were based on some facts and data that were manipulated to mislead the public and win votes. Today's leaders, however, seem to be manufacturing outright lies in their political factory and mass-propagating them through the social as well as mainstream media. The deception is so well-orchestrated that it casts a shadow of doubt on actual reality. Interestingly, Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway even conjured up a name for these falsehoods when she justified her boss's exaggerated estimate of the size of

the crowd at his inauguration. She termed it as "alternative facts!"

President Trump's disingenuousness, of course, marks a new high in the art of political manipulation. He has called climate change a hoax, claimed that there were a million illegal votes in California (which voted for the Democrats in the 2016 US elections), and has termed his impeachment investigation a "witch hunt". He lies so prolifically that the *Washington Post* reported that he made 2,140 false or misleading claims during his first year in office—an average of 5.9 a day. The most frightening part is that he has mastered the art of transforming his lies into truths. First, he floats a preposterous idea. Then he comes up with false evidence, quoting non-existent sources, and repeats his lies. Finally, when his followers start to believe him, he tells them, the media and his opponents have been misrepresenting facts all along. Unfortunately, this pattern has been imitated by many other politicians with considerable effectiveness.

Political lies are not just restricted to fake news; it's also fake science, fake history and fake economics. False claims about the UK's financial relationship with the EU helped swing the vote in favour of Brexit. Modi has blatantly misrepresented and distorted India's history to promote his party's Hindutva mandate. Russia ramped up its disinformation campaign in the run-up to elections in France, Germany, the Netherlands and other countries in concerted efforts to discredit and destabilise democracies and tip the global balance of power.

As noted above, when lies are repeated persistently by powerful men and women, they begin to sound like "truth". Also, these



US President Donald Trump's disingenuousness marks a new high in the art of political manipulation.

PHOTO: REUTERS/YURI GRIPAS

leaders have cronies who are constantly working to bolster their ludicrous theories by doctoring facts and documents. Elections have thus become a contest of who is better at exploiting the propaganda machinery. Elections are no longer won on facts and figures describing the actual state of affairs on the ground. Unfortunately, a lot of the falsehood is spoken under the garb of freedom of expression. It may thus be useful to remember Daniel Patrick Moynihan's well-known observation that "everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts!"

The lies propagated by political leaders have a dangerous fallout: they invoke fear among the masses by creating suspicion and mistrust between groups. So much so that one group believes that it is being attacked by the "other"—be it immigrants or natives, coloured or white people, Jews or Muslims. As a result, our world is fast becoming a battlefield where groups are fighting with each other without any goal or objective. Unfortunately, it's this antagonism, anger, chaos and confusion that the politicians seem to be capitalising on.

How did this happen? How did truth and reason become such endangered species, and what does this threat portend for our public discourse and the future of our politics and governance? There are no easy answers to these questions and no easy remedies for this global malaise. However, whatever the cause, it is essential that citizens remain vigilant and defy the manipulative tactics that autocrats and power-hungry politicians depend on to subvert the truth. We must not forget that without facts, there can be no rational debate over democratic policies, and no way to hold elected officials accountable to the public.

And it is up to us, the people, to reject the perversion of truth that our leaders spin out for their political gains. Regrettably, most of us have grown cynical or are reluctant to actively resist the onslaught of propaganda that we encounter on a daily basis, even when we have the knowledge and capacity to challenge these falsehoods. In the process, we are allowing the autocrats to not only dominate the public arena, but also occupy our minds by forcing us to believe in a fictitious reality.

George Orwell spent his life resisting and fighting totalitarian tendencies in Western societies. After the publication of his dystopian novel "1984", which exposes the Machiavellian strategies and lies that authoritarian leaders use to subjugate citizens, he said: "The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: Don't let it happen. It depends on you."

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.



QUOTABLE Quote



CL

MERYL STREEP
(Born 1949)

American film actress known for her mastery technique, expertise with dialects, and subtly expressive face.

True freedom is understanding that we have a choice in who and what we allow to have power over us.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Top-rated

5 Blast of wind

9 Island south of Sicily

10 Really impressed

12 Peruvian peaks

13 More tender

14 Moves furtively

16 Paving goo

17 Time in office

18 Physics particles

21 Last year's jrs.

22 Hospital workers

23 Property claims

24 Brawl

26 Hot dog holder

29 "Jeopardy!" host

Alex

30 Nevada city

31 Brain scan: Abbr.

32 Orates

34 Raring to go

37 Loosen, as laces

38 Use the rink

39 New drivers, usually

40 Clothing line

41 Mail

DOWN

1 Flag

2 Church leaders

3 Teakettle output

4 Gofers' work

5 USO patrons

6 First Numero

7 "No Exit" writer

8 Fine-tunes

9 Ship poles

11 Blunders

15 Mouse sounds

19 Coffee dispens-ers

20 Burro

22 Pleasant

23 Research setting

24 Aberrations

25 Bob Marley's music

26 Defeated

27 Nasty

28 Snouts

29 Golf pegs

30 Zellweger of "Judy"

33 Places

35 Seventh Greek letter

36 "Stand" band

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

PIER
ACRID
LARGE
ERA
SUNLIT
STALEMATE
CLASSMATE
WHIZ
HASTRO
RELIC
FREAK

BRIEF
RINSE
ABATE
RAD
GUTS
PENAL
THESE
HALER
MOST

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

I WOULDN'T GET INTO ANY GAMES WITH COSMO. I THINK HE'S GOT EVERYTHING FIXED

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THAT?

HE WON THE BIG CRAP GAME YESTERDAY AND HE WASN'T EVEN THERE!

GREG! MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

THE WINDUP

I'VE BEEN LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS GAME ALL SEASON.

THE PITCH

IF I CAN STAY HOME AND WATCH IT, I'LL DO THE DISHES FOR A WEEK!

THE CALL

PUZZLE SAM