

Where did appeasing Hefajat get us?

The govt must wake up to the reality of the situation

EVEN though the Hefajat-e-Islam used the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for their recent onslaught across the country, their main attack was on the government and the secular values that Bangladesh today stands for. And that becomes obvious once we look at what they targeted and destroyed—setting public offices on fire, attacking police stations, ransacking Mandirs and not even sparing the Ustad Alauddin Khan Music Academy. Alauddin Khan is considered one of the most high ranking classical musicians, who is not only respected in this region but also abroad by lovers of classical music. Why was his memorial destroyed? Why was the public land office attacked and land records destroyed? Why was a public train attacked?

If we look at all these factors, we see that Modi's visit was just the excuse—the chaos was intended for the occasion of Bangladesh's 50 years of independence. This is a wake-up call for the government, the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina, who has long been appeasing them by accepting all their demands, some of them quite outrageous. It was due to their pressure that a lot of changes were brought to our regular school education, including the exclusion of secular writers' stories from prescribed government textbooks. The government was forced to give due recognition to the degrees of the Qawmi madrasa system, which was particularly absurd when the government has no say over the curriculum of Qawmi madrasas and does not even have a complete list of how many Qawmi madrasas there are in the country.

With all these appeasements, they have now revealed their true colours, and if the government thinks this is just an anti-Modi movement and try and renegotiate with them again, it will be making a big mistake. While appeasing Hefajat, the government, in the meanwhile, suppressed all other dissenting voices, including that of the opposition BNP, civil society and the independent media. On the one hand extreme voices were given space, but on the other hand, secular dissenting voices were crushed. Now the government stands alone against this extremist force.

The handling of the situation over the last few days is also questionable. Was it really necessary to open fire on Hefajat activists? Were the necessary precautionary steps taken beforehand to prevent violence? And why was Chhatra League used as a counter force to the Hefajat? Why was that necessary when we already have the police and other law enforcement agencies?

What we witnessed over the past week is very alarming. The government must immediately rebuild bridges with secular voices in the country, including the dissenting ones, and thereby strengthen the force that needs to be brought together to curtail the rise of extremist organisations, including Hefajat.

Government's fresh directives on Covid-19

Compliance must be ensured

IN the face of exponentially higher daily coronavirus infection rates, the government on Monday issued a gazette notification containing 18 new directives aiming to combat this spike. One had hoped that the new directives from the government related to the Covid-19 pandemic would come sooner. The world is seeing another spike in the infection rates, and many countries, European ones in particular, are in complete lockdown. The dangerous aspect of the virus is that it has mutated into new strains that might be more infectious and more difficult to control. There are also concerns that vaccines developed so far may not provide as much protection against the newer strains.

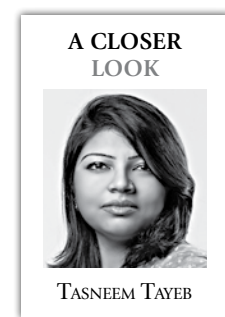
In Bangladesh, unfortunately, we have, across the board, let our guards down over the past couple of months. Beginning in January, there was an untoward relaxation of protective measures (both at individual and collective levels), due to the reduced number of Covid-19 cases, and given the business-as-usual attitude, it seemed as if Covid-19 was history. Of course, that was not so, and we are learning it again the hard way. Health facilities, for one, have been saturated, with the number of infections and hospitalisations rising sharply.

While we commend the new restrictions, a few of the guidelines do require clarification. However, it is just as well that the confusion regarding quarantine of passengers has been clarified. From now on, incoming passengers from Europe will have to quarantine for 14 days in government facilities or government-approved hotels at their own expenses, and returnees from other regions will have to quarantine at home if they do not show symptoms upon their arrival in Bangladesh.

The new directives also mandate purchase and sale of daily necessities in open spaces, maintaining hygiene rules. But one wonders what would be the case for kitchen markets that are in enclosed areas, given that there are quite a few of those in Dhaka city. And what measure should shopping malls (enclosed and centrally air conditioned) apply to keep the number of people inside them to the level that the environment remains "safe"? It is imperative that these and any further directives from the government are not vague in any way, in order to eliminate all kinds of confusion during this crisis.

We believe that the administration should not rest by issuing directives only. It must also ensure that the suggested measures are followed strictly. For example, in the past, we had seen public transportation vehicles charging double the normal fare to defray the loss due to the restrictions in the number of passengers a bus could carry, yet carry the full capacity of passengers. One of the best ways of fighting the pandemic is to prevent its spread. The suggested measures will help in doing so, provided they are followed religiously. That must be ensured, and if needed, enforced.

Modi spreads neighbourly love, but key challenges rumble on



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYER

development of the region and concerted efforts to meet common goals: "For our millions of people, for their future, for our fight against poverty, for the fight against terrorism."

PM Modi generously presented Bangladesh with 109 ambulances and 1.2 million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presented PM Modi with a gold and a silver coin which were released marking the birth centenary of Bangladesh's Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with a silver coin released on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the country's independence. The Indian Prime Minister reiterated India's Neighbourhood First Policy and the two leaders also virtually opened some projects together. On the surface, the relationship between the two countries could not be better.

The two countries also signed five MoUs on March 27, 2021, to enhance bilateral cooperation in a host of areas, including: trade, ICT, disaster management and sports. To be specific, the MoUs are: MoU on disaster management, resilience and mitigation; MoU between Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC) and National Cadet Corps of India (INCC); MoU on the Establishment of a Framework of Cooperation in the Area of Trade Remedial Measures between Bangladesh and India; MoU on Supply of ICT equipment, courseware and reference books and training for Bangladesh-Bharat Digital Service and Employment and Training (BDSET) Center; and MoU on Establishment of Sports facilities at Rajshahi College field and surrounding areas.

"India and Bangladesh signed MoUs in key sectors such as disaster management, sports and youth affairs, trade, technology and more. These will add strength to our development partnership and benefit the people of our nations, especially the youth", tweeted Narendra Modi post the signing of the MoU between the two neighbours.

"Relationship going from strength to strength!" tweeted Arindam Bagchi, spokesperson for the Indian External Affairs ministry.

Indeed, India-Bangladesh relations have improved significantly over the years. Bangladesh today is one of India's largest trading partners in South Asia, connectivity between the two countries has improved significantly over the last few decades, and so have security, academic and cultural ties, healthcare support, and people-to-people relationships, among other parameters.

However, despite all the positives, there remain some unresolved, contentious issues that plague the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations.

Rampant killings of Bangladeshi civilians at the India-Bangladesh border by the Indian border security forces, uncertainty over the Teesta water sharing agreement, and anti-dumping duty on Bangladesh's exports to India are some of the many issues that need to be resolved to forge a lasting bond between the two nations in the long run. Unfortunately, none of these could get the spotlight during Modi's recent visit to Bangladesh.

Human Rights Watch quoting Odhikar reported earlier this year that Indian "border forces have killed at least 334 Bangladeshis since 2011 and committed other instances of severe abuse, including 51 killings in 2020."

Even as late as March 20, 2021, BSF killed a Bangladeshi national named Bappa Mia at a border village in Tripura. He was allegedly a cattle smuggler. And

Bangladeshis at the border. One can only hope that India would take Bangladesh's request seriously and act on stopping the unnecessary loss of human lives at the border.

With regard to the Teesta water sharing agreement, the Indian Foreign Minister during his recent visit to Bangladesh firmly asserted that India's position remains unchanged and that soon, secretary level meetings would take place to discuss the issue in detail. However, India could not say anything concrete about how long it might take for them to resolve this issue. While the Indian centre seems committed to sharing Teesta waters with Bangladesh, the state through which the river flows—West Bengal—has vehemently opposed this idea.

And with the centre and the state at odds over Teesta water sharing, unfortunately for Bangladesh, this issue is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. During PM Modi's visit, PM Hasina stressed the importance of signing the

Despite multiple requests from Bangladesh, the anti-dumping duty and countervailing duty levied by India have not been lifted. This is significantly hurting Bangladesh's trade and in the long run, will keep on being a burning issue for both countries.

The Indian and Bangladesh prime ministers discussed the issue of removing tariff and non-tariff barriers to balance and bolster trade ties, and Bangladesh again requested India to withdraw the anti-dumping duty. How India will respond to this remains to be seen.

India's muted response to the Rohingya crisis has also put a dent in India-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh has sought India's support to resolve the Rohingya crisis on multiple occasions. India, in the past, had mostly confined its reaction to the Rohingya issue to more tactical statements of concern.

Only recently did we see a strong stance by India on the Rohingya issue, when India's Permanent Resident to the UN, Pawan Badhe said, "We remain committed to ensuring safe, sustainable and speedy repatriation of displaced persons from Rakhine state, currently staying in Bangladesh, to Myanmar, based on the understanding reached between the two countries. We will continue to support efforts in this direction."

During Modi's just concluded Bangladesh visit, the Indian foreign secretary suggested that India will work for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, but India's response to the issue is perhaps too little too late. In the wake of the Myanmar military coup and the internal political instability ripping the country apart, engaging the Myanmar military leaders to find a sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis will not be easy.

These outstanding issues will continue to be a challenge for India-Bangladesh relations in the long term. While the two countries have reached agreements on multiple bilateral issues over the years, resolving these will be key in forging a stronger relationship.

There is no denying that India-Bangladesh relations are deeply rooted in shared history, heritage and culture. The two countries have been friends even before Bangladesh actually became a reality. It was with the support of India that Bangladesh was finally able to quash the enemy during the Liberation War.

Indeed, PM Modi's visit to Bangladesh, as put by the Indian Foreign Secretary, has been "substantive, historically symbolical and very special." In Bangladesh, we really appreciate India's warm gestures.

And it is in the spirit of these deep-seated shared bonds that India and Bangladesh must now work together to minimise differences and take this friendship to newer heights of camaraderie. While both countries have said all the right words praising each other, only time will tell how much value both attach to these ties. Actions, after all, speak louder than words.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana hold high the Gandhi Peace Prize-2020 awarded to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman posthumously by the Indian government. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen applauding next to them.

PHOTO: PID

except for 2018, when 11 Bangladeshis were killed at the border, the killings by BSF have remained high.

Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar's comment earlier in March on border killings—"Every death is regrettable but we also have to ask ourselves why is there a problem, and the problem is because of crime. So our shared objective should be a no-crime-no-death border and I am sure if we can get it right, we can address this problem effectively"—does not help the cause.

Intruder, smuggler, trafficker, criminal: whatever the crime is, the border guards cannot simply just kill individuals. There is the law that decides the punishment for criminals and if a person has committed a crime—whatever it may be—they should be referred to the courts of justice, in compliance with due processes.

Bangladesh has urged India to use non-lethal weapons at the border to bring down the casualties to zero. Even during Modi's visit, Bangladesh "strongly requested" India stop the killing of

Teesta water sharing agreement, in response to which her Indian counterpart reiterated his country's commitment to seal the deal.

With regard to the Indian request for early finalisation of the draft from Bangladesh on the Feni River water sharing issue, the Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said, "River water cooperation is something that will continue." If that is the case, then India must surely try and address the Teesta issue and also accommodate Bangladesh's request to allow drawing of water for irrigation from Kushiara River.

Similarly, there is no end in sight to the problem of the anti-dumping duties imposed on certain Bangladeshi exports to India. In January 2017, India levied anti-dumping duties on certain imports from Bangladesh, including hessian and jute yarns. In April that year, India imposed similar duties on imports of hydrogen peroxide from Bangladesh. In 2018, the country imposed another duty on imports of fishing nets from Bangladesh.

Celebrating 50 years of British-Bangladesh relations

There is huge scope for collaboration in tackling climate change in the next 50 years



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

Elizabeth of England, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prince Charles. There were also many celebrations in the United Kingdom to mark the occasion, such as the lighting up of the iconic London Eye ferris wheel in the green and red colours of the Bangladesh flag.

As a proud Bangladeshi citizen who has spent many years in London, first as a student and later as a professor and scientist, I hold both the UK as well as Bangladesh close to my heart. As such, I will suggest some ways in taking forward the relationship between our two countries to the next level in the coming years.

I will do so in the context of the greatest global emergency of climate change, which will have to be faced by every country from now on. In this context, it is noteworthy that the UK will be hosting the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, Scotland in November this year, while Bangladesh will be the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) group of countries at COP26.

Hence, there are a number of issues on which the leaders of the two countries



PHOTO: COLLECTED

can bring forward ideas to tackle climate change at the level that it deserves to be dealt with. A British-Bangladesh climate change accord could be agreed upon between the two countries, which could set out ways forward for all the other countries to emulate and follow to make COP26 a success.

However, there are also many other opportunities for the two countries to continue to collaborate to tackle climate change in a mutually beneficial manner, rather than with the UK providing aid to Bangladesh, which was the main feature of our relationship in the past.

Over the last two months, I had the privilege of co-moderating a series of eight webinars on UK-Bangladesh collaboration to tackle climate change, where we had

presentations from experts from both Bangladesh as well as the UK talking about adaptation and resilience, nature based solutions, renewable energy and finally, climate finance.

This excellent series of webinars identified a number of ways in which the two countries could collaborate to tackle the common global emergency of climate change. The following are only a few of the ideas that came up in those discussions.

The first session on adaptation and resilience highlighted the fact that Bangladesh has become globally recognised as a world leader in adaptation to climate change, and there were tremendous opportunities for a two-way learning exercise between the two countries in research, learning and capacity

building on adaptation to climate change. This could be built on the longstanding relationship between universities in the two countries.

The second major area of collaboration identified was for promotion of nature-based solutions for future infrastructure in both countries, with plenty of opportunities for learning from each other, particularly on wetlands management.

The third area of opportunity identified was mainly for the private sector companies in both countries to invest in renewable energy, which would include both solar and wind energy. In particular, the potential of using the latest technology for large-scale offshore wind energy generation in the Bay of Bengal, which is currently being deployed in the North Sea, would be a potential game-changer for Bangladesh's future energy pathway.

Finally, the strong social and family ties between the British citizens of Bangladeshi descent and their relations in Bangladesh is another excellent foundation upon which future relationship between citizens of the two countries can be taken to the next level in years to come.

In my many years of living in London, I had the opportunity to meet many young British citizens of Bangladeshi origin who were particularly interested in the topic of climate change and how it might affect both the UK as well as Bangladesh. That is why I strongly believe that using the framework of tackling climate change can become the basis of the relationship between the two countries for the next 50 years.

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