

CONTROVERSY OVER MODI'S TWEET

Communal narrative is a no-go zone!



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A recent tweet from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has ignited controversy in Dhaka regarding the historical context of the 1971 war, which resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh. While Modi’s rightful praise for the Indian soldiers involved in the war is noteworthy, it raises questions about the broader historical narrative and attempts to rewrite history. The war, which began on March 26, 1971, with the participation of mass Bangladeshis, culminated in Bangladesh’s independence on December 16, 1971. Dhaka sees this carefully crafted tweet as another foreign policy misstep that could further increase anti-India sentiment.

It is essential to acknowledge that the narratives from New Delhi too often fail to recognise the contributions of over 1,500 individuals who sacrificed their lives for freedom—among thousands of others—during a challenging 15-year period marked by the Awami League’s transactional collaborations with the BJP. The use of communal narratives in Mr Modi’s tweets on Bangladesh is most certainly causing phenomenal reactions. At the same time, the track record of minority persecution under the BJP, as reported by the US State Department’s reports on religious freedom, is not a forgotten phenomenon. AL remained silent on the minority persecution in India while India saw a phenomenal decline in Muslim participation in Indian politics.

Hence, communal narratives perpetuated by the political cheerleaders or propaganda machines in Delhi will only cement the anti-India sentiment, in which the far-rightists and the extremists will gain momentum in the future. These groups, like the Hindutva extremists or the ethnonationalist extremists in Myanmar, will comfortably hold enough control over the perception by displaying vivid examples of minority persecution, notably the Muslims and the communities in the Indian Northeast. It is still a surprise that communal narratives, which the international community has already debunked remain a core tool for

Delhi’s propaganda machines.

While AL’s ousting by the mass uprising was an apparent shock for the Indian political agencies, anti-Bangladesh narratives further question the foreign policy acumen of the BJP. If the BJP and its security tools are consciously creating ground for extremist bloopsto justify AL’s return to Dhaka, this will be another classic blunder that Delhi will have to bear for a long time to come. On a positive note, Dhaka has consistently shown positive gestures to continue equal-handed and win-win relations with Delhi since August 8, 2024, recognising the importance of this crucial bilateral tie. I guess that idea of equal relationships is hurting political machoism.

Like Bangladesh’s Western partners and trade confidant China, Delhi should note that the interim government is new, the political situation is still fluid, and the government requires a reasonable time to fix the nuts and bolts of democracy. Here, the buzzword is “democracy,” which has always been the least priority for BJP and AL ties. The interim government came to power at a time when the democratic institutions, judiciary and law enforcement agencies, and electoral systems essentially became one-party enterprises.

On top of that, Bangladesh had practically no functional law enforcement agencies between August 5 and 8, and some attacks against AL affiliates continued in between. These attacks included AL politicians and beneficiaries, be they Muslims or Hindus. At the same time, the economy that the interim government inherited continues to be challenging, requiring sustained international support. One would have expected Delhi’s forthcoming role in Bangladesh’s economic reconstruction and institutional reforms, but the train has left the platform.

Instead, media narratives (one would say it is media terrorism), recent attacks on Bangladesh consulates, and the desecration of the Bangladesh flag continue openly. The

Bangladesh foreign secretary had to take a bold stance to remind his counterpart that religion and its practice are Bangladesh’s internal affairs, and other countries are not expected to comment on our internal matters.

That means the Indian communal narrative and misleading history projects deeply affect its neighbourhood and foreign policy. These narratives come as South Asia

Chinese economy perhaps gives an informed anecdote of foreign policy frailties. The other major political party, the Congress, has demonstrated relatively better political maturity despite its struggles to balance a need for stable Dhaka and familial ties between the Gandhi family and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s misleading appeal for stationing

Trump and Modi administrations could prioritise communal issues and security concerns and routinely position Dhaka’s tie with Beijing as a significant threat.

Despite ongoing pessimism, there is hope for improved bilateral relations if Delhi adjusts its foreign policy in the coming months. Delhi needs to acknowledge that adopting a more inclusive foreign policy aligns with mutually acceptable interests. Assisting the interim

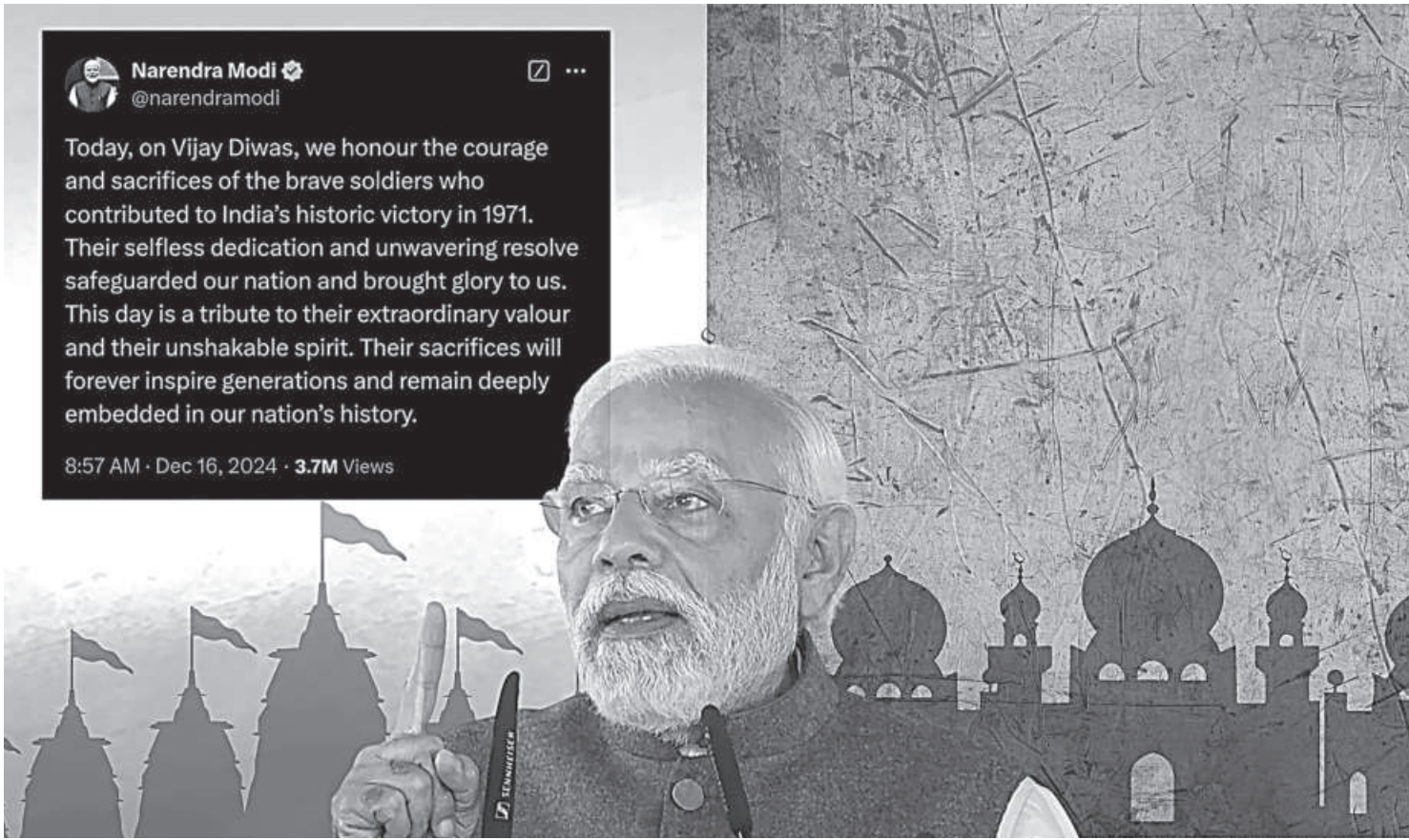


ILLUSTRATION: NOSHIN NAWAL

undergoes massive transformation, which puts the BJP in a position where it must justify its actions to its political allies and adversaries in Delhi. The party’s Herculean position of having an absolute majority in parliament is being challenged. It faces a decline in regional partnerships, exemplified by the closure of its embassy in Kabul or the animated ties with the failing Buddhist military in Myanmar accused of genocide.

Indeed, Sri Lankan and Maldivian tilts toward China and the West, or Nepal’s rewriting of the map, can’t go unnoticed. BJP’s heightened dependence on the

peacekeepers underscores Kolkata’s mounting desperation. After the Indian High Commission in Dhaka closed visas for general Bangladeshis, the state experienced alarming economic declines, and its prosperity was heavily intertwined with its economic relations with Bangladesh.

Moreover, after President-elect Donald Trump’s tweet on attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh, there is wide speculation that Mr Modi’s cabinet will go the extra mile to put pressure on Dhaka using channels with the White House. Just a heads-up, Dhaka would perceive that the tie between the

government in stabilising the economy and reinforcing political institutions can facilitate a quicker return to a democratic framework. An emerging national unity regarding legal actions to reform AL and transform it into a reformed political entity distanced from its past leadership is a reality. Hence, advocating for free and fair elections and remaining open to any changes the Bangladeshis choose to bring in are also key to India’s interest. Indeed, refraining from exaggerated communal rhetoric would serve as its best deterrence against perceived extremist threats.

Bangladesh and ASEAN: A bridge too far?



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It seems that recently, Bangladesh has been trying to redefine its foreign policy with a pivot towards Southeast Asia, signalling its intent to strengthen diplomatic and commercial ties with countries in the region. Bangladesh’s strategic decision to align itself more closely with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) highlights the country’s desire to diversify its foreign relations and assert itself as a regional player. The move reflects a more pragmatic approach in Bangladesh’s quest for economic growth and geopolitical relevance, but it also exposes deep-seated challenges that could impede its progress towards ASEAN membership.

Bangladesh’s foreign policy has long been characterised by the guiding principle of “friendship to all, malice towards none.” Historically, this approach has resulted in an alliance structure heavily shaped by its reliance on India and its dependence on Western markets, particularly for its booming RMG industry. However, as the geopolitical landscape has evolved, Bangladesh has recognised the need to reduce its over-reliance on these traditional allies and diversify its economic and strategic partnerships. ASEAN, with its dynamic economies, strategic location, and integrated market, represents an attractive alternative.

For Bangladesh, the rationale behind this pivot is multifaceted. The global economic landscape is undergoing significant changes, and Bangladesh’s reliance on Western markets for exports, primarily textiles, has made the country vulnerable to shifting trade dynamics and economic volatility. The growth trajectories of ASEAN economies



Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus receives Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on October 4, 2024.

PHOTO: CA’S PRESS WING

offer new trade opportunities, and its collective GDP of over \$3 trillion presents a significant opportunity for Bangladesh to tap into vibrant markets. Furthermore, ASEAN’s focus on regional integration aligns well with Bangladesh’s economic priorities, which include expanding foreign investment, increasing exports, and developing its infrastructure.

The desire to engage with ASEAN is not just aspirational but pragmatic. Bangladesh’s position in South Asia, with its strategic access to the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to major global trade

routes, offers ASEAN countries valuable partnerships. Moreover, Bangladesh’s booming garment industry, which forms the backbone of its economy, complements ASEAN’s manufacturing base, opening avenues for deeper economic collaboration. Beyond economic interests, Bangladesh’s closer ties with ASEAN could amplify

its voice in regional security and diplomatic matters as the country seeks to enhance its geopolitical influence.

However, the pathway to ASEAN membership is fraught with complexities. One of the most pressing challenges is Bangladesh’s internal governance issues, which have raised concerns among both regional and international observers. In the past decade, Bangladesh has faced serious democratic setbacks, with three consecutive controversial elections marred by allegations of rigging, voter suppression, and a lack of political pluralism. The Awami

League’s dominance, often seen as authoritarian, had raised questions about the country’s commitment to democratic principles. Bangladesh’s inability to resolve these issues has not only tarnished its domestic political climate but also raised doubts about its readiness to join a bloc like ASEAN, which prioritises good governance, stability, and

consensus driven decision making.

Corruption remains a significant hurdle. Bangladesh is consistently ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world, with systemic graft permeating nearly every level of government. Public institutions are plagued by inefficiencies, and economic opportunities are often hijacked by powerful elites with political connections. This corruption has stymied development, alienated foreign investors, and tarnished Bangladesh’s international reputation. It is a reality that cannot be overlooked if Bangladesh is to have a serious shot

at ASEAN membership.

In addition to governance challenges, Bangladesh faces concerns over migration and its potential impact on ASEAN member states. Historically, Bangladeshi migration has been predominantly directed toward Western countries, with millions of Bangladeshis living in countries like the US, UK, and the Middle East. However, if Bangladesh succeeds in joining ASEAN, this migration trend could shift, with many Bangladeshis opting to migrate to ASEAN countries, particularly the more developed ones like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

This potential increase in migration raises significant concerns about maintaining social cohesion within ASEAN, an organisation that places a high premium on regional stability and harmony. The influx of migrants could strain social services and trigger concerns about unemployment and ethnic tensions in host countries. ASEAN countries, with their diverse cultures, religions, and political systems, are highly sensitive to these issues, and Bangladesh must be proactive in addressing these concerns. Ensuring that migration is managed responsibly and does not burden ASEAN countries’ social and economic systems will be crucial for Bangladesh’s integration into the bloc.

Moreover, Bangladesh’s pursuit of ASEAN membership is complicated by the unresolved Rohingya crisis, which could further strain its relations with some ASEAN members. Myanmar, a full member of ASEAN, has been a staunch opponent of Bangladesh’s efforts to repatriate the Rohingya refugees currently living in Bangladesh. The ongoing political tensions over the Rohingya crisis could create significant friction within ASEAN, especially as Myanmar could oppose Bangladesh’s accession to the bloc in retaliation for its criticism of Myanmar’s handling of the crisis. The complex nature of ASEAN’s decision-making process, which requires unanimous approval from all members, means that this could

be a major stumbling block for Bangladesh’s aspirations to join the organisation.

Despite these challenges, Bangladesh’s engagement with ASEAN is not without merit. Bangladesh’s growing influence within the region, coupled with its strategic geographic location, provides significant opportunities for collaboration. The country’s burgeoning garment industry, along with its rapidly expanding infrastructure and manufacturing sectors, aligns with ASEAN’s goals for regional economic integration. Furthermore, Bangladesh’s commitment to climate change mitigation, sustainable development, and regional cooperation could offer synergies with ASEAN’s broader strategic objectives. If Bangladesh can demonstrate that it is capable of resolving its internal governance issues, tackling corruption, and managing migration responsibly, it could become a valuable partner in ASEAN’s quest for greater regional unity and economic stability.

The potential benefits of ASEAN membership for Bangladesh extend beyond economic considerations. Closer ties with ASEAN could open up new avenues for collaboration in areas such as technology, education, public health, and infrastructure. These partnerships would not only drive economic growth but also contribute to a more resilient regional landscape capable of addressing shared challenges. Bangladesh’s engagement with ASEAN could also serve as a platform to amplify its voice in global discussions, particularly in forums like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

The coming years will be crucial in determining whether Bangladesh can navigate its complex challenges and successfully integrate into ASEAN, balancing its ambitions with the realities of governance, regional dynamics, and international diplomacy. For now, Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, with the potential to reshape its future and play a more prominent role in Southeast Asia—if it can overcome the obstacles that stand in its way.