

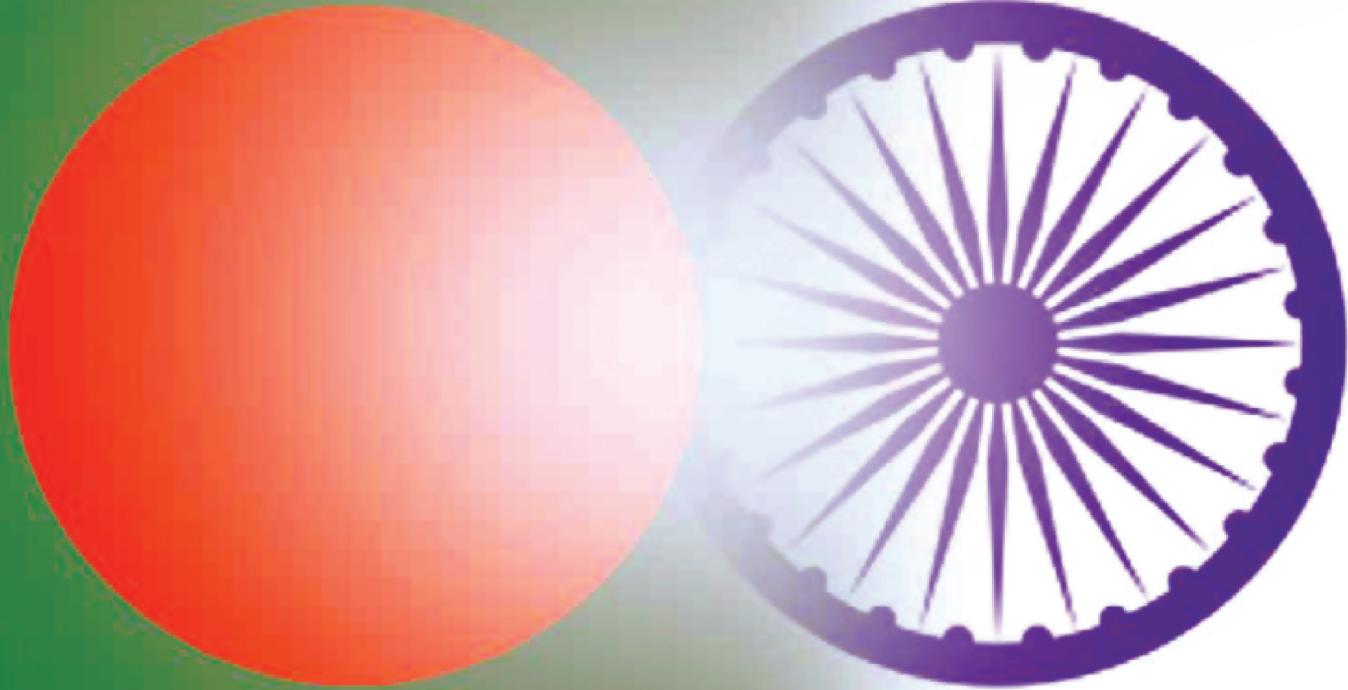


PROCEEDINGS

Seminar on

Bangladesh-India Relations: Confluence of Ideologies and Evolving Perspectives

Wednesday, 30 March 2022



Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

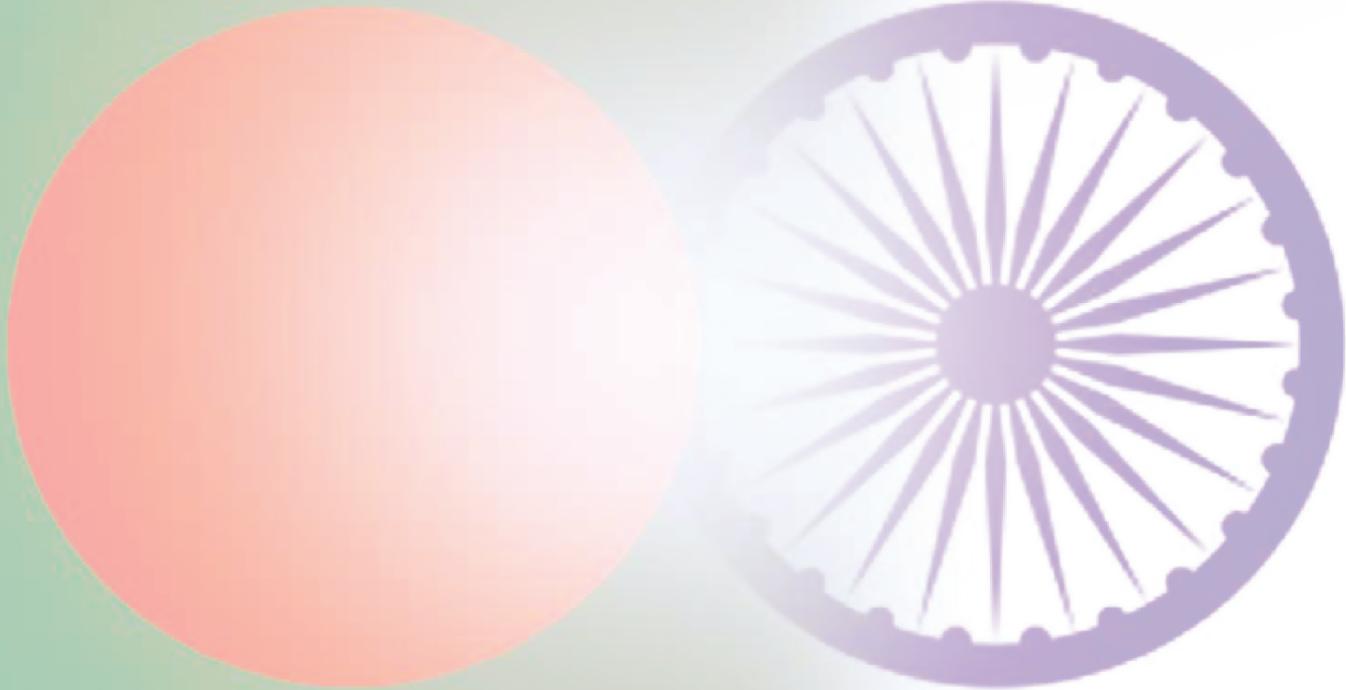


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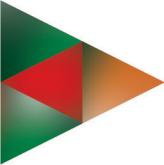
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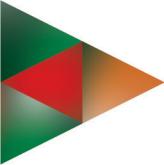
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SEMINAR
ON
Bangladesh-India Relations:
Confluence of Ideologies and Evolving Perspectives

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a seminar on “**Bangladesh-India Relations: Confluence of Ideologies and Evolving Perspectives**” on Wednesday, 30 March 2022 at the BIISS Auditorium. **H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP**, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. **Dr Arvind Gupta**, Director, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), India, graced the occasion as the Special Guest. In the Seminar, **Mr A S M Shamsul Arefin**, Chairman, Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies and **Lt Gen (Retd) Ravi Kumar Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM**, Centre Head and Senior Fellow, National Security, VIF, also delivered their remarks. **Ambassador Kazi Imtiaz Hossain, PAA**, Chairman, BIISS, chaired the event and delivered the concluding remarks while **Major General Mohammad Maksudur Rahman, OSP, BSP, psc**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the welcome address.



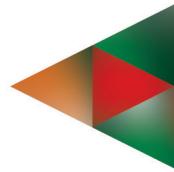


Bangladesh-India Relations: Confluence of Ideologies and Evolving Perspectives

Two distinguished presenters, **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIISS and **Dr Sreeradha Datta**, Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, VIF made their presentations in the seminar. A book titled “**India-Bangladesh Bonhomie at 50: 1971 and the Present**” was also launched at the end.

Senior officials from different ministries of government, ambassadors and high commissioners, former diplomats, senior military officials, media, academia, researchers, teachers and students from different universities, and representatives from different international organisations participated in the Seminar and presented their valuable opinions in the open discussion session.





WELCOME ADDRESS



Major General Mohammad Maksudur Rahman, OSP, BSP, psc

Director General, BIISS

At the outset of his speech, **Major General Mohammad Maksudur Rahman, OSP, BSP, psc**, Director General, BIISS paid profound tribute to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and to all martyrs who laid their lives for the nation, while the entire nation is celebrating the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation and Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's independence.

He noted that the relations between Bangladesh and India are based on shared history, culture, language, and values of secularism and democracy. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, India extended critical support to Bangladesh by providing military assistance and shelter to 10 million refugees. India was one of the first countries to recognise the sovereignty of Bangladesh and established diplomatic relations immediately



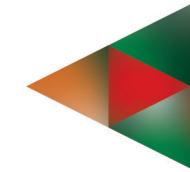
after its independence. Since then, mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and strong political will from both sides contributed substantially to strengthen these ties.

In the recent years, both countries have developed a remarkable understanding in the areas of defence and security, trade and commerce, power and energy, transport and connectivity, science and technology, and rivers and maritime affairs, he added. One of the significant achievements of the bilateral relations is the implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), exchange of enclaves and peaceful settlement of the maritime boundary dispute.

The Director General of BIISS mentioned that remarkable progress has also been achieved in trade and investment. Bangladesh is the biggest trading partner of India in South Asia. In the fiscal year of 2019-20, the two-way trade volume surpassed USD10 billion. Currently, India's exports to Bangladesh account for more than 85 percent of the total bilateral trade. Bangladesh is now the largest recipient of the line of credit (LOC) funds from India.

Besides, cooperation in the power sector has become one of the hallmarks of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. Bangladesh is importing 1,160 Megawatts of electricity from India to meet its demand. Connectivity has also become a priority for Bangladesh and India. Two countries are trying to re-establish the old linkages. Recently, they re-opened the old rail link of Chilahati-Haldibari and inaugurated Dhaka–New Jalpaiguri passenger train, Shwadhinata Sarak and Maitri Setu. Furthermore, cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries has been continuously rising through different programmes, including defence discussion, joint training and drill. For the first time in history, Bangladesh's tri-service contingent joined India's 2021 Republic Day parade.

He further added that the relations have further enhanced through regular high-level visits and exchanges since the last decade. The Prime Ministers of two countries participated in a summit-level virtual meeting in 2020. They signed seven MoUs and agreements in various sectors, including hydrocarbons, agriculture, trade, development projects, and heritage conservation. In March 2021, Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi participated in the golden jubilee of Bangladesh independence and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu. In order to celebrate 50 years of the diplomatic relationship,



both leaders decided to commemorate December 6 as 'Maitri Diwas' (Friendship Day). These initiatives will certainly add momentum to the bilateral relationship.

Against this backdrop, BIISS has organised the seminar to understand the different aspects of Bangladesh-India bilateral relations and how both countries can work together for their mutual benefits and prosperity. He was delighted to mention that Bangladesh and India have celebrated fifty years of their relationship, and he hoped that this friendship will reach new heights in the near future.





PRESENTATION ONE



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, BIISS

In his presentation, **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIISS, focussed on the economic and developmental issues of Bangladesh-India relations from Bangladesh perspective. Echoing the Director general of BIISS, he said that Bangladesh and India have a very deep-rooted relationship across all the dimensions of cooperation and friendship. He added that independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and strong political will are the four areas where mutual respect and recognition exist and there are common platforms like BIMSTEC, SAARC, BBIN and IORA where both Bangladesh and India are members. Here, they work on the common areas of cooperation.

He noted that both the countries have a long common border of about 4,096 kilometres. Though they have some obstacles in border management, informal and irregular migration, and water sharing, still they are enjoying a lot of cooperation and improvement in the relationship in the border management. Both countries had a long-pending border and maritime dispute but it has been solved very amicably. It is one of the historical achievements in the relationship between the two countries. There are

enabling factors in the cooperation between the two countries especially in the areas of development, trade and other mutual interests.

Both countries are enjoying rapid economic growth and developing in human dimensions. There is a trade along the value chains, so they have strong value chain cooperation and have the geographical proximity which is not only in the trade and development but also in the other areas of corporations like cultural, educational, scientific and other areas. They have strong investment linkages. Indian companies are investing not only in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) but also in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs). There are three dedicated SEZs. Now India is investing in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar, which is also an important area of cooperation and expanding trade complementarities.

He added that previously critics were talking about the competition between the two countries. Now, both the countries have a complementarity relationship and are hosting trade and developmental cooperation.

Referring to the data of the Export Promotion Bureau, he expressed that if the data of the last 10 months is considered, the export from Bangladesh is crossing US\$1.3 billion, and he expects that by the end of this fiscal year, it would be more than two billion. He mentioned that it is an outstanding achievement. He further added that if the growth rate is 20 per cent even in the current fiscal year, the growth is expected to grow about 60 per cent. It is an outstanding growth in exports from Bangladesh to India. So, if the rate continues then it is the matter of time to export more than US\$5 billion.

He also mentioned that there is another magnificent achievement in the last two years. The pattern of export growth and the growth of both the countries are struggling. But Bangladesh has achieved a better recovery from the Covid-19 and both the countries are doing very well. So, from Bangladesh to India, the export growth was higher than the export growth from Bangladesh to the world.

He added that if the pattern of export items is considered, even though in the last 5-6 years, there was diversification but rapid diversification taking place now. Now, Bangladesh is not concentrating solely on Ready-Made Garments (RMG); there are other products coming in the export basket of Bangladesh like agricultural products, food items, home textile, iron and steel and chemical products. Bangladesh is gradually enjoying the



diversification in the export items. He added that diversification means greater stability as a destination of Bangladeshi products. Because of the duty-free access to all products in the Indian market, Bangladesh is enjoying these benefits.



He also said that Bangladesh is expecting an early commencement of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Study is going on both from the Bangladesh and Indian side. He mentioned that it would be a guarantor and would secure the Indian market after the graduation from the LDCs. But, he noted that, if the export of services is considered, Bangladesh is doing very well in the Indian market. However, the problem is that the sectors in which Bangladesh is exporting the services, these are not high-tech or knowledge products but still categories like the construction services and the office maintenance—basically, the public related services like business services and advertising. These are the strong areas where there is complementarity and these areas in which Bangladesh exports and imports services. Bangladesh is experiencing a positive kind of trend. It is significant in terms of volume. But there is a strict environment not only in Bangladesh but also in India. Non-tariff and para-tariff barriers still exist. Even though the market in India is duty-free for almost all products of Bangladesh, the presence of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers still exist.

He argued that it may be because of the lack of exchange of information among the businesses. That is a big problem; there are studies, but the problem is that the businesspeople generally raise the issue of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers but when they ask the question specifically, they cannot mention due to the lack of information exchange on those barriers. Because of that, even though the trade regime is open, Bangladesh still cannot utilise its full potential. If we consider trade-related investments, the situation is improving significantly. During the Covid-19, the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from India was declining but it recovered very significantly during the last fiscal year.

He mentioned that the position of India in terms of FDI is the eighth. The volume of investment from India is increasing in terms of amount. Now, it is 5.2 per cent in total FDI inflow. There is another surprising thing called outward FDI. Financial intermediaries in mining and fuelling. There are the two sectors in which the formal investment is going: financial intermediaries, and mining and fuelling. India is the 4th largest destination of Bangladesh's outward FDI, after UK, Hong Kong and Nepal. It is going on in a welcoming approach. Bangladesh Bank is allowing the formal FDI insulated destinations and India is one of that. There is another area of developmental cooperation that is the Indian Line of Credits (LoCs). Currently, the third line of credit is being implemented. The total amount is US\$7.86 billion in the LoC but there are stringent kind of terms like procurement terms. He mentioned that 75 per cent procurement should be done from the Indian side with the limited tendering method. Only 25 per cent would be done locally with 1 per cent rate of interest and 0.5 per cent commitment fee. However, he argued that it is still better than the Chinese loan. In the Chinese loan, the terms are stringent plus 2 per cent rate of interest with limited grace period. Hence, if the two source of the loan is compared, Indian LoC is better. Another thing is slow rate of implementation. It is beyond the grace period. There is cost escalation problem because of that. Another thing is the lack of experience of handling the bigger chunk of loans which causes the delay of implementation.

He further expressed that if the whole landscape of developmental cooperation in trade and investment is considered, then it is not a big deal. Once the projects are implemented and if both countries are taking the benefits, then definitely it would be a good avenue of cooperation. Considering the whole value chain, trade complementarity, congenial environment and new areas of development, there definitely is a good potential in the coming years. He hoped for an integrated developmental approach between the two countries.



Given the broad backdrop, Dr Kabir suggested an eight-point agenda in order to enhance the developmental and economic cooperation. One of them is to attract Indian investment to increase exports. Regarding the level of development and the per capita income of the two countries, India is experiencing the growth of the middle-class and the consumer groups who need cheap but quality Bangladeshi products which can be produced in Bangladesh and imported by India. This way, the demand of the Indian consumers could be met.

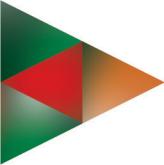
Bangladesh needs to have a post-LDC graduation strategy. Even though we are expecting an early commencement of CEPA, there is still uncertainty. It may not be as per the expectation of the Bangladeshi side. There needs to be a kind of guaranteed environment, duty-free environment in India so that it can be done. And the other is to soften the terms and implementation of the LoC. There are complaints and allegations but if the rate of implementation is increased then definitely the cost would be reduced and then we can enjoy the grace period of the implementation of the projects.

Bangladesh needs to identify the new products. Even though diversification is there, Bangladesh is depending on fewer categories of products and services. It needs to ensure export of high-tech and capital-intensive products.

Both the countries need to address the non-tariff and para-tariff barriers. Even though India is giving the duty-free access, still non-tariff and para-tariff barriers are jeopardising the potential benefits.

Both countries need to strengthen cooperation between the two standard institutes—the Bureau of Indian Standards and Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institute (BSTI). There is still ongoing cooperation, but they have to achieve an international standard. India has very high experience in terms of standardisation of their products. They have requirements. So, if there is strengthened cooperation between two standard institutes, then Bangladeshi products could easily enter the market and non-tariff and para-tariff barriers would be addressed.

Both countries need coastal shipping agreements. Both the countries have such an agreement, but it should be made viable. Bangladesh needs to seek India's technical support and investment to develop the tourism sector. India has wide experience in terms of their tourism sector. Dr Kabir finished his speech by referring to the friendship day. He believes that although 6th December is the Friendship Day, all the days across year are friendship days between these two countries.



PRESENTATION TWO



Dr Sreeradha Datta

Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, India

Dr Sreeradha Datta, Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), at the outset, conveyed her greetings to all the dignitaries and participants. She shared that she always gets nostalgic when she visits BIISS, because she began her first conference in Bangladesh with a BIISS event in 1999. She highlighted that for the last one year, Bangladesh and India have seen an unprecedented kind of bonhomie in terms of leadership. Three high level visits took place in a year. India has never celebrated any such 50 years with any of its neighbours other than Bangladesh.

Indo-Bangladesh relations have a huge historical background. According to Dr Datta, India and Bangladesh have a very stable partnership right now. She believes that this is the kind of relations Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi had envisaged in terms of close cooperation in 1971. The various sectors of cooperation that the two neighbours have handled for more than 10 years since India and Bangladesh

signed the Joint Communiqué 2010, laid out the basis of bilateral relations.

She opined that the delegation team visiting Bangladesh, celebrating its 50 years of independence and the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation signifies strong ideological connection. India has always appreciated Bangladesh's effort in ensuring democracy. There have been some ups and downs over the years. But one must look at the big picture. Dr Datta highlighted about the ethos of secular fabric which connect India with Bangladesh so well.

According to Dr Datta, since no South Asian country has a monolithic population, there are bound to be some form of irritants. But the large picture at the political and the leadership levels is something that the countries converge on. Bilateral relationships take place at various levels, and they have multiple layers. She broadly divided them into state-to-state, government-to-government, and people-to-people. The governments of both countries are working on diverse sectors—social, political, economic and many more, some of which were completely unheard of earlier. Dr Datta reiterated that Bangladesh and India have never seen such cooperation at any level. That both the country have been able to reach there is something to acknowledge and take forward.

She shared that as a student of International Politics and someone who frequently works on Bangladesh, she has written about how the leadership and the governments are converging. There are broad sectors and themes they are converging on. She then focused on people-to-people connects. She added that the interactions that Bangladesh and India have in literature, music, arts and aesthetics, is innumerable. Every single artist from Bangladesh is appreciated in India and vice-versa. A huge band by Indian music composer and singer A R Rahman was in Bangladesh the previous day. These are instances of constant interactions between the two countries. But the news media and the social media, have taken the narrative to another place. She suggested that the growth of people-to-people contacts in medical sector, tourism sector and in commercial shopping level should be appreciated. It is certainly growing. She informed the audience that in 2019, India issued 2.2 million visas, which hugely contributed to the economy of India. She highlighted two areas here—medical tourism and social events. She pointed out that no Bangladeshi social event now takes place without shopping in India.

According to Dr Datta, letting a few negative voices cloud the bilateral relationship is really unrealistic. Because for the first time, India and Bangladesh are not only bilateral partners, they are showcasing how two countries can make regionalism work in South Asia. However, she also pointed out that infrastructural development, cross-border facilities, developments within BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement, etc., had been delayed. She referred to herself as a huge critic of BBIN as the

initiative is still grappling since it was signed in 2015. The signatories finalised the MoU just a month ago. The countries are still grappling with the modalities on the ground which are not in place. She humorously added that the South Asians move at a slow pace. She suggested everyone to accept it and not blame each other.

She again highlighted that India and Bangladesh have never been at a more stable position and asked everyone to take it forward. There is bound to be frictions like people have frictions within the families. She gave an example that in India, every state is having some contest over the other for water or other reasons. She is aware of the existing gaps and noted that it is a work in progress.

Dr Datta opined that water is the most emotive bilateral issue between the two countries and think often right signals are not sent. There was a talk about basin management in the 2010 Joint Communiqué. In 2022, it is still on the table. Clearly, there is delay in many core sectors. She noted that there are outstanding issues at the border too. But she suggested that these few irritants must not be allowed to take away the big picture. The big picture here is that the two fastest growing countries in South Asia have to work together. Over the last 12 years, Bangladesh and India realised that working together is the way forward. There is no way they can work without being interdependent on each other.

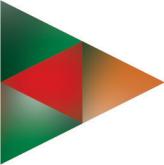


Dr Datta referred to Dr Mahfuz Kabir's presentation where he demonstrated how the economic interdependence between the two neighbours is growing. She admitted that several points of discussion are still there. The largest trade is still through Benapole-Petrapole which is overused and overutilised while a whole lot of other trading points like Akhaura-Agartala barely have any trade movement. The latter indeed has fabulous international standard Integrated Check Post (ICP). She opined that there is a mafia syndicate responsible here. She also pointed out that after two years of pandemic, the countries finally resumed train services, which is used by the passengers constantly.

She stated that the situation in Dhaka provides a real example of why roads must be freed up for tourism and people's movement and why cargo has to move to railways and waterways. She opined that Bangladesh uses its inland waterways efficiently, but India unfortunately has not been able to replicate that. She also pointed out that there are so many agreements between the countries, but in terms of actualisation, there is not much development. She also shared her regrets about the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which, according to her, is a "non-starter".

She highlighted the negative impact of social media which is full of naysayers. She identified that the problem arises when people rarely share a happy moment; but when there is a moment of irritation, everyone shares it. She lauded Bangladesh's achievements in its 50 years as well as the kind of achievement Bangladesh had made in terms of its journey towards the middle-income countries, from the least developed countries (LDC). She proudly shared with everyone that she was one of the two Indian authors who had the first book on "Bangladesh at 50".

Dr Datta then emphasised that it is not about being an Indian or Bangladeshi, it is about a South Asian identity and this identity is going to take the two countries forward. She thinks that it is time to stop quibbling from both sides to work together on having solutions. There will be water issues; there will be new issues coming to the forefront. But people must change the mental maps in terms of addressing the problems. She suggested the need for a solution-based approach. After 50 years, now is a good time to think afresh and see how the two countries can converge on many promising things lying ahead. She opined that the partnership that the countries enjoy in South Asia must reach out to a larger Asia. She concluded with a very positive note that India and Bangladesh can do what no other neighbours in South Asia can and this is just the beginning.



OPEN DISCUSSION



Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Former Chairman of BIISS, thanked the presenters and the chair for their enlightening presentations. However, he also pointed out that although the topic mentions evolving perspectives and confluence of ideologies, there was much talk about the evolving perspectives in the presentations and less about the confluence of ideologies — what it means and whether it is necessary to have a confluence of ideologies. He said that confluence of ideas may be necessary, but he was not sure about the ideology part, and wanted to know more about this from the presenters. He said that despite the difference in ideology people can work together in a friendly way. Nevertheless, if people start terming each other's ideologies as good or bad, the problem starts. He said that complementarities in trade are important and good, but he wanted to hear a bit more about the issue. He asked whether Bangladesh and India had any trade complementarities or was it because India is very big and Bangladesh has advantage in some of its products in certain parts of India.

He also talked about the bonhomie and said while there is bonhomie between the two countries, one should not lose sight of the contradictory developments that take place, which tend to vitiate the atmosphere and divert efforts in many ways. He said that he differs slightly from Dr Sreeradha's opinion that defence cooperation was unheard of before. While there was a period when this was stopped, India-Bangladesh cooperation

in defence started when Bangladesh was created and Bangladesh military organisations were set up with Indian help. And now, there are talks about that again. He thinks it is important that as the bigger neighbour, India should allow Bangladesh and other neighbours enough space to make their own choices about what they want to do. That will actually make sure that the relations flourish; but the moment there comes a perception of being limited, things will sour up. His last point was about SAARC being a non-starter. He said that India deserves a place as a leader regionally and globally. If India can play a role to reinvigorate SAARC and make it a success, India's leadership will be ensured.



Air Commodore (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, Treasurer, University of Asia Pacific said that he was really looking for a discussion on the confluence of ideology and said that the confluence of ideology is very important and it has been here for thousands of years. Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam all are influenced by ideologies. Specially in Bengal, Islam has been heavily influenced by Sufism and Vaishnavi which are two sides of the same coin. He recalled Lalon Shah, Shah Abdur Karim and other Sufi leaders. He said that these people had brought a confluence of ideas in this region. The national poet of Bangladesh Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote Shyama Sangeet long before he wrote Islamic songs. So, he thinks that if the VIF works on the issue of bringing the people together through ideology and culture that will be a great job done.



About connectivity, he agreed with Dr Datta and asked why the Chattogram port is not becoming the port for the entire Northeast India. He said that while there is the Agartala rail line, there is also a need to revive the dormant Kulaura railway line. That will provide more access rather than going for the hill railway in Agartala. The whole of Northeast India can be benefited by using the Chattogram port. He also mentioned about an irritant. He had come across a research article on India's river connectivity. In that paper the author talked about connecting Brahmaputra with Ganges and all the other rivers, but there was only one paragraph in the 10000-word length article about Bangladesh's concern about it. He also mentioned the Assam situation and said that with Bangladesh's growth, it is possible for people of Assam to look for jobs in Dhaka, but they will not go to Guwahati for jobs. But some people want to create political hype that can be bad for the bilateral relationship, but countries have to move ahead.



Lt General (Retd) Harun-ar-Rashid, Former Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army congratulated BISS for organising the seminar and welcomed Dr Gupta and Dr Datta to Bangladesh. He said that the Bangladesh liberation war was fought on an ideology. Pakistan's ideology of a state based on religion was replaced by an independent Bangladesh that would nurture the Bengali culture and tradition—a Bengali nationalism that was based on Bengali language and culture. Regarding religion, the dream was a non-communal country. The father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has categorically said that in Bangladesh there will be no politics based on religion. The relationship between India and Bangladesh has gone on and off. But India in 2022, is

different from India at the time of the liberation war. Today's India does not talk about neutral religion, it talks more about the revival of Hinduism. If one looks at the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the special privilege given to the non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan; there is a doubt if the two countries are in the same path or not.

He said that he is more interested in seeing and hearing what ideologies the two countries are confluencing on. He recalled that in November 1971, the two governments signed an agreement to form a joint command and General Jagjit Singh Aurora was detailed as the chief of the India-Bangladesh Joint Command. India-Bangladesh jointly brought the victory and that is the Bangladeshi perspective. But many Indians write that India liberated Bangladesh. He also shared his experience of visiting the national memorial of India during the last November. The museum depicts a number of battles that took place in Bangladesh during 1971, but the captions say, "Operations in East Pakistan". Even in the official booklets, 1971 is noted as the India-Pakistan War. He said that being a freedom fighter, he wanted to say that he did not participate in the India-Pakistan war, rather he had fought in the liberation war of Bangladesh. The joint command was established with the consent of both governments, and the declaration of the surrender of 1971 also mentions Bangladesh, not East Pakistan. Bangladeshis cannot accept the 1971 war as the India-Pakistan war in the eastern quarter. He said that until and unless the sentiment of the Bangladeshis is accepted by the other party, confluence will be a little difficult.



M S Siddiqui, Vice President, International Business Forum of Bangladesh, stressed on the importance of economic involvement. He said that Bangladesh is on

the red list of India's overseas employment, along with Pakistan. Any investment from Bangladesh to India requires special scrutiny before approval. He enquired why the case is like this. The second point he made was that the Indian government has changed the customs rule and now the Customs Officer has the discretionary power to approve the invoice, under the zero tariff of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) act. The third issue is that many Bangladeshi food products are being exported to western countries but are not approved by India. He asked why there is no joint approval system for this between the two countries.



Salahud Din Ahmed, former Member of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission was amazed by the fact presented by Dr Mahfuz Kabir that there is a part of outward FDI, and India enjoys the position of being the fourth largest destination. He referred to Dr Datta's points about music being played and sung, which is an ear-to-ear thing. But when it becomes soul to soul, the relation becomes warmer, deeper, and meaningful. He then pointed out that the selection of scholarship is an important thing. Many people are visiting India to get enrolled in universities and to other trainings. According to him, if the selection is spread to the eight divisions of the country, this will give a better feeling that not only the people of the capital or only known people are enjoying the scholarships. Mr Ahmed then raised the question of cost differences between Indian and Bangladeshi products in the Bangladeshi market. To elucidate his points, he gave an example of Amul milk which costs BDT80 in Bangladesh but a similar kind of locally produced drink can be bought for BDT20-30.



Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Shahadat Hossain shared that now at the age of sixty, he has been acquainted with the Indian people for 60 years but with Chinese people for only 34 years. He sees India and China equally. He had an opportunity to work in intelligence organisation inside the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and was also involved with the Peace Treaty dialogues. In the CHT, he was the Brigadier Battalion Commander twice. He pointed out that younger generations are going frequently to China for business and study purposes. The Chinese are doing mega projects inside Bangladesh, and Bangladeshi people are being employed. He suggested that India should directly help Bangladesh in the implementation of such mega projects, specially, the Teesta Barrage, in dealing with drug cartels and in stopping cross-border firings. These are the things the common people of Bangladesh care about. He acknowledged the huge assistance from India during the War of Liberation. Against this backdrop, he opined that from India, there should be more assistance than that of China.



Ambassador (Retd) Ashraf-Ud-Doula warmly appreciated the contribution of the guests respectively in building up Bangladesh-India relations and the way they talked

about positivitie. All these exercises built by the two countries will lead to a very strong bridge. Ambassador Doula has no doubt that over the years there will be unshakeable and strong pillars at the very highest level between Bangladesh and India. According to him, when it comes to government-to-government relationships, there cannot be a second-best relationship compared to what Bangladesh and India enjoy. Having said that, he raised a question whether this relationship percolates to people-to-people contacts. There can be billion-dollar businesses, but the common people do not know about these, or they do not understand it. But if one person is killed on the border, that makes news. The information travelling through social media travels very fast shapes people's perception.

He shared that Bangladesh's foreign policy has been structured in such a way that India perhaps holds the highest priority in designing its foreign policy. He also strongly believes that there is a confluence of ideology between Bangladesh and India, yet there has been a deficit over the years. He shared that in this part of the region, the Muslims, the Hindus and others have lived for thousands of years depending on their respect for one another. That was indeed the "ideology". The ideology of democracy is what the two countries are striving for. He wanted to know from the speakers how these ideologies can be brought back. He then reiterated the importance of people-to-people contacts. He finished his comments by saying that the common people have to understand and feel that the two countries are friends.

RESPONSES FROM THE SPEAKERS



Dr Sreeradha Datta

Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), New Delhi, India

Dr Sreeradha Datta said that she purposefully avoided talking about ideologies because there are too many complexities, and she was not going to open a pandora's box. This is an issue that one can talk about for 24 hours. The ideological confluence which was there in 1971, was in the past. That 1971 Bangladesh does not exist anymore, and neither does India. It is an evolving world and people change. The two countries have a convergence of ideology in secularism and democracy, which keeps the two nations going. She also defended her point about India-Bangladesh military cooperation because after 1975, Bangladesh completely obliterated India from all sectors. What was there between 1971-75 was the continuation of the War era. But the defence cooperation agreement did not happen for a long time. Even now, it is only a 5 million line of credit for a joint exercise. She said that the whole idea of flagging defence was that the two countries now could enjoy a comfort level which was never there before.



She said that the point of national interest and foreign policy is that it is always evolving. What was true for 1977 and the 1980s is not true for now, but everyone should focus on what is present and build on what is better for both of the neighbours. On the issue of ideology, she said there is a bonhomie between the two countries, and there will always be people in both countries who do not believe in that ideology. But the larger consensus in both India and Bangladesh is there to build on the cooperative framework that is currently in place. She also said that as a student of politics, she constantly works on irritants because if the irritants are not cleared out, things cannot move forward. But in her opinion, the celebration of 50 years of friendship between the two nations is not the time to bring it up.

On SAARC, she explained why she called it a non-starter. She said that the recalled memory of regionalism in South Asia is SAARC. BIMSTEC remains an unknown entity, despite many efforts it has not yet captured the imagination of people. But she asked what can be done with an organisation that is not moving forward for various reasons. Even during the pandemic, when the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked for a virtual summit, Pakistan did not cooperate. She asked, in a moment of crisis, if that is how a neighbour acts, how is anyone going to take SAARC forward. But BIMSTEC, despite not capturing the people's imagination, is showing results. For the first time, there have been meetings of national security chiefs, which has never been done before. She said that when Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2008, if she had not addressed India's security concerns, the entire red carpet that rolled out would not have happened.

She stressed that countries in South Asia have to address their security concerns mutually, which has not been the case and why most of these regional initiatives have not worked. For instance, the BBIN was signed in 2015, but there has not been an MoU because Bhutan did not trust Indian truckers, Nepal still has problems with India's truckers. She asked why no one has been having frank conversations and pointed out that this was also another problem in South Asia. Forums like this seminar are places where people can be free and frank. But she thought today they should celebrate. She said that India would be very happy to make SAARC work, but the circumstances and the neighbours are not allowing that to happen. She said that just because BIMSTEC is there does not mean SAARC is abandoned, rather if political leadership changed, India would be glad to put thrust on both regional attempts.

On the river issue, she said that Air Commodore Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury had clearly read an article that was not well sourced. Even in India, interlinking of rivers is a sensitive issue. There were attempts at some point of time but now there are only squabbles among the states regarding water sharing. Brahmaputra-Ganges was never part of the interlinking plan. She again asked everyone to be cautious while reading about these because there is a risk of misrepresentation.

To answer the question on the 1971 war, she said that it is a very sensitive issue. Technically India was fighting the Pakistani forces and many Indian authors believe in the narrative that it was an India-Pakistan war. She informed the audience that as an author, she has been very cautious in all her writings. She again emphasised that it is Bangladesh's liberation war. Bangladesh and India together were fighting the Pakistani forces. She ensured that nobody would find the term "Pakistan" in the book which is being launched. According to her, fighting for the cause of Bangladesh's liberation was the core spirit here.

About para-tariff, she opined that these are small issues and should not be ballooned up. If India starts to make a list of what Bangladesh has not delivered and vice-versa, it will not take them anywhere. In 2014, India brought down most of the tariff and non-tariff barriers except for some contraband items which helped the bilateral trade increase up to more than US\$11 billion. As a frequent visitor to Bangladesh, she does not see much euphoria anywhere in the media or in the think tanks about what India promised and delivered. In 2017, China did the same thing by bringing down tariff barriers. She noted that Bangladesh was extremely vocal about it and there was absolutely zero reference to the fact that India had done it five years ago. She however clarified that her point is not to state that Bangladesh does not appreciate India's contributions. She thinks there are few people in every country who write in a particular way. But that does not take away the kind of framework the two countries are working on.

On the point raised about "perception", Dr Datta completely agreed that perceptions might drive foreign policy. She added that Bengalis are political creatures and, in Bangladesh, everybody has some kind of opinion about India. These can be right or wrong, but they are certainly aware of what is happening there in India. Bangladeshis watch the news more closely than many Indians. The problem on the other side is that India is vast. Haryana does not know what Gujarat is doing and Gujarat does not know what Pondicherry is doing. There obviously are some internal irritants like labour

migration but it does not spill over in such a big way across to Bangladesh. On the other hand, everybody in Bangladesh has a point of view about India and they express it frankly. However, negative perceptions are bound to be there. Once the differences are ironed out, the countries will come close because they are dealing with such a broad spectrum now. It is impossible to address everything; but again, it is a work in progress. The intention is to work on and ensure how Bangladesh and India can make a win-win cooperation.

The multi-layered projects, she noted, which are taking place in Bangladesh, i.e., the Dhaka Mass Transit, have an Indian touch to them. Most of the 2010-onward projects have a trickle-down effect on the people. These however have not been conveyed in the right tones. She thinks that the media in Bangladesh should be more responsible in delivering what collaborations are being undertaken together and then benefits will come—whether it is a cargo movement or whether it is people-to-people contacts. The kind of trains or daily buses that the two countries have, and the kind of movement that is taking place shows that a lot more give-and-take is happening besides a few misperceptions. Again, leaders from both states are invested in each other which has not happened before.

She opined that India staying out of investing in South Asia is the reason why interdependence in the region has not grown. She believes that it is going to change. She referred to Bangladesh as a very able partner and hoped that Bangladesh and India would be able to iron out the issues. The large picture is there, and Bangladesh and India will continue to work together on a very positive platform.



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, BISS

Regarding intra-industry trade, **Dr Mahfuz** believes that top products like the RMG and many other are complimentary to intra-industry trade. For example, Bangladesh uses the raw materials coming from India and then produces the final goods. The buyers will be in India. So, they are taking it from Bangladesh and selling it in India. He explained how the whole value chain is working and complementary trade is taking place.

To answer the question on connectivity, he agreed with Dr Datta that it is unfortunate that South Asians still cannot trust one another. Nevertheless, he referred to the Indian Line of Credits (LoCs) for the Ashuganj terminal. Dr Mahfuz believes that there is a huge potential for using it to connect with the North-eastern markets of India. He also flagged the over-utilisation of some of the land ports like Benapole and suggested that the Bhomra land port can be one of the viable alternatives.

He then mentioned about the difficulties in non-tariff barriers. There are frequent changes in custom rules and procedures as mentioned by the exporters of Bangladesh. That creates a problem regarding the perception of the businessmen. Specially, when the



small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) owners want to export their products, they face lots of difficulties, i.e., certification of health standards. But the bigger ones do not face that much of problems.

He highlighted the joint production of defence equipment and pharmaceuticals proposed by the Indian side which is an interesting area to be pursued. Although further collaboration is needed between the BSTI and BIS, Dr Kabir believes that the South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO) is another avenue which can help Bangladeshi products reach not only Indian market but also European markets.

Regarding outward FDI, Dr Kabir thinks this is a very good start. The fourth position in terms of money might not be significant but it signifies that the momentum is going on. He believes it will create a significant impact in the coming years. In the field of technical cooperation, Bangladesh is pursuing the idea of blue economy. In fact, through its developmental policies, there is a huge scope of mutual cooperation between Bangladesh and India. So, the two countries have common natural, social, cultural, and political capitals. If the issue of water is considered, a huge area of cooperation can be in the inland water base.

According to Dr Kabir, there can be even stronger cooperation in the maritime areas. Bangladesh is now heading the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). There is a huge potential in scientific and development cooperation which the two countries should nurture. He highlighted that there is ample political will, and it has to be transferred into political capital in order to address many different issues. Bangladesh and India have issues like border killing. The statistics show that between 2010 and 2019, there were around 1,165 killings. But over the last two years, there has been huge progress. One can now hardly find any number or any news on border killings. Dr Kabir believes that technical cooperation is the future of cooperation in capital-intensive areas. This area in the relationship should be promoted to have a better impact on cooperation in the coming years.

REMARKS



Lt Gen (Retd) Ravi Kumar Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM

Centre Head and Senior Fellow, National Security, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), India

At the outset of his speech, **Lt Gen (Retd) Ravi Kumar Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM**, Centre Head and Senior Fellow, National Security, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), India shared that it was a privilege and an honour for him to be in Bangladesh. He joined the army as a cadet when he was 16 years old and retired at 60. This implies that he had to put on his uniform for 44 years. His regiment consisted of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who fought the World War I, World War II and the other wars they had to fight with Pakistan, including the one in Bangladesh. They carried the regimental flag with honour and pride. When the 1971 War took place, he was a Major in the Army Headquarters. They had a very charismatic general, General Sam Manekshaw, who would bravely tell the political leaders what they might not want to hear. He frankly shared that he and the team members used to think about the particular operation which was going to take place for Bangladesh's liberation war and were very sceptical at the first place. To his amazement, the miracle happened.

Lt Gen Sawhney added that it is one of the most amazing events of not only the subcontinent but also of the world that the two countries got together. They helped each



other a lot against suppression, bully, brutality, and to throw away the yolk of slavery. Bangladesh wanted to become independent, and India helped the people of Bangladesh. He thinks that it is the valour of both sides. He emphasised on the amazing spirit of common people of Bangladesh. Those who came back from the war told him about the valour of the common persons who were just unarmed men of around 20 years old, leading a column.

Lt Gen Sawhney saw the brutalities and heard about them. He learnt from his course mates who went into the war and came back chastened. Bangladeshis decided that their culture, language and literature were equally important. He shared his pride in helping a process where not only history was made, but geography was also made. A new nation was born and that is something which the Indians would always carry with pride.

He shared that both his son and son-in-law are in the army. He always tells his grandchildren that this is one of the proudest moments of the Indian Army that it helped in the process of creating a nation. He highlighted that this is a relationship where the blood was flown from both sides and nobody else can substitute it. He referred to the Chinese investments and said that the Chinese can build roads, but they cannot have a relationship of hearts which Bangladesh and India have.

He then noted how the things went down. He was commanding four corps in Assam. There were problems. But for the last 10-12 years, there is an amazing change in the relationship. It is not a perfect relationship but again, there is no perfect relationship in the world. In any relationship, there are imperfections, there are problems, and there is a requirement of continuous renewal. He opined that the existence of complaints in a relationship signify that it is working.

When Lt Gen Sawhney went to a Prisoner of War (POW) camp where 98,000 Pakistani POWs had been repatriated from Bangladesh. One of the Majors told him, “Beware of them! We are very happy that we got rid of them.” He then shared the experience of his recent visit to Pakistan around three or four years ago. There was no economic activity. He met some entrepreneurs in Pakistan who wanted to come and open their business in Bangladesh. According to him, it is a miserable place to go to.



He stated that when he sees Bangladesh, he sees vibrancy. He humorously added that the traffic might be horrible, but Dhaka could compete with Delhi. It is an amazing place to come to. He praised about the way the buildings are built in Bangladesh, the levels of prosperity, and the people of Bangladesh who engage internationally. He shared his disappointment with the culture that in South Asia, people are afflicted with the disease where they have to pick up one another's faults. He reiterated that he found some amazing changes during his visit in Bangladesh and he thinks that Bangladesh and India jointly can do wonders. He opined that the young generation of Bangladesh is very self-sufficient, and they do not have any complexity in them. He thinks it is a very positive aspect.

Lt Gen Sawhney concluded his speech saying that Bangladesh-India relationship is indeed very beautiful. He stated that in this relationship, it is very good that people come out and complain. He invited everyone to continue sorting out these problems and continue to remember that the relationship is more than commercial. He emphasised that the relationship is a relationship of blood which no country can replace. He firmly advocated that neither Bangladesh nor India would like to replace this.

REMARKS



Mr A S M Shamsul Arefin

Chairman, Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS)

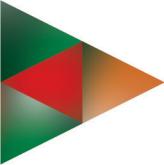
In his address, at the outset, **Mr A S M Shamsul Arefin**, Chairman of Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS) welcomed the honourable guests and the distinguished panellists and those who have joined online to the seminar. He mentioned that the guests from India, they have come to Bangladesh on the invitation, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to assess how best the relations between India and Bangladesh can be developed. Mr Arefin appreciated that the younger generation is taking part in politics, the nation building programmes and the administration. Both the countries have passed 50 years in bilateral relations, which is almost three generations. If 1971 is considered as the base of our relations, he said that Bangladesh and India both need to transfer that ethos of 1971 to the new generation—where blood was shed together, as General Sawhney has mentioned, to build a new nation. Mr Arefin mentioned about a joint approach that he discussed with Dr Gupta, when they met in Delhi, where

he proposed to conduct a study that will help to create a people-to-people connection between India and Bangladesh.

He also mentioned that, since India is a vast country, not all parts are equally familiar with Bangladesh. Kerala does not know where Bangladesh is. Odisha may know a little, but Tamil Nādu, Goa and other places, those people do not know where Bangladesh is. There has to be a way to reach out to them.

Mr Arefin further said that their approach is that his organisation is now trying how they can approach the younger generations to the other states of India. VIF has agreed to work with them. The Honourable State Minister of Bangladesh is taking that spirit with them to go ahead and chalk out how better connectivity can be established. Mr Arefin said that the panellists discussed the fundamentals and the processes, he has nothing to say there. They are trying to facilitate the process through BFRS and with support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh. Mr Arefin welcomed this mission of VIF to have more interaction with the people, the government machinery, the civil society and the intellectuals as much as possible.

He also mentioned that in the next three or four days, BFRS will have discussions with Dr Gupta and other intellectuals from India and he believed that these guests who had come from India would carry some values and some assessments so that together they can find out the best ways to develop India-Bangladesh relations. He said that it is not about the relations only in the commercial sector or the IT sector. Their main objective is to build people-to-people communications. According to him, Bangladesh and India are society-driven countries and societies decide the states. So, people are major factor in building relations. Mr Arefin said that Bangladesh currently has much better relations with the Indian Government. He said that the best thing to do now would be to reach people. He acknowledged State Minister Md Shahriar Alam's presence in the event and hoped that he would lead Bangladesh on this matter. He expressed his desire to hear more about this topic from the Minister and Dr Gupta. Finally, he again thanked the panellists and the audience for giving him time. He thanked BIISS for organising such a wonderful interaction and letting people think about the best way of pursuing the future.



REMARKS BY THE SPECIAL GUEST



Dr Arvind Gupta

Director, Vivekananda International Foundation

Dr Arvind Gupta, Director of Vivekananda International Foundation at the beginning of his remarks, conveyed his warm greetings towards the State Minister Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Chairman of BISS Ambassador Kazi Imtiaz Hossain, Chairman of BFRS Mr. Shamsul Arefin and the distinguished audience who have studied and devoted their time to study India-Bangladesh relations and have participated in bringing this bilateral relationship to this level.

He said that it had been a wonderful experience for him which would help him understand the true complexity and depth of India-Bangladesh relations. He mentioned General Sawhney's quote where he described this as a relationship of blood. He said that no matter what is discussed in the seminar and what has been discussed the day before, whether it is the question of NTBs, lack of trust, ups and downs, etc. can continue, but

that one reality will not change. When one approaches India-Bangladesh relations, the reality is that both of the states fought for the liberation of Bangladesh, no matter what name is given to the war. Everybody has a different prism to look at it, but the reality of the sacrifices of millions of people, of hundreds of thousands of Indian soldiers will never change.

He appreciated Mr Arefin's mission that the spirit of 1971 should be understood and conveyed to the new generation. He added that it is extremely important and the VIF is committed to that. He said that he was very moved when somebody in the audience gave a standing ovation to General Sawhney, who had been a participant in the 1971 war. General Sawhney had not only participated in that war, but from 1962 and 1965, had contributed a great deal in India's nation building and understood what war meant. According to him, the sentiment of the people who have participated in that war needs to be respected. He said that the India-Bangladesh relationship is unique, and he really meant it and was not using it as a cliche.

Dr Gupta said that he was so happy that in the last few years the Bangladeshi government, media, people, and think tanks, everyone has honoured the people who had participated in the war. He believes that it contributes a lot to the bonhomie that Dr Datta talks about in her book. That is a very positive development. He thanked the panellists for talking about those days and he thinks it should be continued. According to Dr Gupta, of course, all nations will follow their own national interests and they should follow that because that is the basis of nation states. However, he also believes that it is important to build up the people to people contacts as well.

Then he said that in the end, people have to live in the reality of today's world. One has to look after one's own interests. One has to look after each of the interests, has to work under the regional contexts and that is the integrity of diplomacy. So, there is nothing wrong if India and Bangladesh do not agree on every matter and there is everything to be celebrated if the diversification of today's relationship is talked about.

Dr Gupta further said that when he visited Bangladesh 10 years ago, they talked a lot about trade. When he came to this institution, they discussed a lot about the facts that the land and maritime boundaries had not been settled, trade was one-sided, there were non-tariff barriers, and so on. Now, if one compares the situation after 10 years, Bangladesh and India have made some huge progress in terms of settling land and



maritime boundaries. The fact that the states had very serious concerns about security which are now left behind is important. There have been some massive changes. Even about the non-tariff barriers, or India not giving zero tariffs, so he thinks a lot of those issues have been addressed. According to him, these are not small changes. These all happened in the last 5-10 years. Dr Gupta recalled, when he came to Bangladesh a decade ago, the trade was about just US\$ 1 to 2 billion, and now it is about several times more than that figure. He said that this is only the beginning. At present, the constraints on trade are really connectivity. So, connectivity is very important.

Then he mentioned that transit was at one time a difficult and unacceptable concept. And now, when he was in a discussion the previous day, someone asked why India is not giving Bangladesh connectivity from Nepal through India. Dr Gupta said that whatever had happened in the last few years, has genuinely benefited the common people on both sides. That is why he thinks the two countries are in good terms and looks forward to a very strong relationship. But in some other areas, if the countries are on a critical point, that needs to be worked out.

Dr Gupta drew the attention of the audience to the fact that if one looks at the world around them today, it is not just India and Bangladesh who are in dispute. It is in Europe, and in the Indo-Pacific. He believes that India and Bangladesh are very much tied up to development, which is global and regional. Unfortunately, the world today is very unstable. He said that today, the world is more uncertain about what will happen tomorrow than it was five years ago. This uncertainty should bring people together. This is why BIMSTEC is important. He believes that it is not about whether SAARC has worked or not. The chance was given to SAARC, but it did not work out. He did not want to go for the blame game. SAARC is still there; it may work in the future. It is not that any country is against SAARC. However, the story of the past five or ten years is not very convincing to him. He said whether it is in Africa, Europe, Central Asia, Indo-Pacific, newer mechanisms are being talked about. Mechanisms are being constructed to suit certain realities. New problems are arising and perhaps countries should look at new models. He said that BIMSTEC is a very positive development in that context. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, etc., are at the heart of BIMSTEC, and he believes it will progress further.

Dr Gupta said that a lot has been talked about perceptions and people-to-people contacts. But perception management is a difficult game. He believes that one can try and manage perceptions. He believes that perception does not define reality; rather, reality

defines perception. Regarding people's perception of the India-Bangladesh relations, he said if the relationship between India and Bangladesh is aimed at mutual benefits, he has no problems with different perceptions.



Dr Gupta recapped all the positive things that were discussed in the seminar by Dr Datta and Dr Kabir. He said that many of these issues can be brought up in the upcoming India-Bangladesh Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). At present, there is a major change of thinking in India. According to him, earlier, India used to be a bit shy about trading agreements and so on. But now the government of India is talking about 10 major agreements, and Bangladesh is one of them. He admitted that, of course, India's negotiations sometimes take a very long time; but he is happy to share that India has already concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and will sign one with Australia within the next few weeks. It will begin soon with Bangladesh too. However, he stressed that India must move fast, since the delay of months pushes back opportunities.

Dr Gupta opined that it is the moment to rethink connectivity. He thinks that India and Bangladesh both have to move in a direction when there is far greater momentum of

connectivity. Regional connectivity is very important. These things were thought about earlier but have not been implemented yet. For him, regional connectivity is not just in the interest of India or Bangladesh only, but also for the vast population of this region. So, seamlessness in connectivity is very important. The two countries need to build supply chains that serve this region, he said.

He concluded by saying that there are a number of issues that can be talked about, and should be talked about candidly, but one should not forget the reality that India and Bangladesh are neighbours that complement each other. He said that Bangladesh has made phenomenal developments in its global image. Now it is a middle-income country, which is a contribution to the regional prosperity as well. He said that it is wonderful to see the strides that Bangladesh has made. He concluded by saying that there is not much to talk about confluence of ideologies when it comes to this subcontinent. Rather one has to look at the history of this region. This is one of the longest-living civilisations in the world and this subcontinent has contributed to the global good. So, there is plenty of confluence. Dr Gupta believes that confluence, and tolerance are part of the subcontinental culture. Today's India looks at itself with confidence, but not with overconfidence. They know their problems. He emphasised that India will not do it alone, and cannot do it alone. In this journey, India invites everyone in the subcontinent to be a part of it. And his team from the VIF will be very happy to engage with BIISS and many others to understand each other better. Lastly, he thanked everyone once again hoping that the seminar would serve as a compass for that effort.

REMARKS BY THE CHIEF GUEST



H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP

Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh began his speech by conveying greetings to everyone present in the seminar to make it an engaging one. He also thanked Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) for its wholehearted support in organising the event, and all the panellists, and participants for making the seminar a success. He recalled India's unprecedented support during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. With regard to General Harun's question, he noted that during November-December of 1971 in the bordering area of Bangladesh where India and Pakistan fought, there was also a full-fledged war on the western front of India. And he humbly requested to listen to the different deliberations of the Indian Foreign Minister, Prime Minister and President and the comments they made. As far as Bangladesh is



concerned, it is our war of liberation. But of course, parallel wars were fought on other fronts. It is also true and cannot be denied.

He noted that over the years, the mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and strong political goodwill from both sides contributed substantially to this eternal friendship. In this regard, the book that is being unveiled “India-Bangladesh Bonhomie at 50:1971 and the Present” edited by Dr Sreeradha Datta, has unearthed information from official archives and from the Indian perspective. The visit to India by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in February 1972 showed Bangladesh’s determination to promote relations between the governments and the peoples of the two countries. Bangabandhu declared that “the friendship between India and Bangladesh would remain intact forever and no power on earth would be able to destroy it”. The visit by the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Dhaka in March 1972 further cemented the bilateral relationship. He reminded the audience what Bangabandhu told Indira Gandhi the very day he landed for a couple of hours on his way back home after good 10 months. Bangabandhu urged to take back the Indian soldiers and wanted to know how quickly they will be brought back home. And it took only just a couple of weeks. He expressed his hope that researchers will be able to substantiate the fact that the incident was probably the fastest return of an allied force (Mitra Bahini) in the history of war or the history of the world.

He opined that out of 52 years of Bangladesh’s journey, it was governed by anti-liberation forces or forces who had very little respect for our friends who supported us for 29 years. Bilateral relations got momentum again in 1996 because of the renewed understanding of foreign policy adopted by India for dealing with its neighbours and the election victory of the Awami League government led by the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. In 1996, Prime Minister I K Gujral promulgated a new doctrine for Indian foreign policy especially with regard to South Asia, which emphasised the principle of “non-reciprocity” in its relations with its smaller neighbours when solving disputes. Coming to power again in 2008, under the dynamic and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League government adopted a pragmatic foreign policy and inducted a new era of friendship with India. In the 2009-2010 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs, India, it is noted that “Bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh acquired new momentum, following the formation of the Grand Alliance Government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in January 2009. India continued to involve the Government of Bangladesh in all important bilateral issues”.

Then he attracted the attention of the audience about the independence of Bangladesh's foreign policy. He noted that the recent voting of Bangladesh in the UN on the Ukraine-Russia issue resembles that Bangladesh pursues an independent foreign policy under the pragmatic leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, unlike previous regimes.

He also gave a few examples of high-level visits between the two countries in 2021—visits by the Honourable Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi during the height of COVID-19 during Bangladesh's Independence Day and Honourable President of India H E Shri Ram Nath Kovind to attend the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's Independence and 50th anniversary of the establishment of Bangladesh-India diplomatic relations. According to him, history was made. The Prime Minister and President of the same country visiting a particular country in the same calendar year showcased the breadth and depth of a very unique relationship which has not only been forged in blood but has also been tested at times in the last 50 years.

He mentioned that both the countries have taken up yearlong programmes to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations on various other fronts. Maitri Diwas/Friendship Day was celebrated in 18 selected cities of the globe along with Dhaka and New Delhi on 6 December 2021. Apart from that, many more joint programmes like the Bangabandhu-Bapu Digital Exhibition, unveiling postage stamps commemorating 50 years of Bangladesh-India friendship and numerous other engagements took place.

According to him, witnessing rising turmoil all around its borders of India and therefore, a stable, moderate Bangladesh as a partner is India's natural choice. He is quite sure that partnership with Bangladesh is also India's long-lasting interest. Constructive Indo-Bangladesh ties could be a major stabilising factor for the South Asian region as a whole. He referred to Prime Minister Modi's remark during his recent visit to Dhaka as: "Bangladesh is a strong example of development and change for the world, and India is Bangladesh's "shohojatri" (fellow traveller) in these efforts."

He noted that Bangladesh and India are destined to grow together. The bilateral economic ties have huge untapped possibilities, with a trade potential of US\$16.4 billion. Bangladesh is the biggest trading partner of India in South Asia. On the other hand, India is the second biggest trading partner of Bangladesh while China is the biggest one.



According to a World Bank report, seamless transport connectivity between India and Bangladesh has the potential to increase national income by as much as 17 per cent in Bangladesh and 8 per cent in India. So, connectivity is in the interests of both countries. Another study indicates a 297 per cent increase which means almost threefold increase in Bangladesh's exports to India and a 172 per cent increase in India's exports to Bangladesh if transport connectivity improves and both the neighbours sign an FTA). He admitted that FTA is a big deal. Even though Bangladesh is the 43rd largest economy in the world, the country is yet to have an FTA with any country as such. Bangladesh is negotiating with some countries, was about to sign an FTA with Sri Lanka, and also signed a Preferential Trade Area (PTA) agreement with a small economy and Bangladesh's significant neighbour Bhutan. And he hoped that this will give enough confidence to the country's business community and institutions of government that deal with trade-related issues.



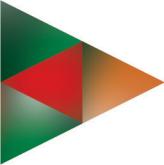
Hon'ble State Minister added that it is very encouraging that the two countries are complimenting each other's economy. During pre-COVID time, India received the highest number of tourists from Bangladesh and the number was 2.2 million. This surpassed the tourists from the USA in 2018 (1.5-1.7 million) and was by far the highest. The number reached 2.2 million in 2019. And hence, no wonder why India has set up their largest visa

processing centre to accommodate all these tourists. And also, Indian hospitals treated the highest number of Bangladesh's patients. Thousands of Indians are working in various sectors in Bangladesh, contributing to service sector of the country and Bangladesh is the 4th remittance earning country for India. Hence, mutual respect and interdependence come from that as well.

The minister then referred to Late Shushma Swaraj, the former Foreign Minister of India whom he respects a lot as a politician. She once said, "Parsi Pahele, Bangladesh Sabse Pahele". From "Neighbourhood First" to "Act East", from connectivity to trade, from security to development, Dhaka's centrality to India's regional outlook is a key not only for India realising its own interests but also for larger regional imperatives. This will be more significant as India's desire to emerge as the locus of the Indo-Pacific narrative becomes even sharper in the coming years. Both traditional and non-traditional security issues shaping this maritime geography will be implicated in the evolving Delhi-Dhaka dynamics. The commonalities of the two countries have them driven to have membership in different regional platforms, such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA, BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, etc.

BBIN is an idea which was tabled by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when the SAARC motor vehicle agreement got stalled. And even within the BBIN, Bhutan is not so willing to go ahead with it. However, he clarified that SAARC was born here and Bangladesh still hopes that SAARC will work. But unfortunately, the group had added one more member and at any given point of time, there are always problems between two countries which seems like Afghanistan plus one. It is hard to move with a region or a regional forum where there is no stable government. However, Bangladesh is still committed to that initiative. But there is a lot of enthusiasm for BIMSTEC. He mentioned that as a Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, he himself had the good fortune to put his signature for the first-time formation of the BIMSTEC Secretariat in the third BIMSTEC Summit at Naypyidaw. And on the same day the BIMSTEC leaders met virtually, and the Minister noted that he is scheduled to join there along with the Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. There is renewed enthusiasm and a lot of good news. Hopefully, BIMSTEC will deliver better compared to other initiatives.

He further added that with the Bay of Bengal in the South and the Himalayas in the North, Bangladesh and India essentially form one ecosystem with the same waters,



same rivers and same sediments. As the closest neighbour, with so many shared cultural traits, it is also inevitable that events in one country create ripples across the border in another country—irrespective of whether there is a real justification for this. Like many neighbours, there are irritants between Bangladesh and India. The two countries are still not fully able to realise the potential of their relations. Although many long-pending lands and maritime border disputes have been resolved, the death toll of Bangladeshis on the border has become a major stain on this bilateral engagement. And no denial that tops in our agenda when the leaders meet at any level even in track two-level seminars. The thorny water-sharing issue of transboundary rivers—54 of them—remains another issue of debate in the Bangladesh-India ties. As a downstream country, Bangladesh wants more water from the Teesta River. There should also be a framework agreement for optimal utilisation of waters from six rivers, namely Muhuri, Manu, Gumti, Khowai, Dudhkumar, and Dharla.

He mentioned that on the 50th anniversary of Dhaka-New Delhi ties, it is the need of the hour to introspect the strengths, retrospect the mistakes, acknowledge the challenges and draw a roadmap to take this relationship to new heights. It is in this overall context that Bangladesh today has become India's largest development partner in the world; its largest trade partner in the region; and its most extensive and integrated government-to-government relationship. Over 75 separate dialogue mechanisms connect the two Governments and people in an effort to build the strongest possible framework for a permanent partnership.

According to him, the golden age in India-Bangladesh relations may just have begun. Challenges remain but the leadership in the two countries has indeed ushered in a transformative moment in bilateral relations and regional geopolitics. If both countries become able to leverage this unique moment effectively and realise the full potential of their partnership, both will also be able to once again write another chapter in their shared destinies. Both the Prime Ministers are cognisant that the future of this relationship will be governed by a very different set of factors such as trade, connectivity, health, energy, advanced technology, artificial intelligence, ecology and the aspirations of youth. On a hopeful note, interpersonal relations and civil society contact groups between the two countries have increased.

While concluding, he noted that in the case of Bangladesh's relations with India, civil society plays a vital role in sensitising mutual concerns and influencing government policy. While the state-level response reflects a clear focus on economic diplomacy and bilateral partnerships, the perspective of civil society remains explicit and polarised. He opined that everyone needs to work in this regard. As for Bangladesh-India relations from a civil society perspective, one of the key strengths is the decades-old strong people-to-people contacts. Bangladesh shares geographical proximity and cultural similarity especially language, music, literature, and food with the bordering states of India. In addition, the introduction of border haats, increased connectivity by road, railway, air and water, and easing of visa requirements are helping to increase people-to-people contacts between Bangladesh and India.

He noted that the civil society of both countries are contributing to the relations, but there are more expectations from them in opinion formation for consolidating the bonhomie. There are a lot of negative stories, write-ups, propaganda and narratives being published and posted on social media by some quarters to tarnish the trust and respect between the friendly countries. He hoped that the researchers, academicians, and think tanks of the two countries can try to publish write-ups, articles on the relationship and friendship, which is known to be the role model for neighbourhood diplomacy.

He finally suggested that Bangladesh and India should try to project more on success rather than the failure and stop blaming each other for narrow political gains. The countries attended the historic city of Shimla for the 10th Round Bangladesh-India dialogue just a month ago and look forward to arranging the next round in Bangladesh in due course. He hoped that the civil society and think tanks would contribute in deepening the bonding between the two countries through their research and writing. The two countries engaged with each other, even at the highest level when the whole world was stalled because of COVID-19 pandemic. Rightly indeed, the current phase of bilateral relations is called the "Golden Chapter", and the new chapters which are unfolding show signs of immense possibilities.



Book Launching Ceremony

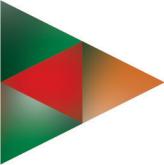
“India-Bangladesh Bonhomie at 50: 1971 and the Present”



Dr Sreeradha Datta thanked BIISS for allowing the launch of the book at its programme. She said that the inspiration for the book came from Mr Arefin who was very keen on doing something jointly. They were trying to produce two books and Arefin had already published his volume earlier. In this book, they look forward to do the same from India but it becomes quite a bit of challenge for them given the COVID-19 condition and since most of the archival libraries were not functioning well. She also said that this was a joyous occasion because they had never done something like this joint effort from VIF and she very much enjoyed working with the young researchers of her team. She said that she had come to realise that there are heavy duty materials on India-Bangladesh Relations, but apart from the people who are interested in international relations and political science, the ethos of liberation war is dimming among the younger generation of both the countries. This book was an attempt to have something easy to read, a quick book that the younger generation can read in order to make them occupied with the core values that underlies the Bangladesh-India relations. Most of the research work on the liberation war is very dense and impossible for someone to get through who is not interested in deep history. The book on the other hand, attempts to capture the young imagination and she will try to translate it into Bengali language for better outreach. The book covers the initial period of the liberation war where India got involved and how they were able to manage the operations. She said that they missed a lot of information to keep the readers engaged, to make sure that they do not lose sight of the big picture.

Dr Datta said that while looking at the archival material and the declassified papers, she had realised that the dream in 1971 got actualised in post-2010 period. She said that what she had done in the book was looking at the liberation war from an Indian prism and then reflect on the bilateral relations of the two countries. She said she had argued that the years that the countries missed out (1975-2008) had not been good for anyone. She genuinely hoped that despite having some irritants, and changes in government, the cooperation, that is reaching out to people, should continue. She said that the government of the country does not get affected by the problems; the common people do. She wondered, why should the common people miss out on the dividends of the cooperation just because some political leaders do not see eye to eye. The whole idea of the book was to see how the two countries can see through a common prism. She tried to annotate the first agreement that Bangladesh and India had signed on peace and cooperation. She said that she knows that the agreement is very controversial and tried to address the controversy as a researcher. She also annotated the 2010 joint communiqué to give the younger generation a flavour of the past and what is there in present and then concluded the book with an upbeat chapter. She said that she is aware of the pitfalls, and she writes about them frequently. But this was a feel-good book, capturing the young generation's attention at Bangladesh-India bilateral relations. And she hoped that all the audience would read it.



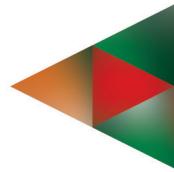


ABOUT THE BOOK



The book “India-Bangladesh Bonhomie at 50: 1971 and the Present”, as the title of the book suggest, reckons Bangladesh-India relations since the War of Liberation till the present. It is divided into three major sections. The first section elaborates the prelude to the war, some glimpses on India’s military operations, responses from the United Nations and other international organisations, and some selected conversations with 1971 war veterans. The second section focusses on how India and Bangladesh came to the full circle and lays out some annotated documents. The third section provides a short chronology of the liberation war, treaties between Bangladesh and India between 1971 and 2001, India-Bangladesh joint projects, and an overview of selected Indian publications on Bangladesh. The book incorporates

research work, scholarly analysis and narratives from the war veterans to give the current and future generations a holistic view of the war. It demonstrates how the liberation war of Bangladesh also helped in the formulation of the core underpinning of a long-lasting partnership between the two states.



CONCLUDING REMARKS



Ambassador Kazi Imtiaz Hossain, PAA

Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador Kazi Imtiaz Hossain, Chairman, BIISS noted that 51 years ago, on the 26th of March, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh. He paid a humble tribute and homage to the Father of the Nation, whose lifelong struggle and visionary leadership brought Bangladesh its independence. He also paid his deep homage to the three million martyrs and 400,000 girls and women who made supreme sacrifice for the independence. He also expressed thanks and gratitude to the people and government of India for their support and sacrifices in Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971.

Ambassador Hossain said that Bangladesh-India relation is deeply rooted in their shared history, civilisation, language and culture. Over the last half a century, the relations between the two neighbours have strengthened, deepened and expanded in various areas



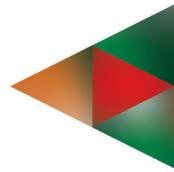
of mutual interest. Being next door neighbours, the life and destiny of people of both countries are intertwined and interlinked. Accordingly, the foreign policy orientation and approaches of the two countries have also evolved progressively with increasing realisation of the importance of the relations.

Although there have been ups and downs in the relations, the two countries have forged a strong partnership in multiple areas of mutual interest since 2009. In the last 13 years, the upward trajectory of bilateral relations has gathered significant momentum and the relationship has attained a high degree of maturity. This is evident from the extensive list of areas where the two countries have expanded and deepened their bilateral relations. Cooperation in physical connectivity, energy and power generation, development cooperation, educational and cultural exchanges, cyberspace, defence and security have joined the traditional list of trade, investment, tourism and river water-sharing as the areas of cooperation between the two countries. The implementation of the LBA, the exchange of enclaves and peaceful settlement of the maritime boundary have removed the lingering irritation between the two countries. Bangladesh has also effectively addressed the security concerns of India. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is another example of cooperative mind-set of the two neighbours.

He then said that as the largest recipient of the COVID-19 vaccine (9 million doses of Covishield) from India, Bangladesh is very appreciative of the support extended by the Government of India to address the health challenge posed by the pandemic.

Ambassador Hossain emphasised that there is no dearth of goodwill and good intention to further intensify the excellent bilateral relations by both sides. To sustain the momentum of upward trajectory in the bilateral relations, it is important to take effective steps to resolve some pending issues. He said that if one wants a healthy and sustainable relationship, the difficult things have to be addressed upfront, and that is how the India-Bangladesh relationship can move into a higher trajectory that the leadership and people are aspiring for.

He concluded by saying that in the seminar, the audience got ideas and recommendations as to what more needs to be done to make the relations enduring and rewarding based on equality and camaraderie, and to transform Bangladesh-India relations into a model of bilateral cooperation and collaboration.



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