



High Commission of India
Dhaka

PROCEEDINGS
Seminar on

BANGLADESH AND INDIA: A PROMISING FUTURE



02 March 2020

Hotel Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka

Jointly Organized by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)
High Commission of India, Dhaka, Bangladesh



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Seminar on

Bangladesh and India: A Promising Future



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIIS) and the High Commission of India in Dhaka jointly organized a seminar titled “**Bangladesh and India: A Promising Future**” on 02 March 2020 at Hotel Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka. **Dr Gowher Rizvi**, Advisor to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Relation Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the seminar as the Chief Guest.

The Seminar was divided into two sessions. In the Inaugural Session, **Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed**, Acting Director General, BIIS delivered welcome address. **HE Smt. Riva Ganguly Das**, High Commissioner of India, Dhaka, Bangladesh made the opening remarks. **HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla**, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, delivered the Keynote Speech. The keynote speech was followed by a lively open discussion and the address by **Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, the Chief Guest. **Ambassador M Fazlul Karim**, Chairman, BIIS, chaired the Inaugural Session.

The Inaugural Session was followed by a Working Session, which was chaired by **Dr Mustafizur Rahman**, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh. Two panelists from Bangladesh and two panelists from India talked in the Working Session. Panelists from Bangladesh were: **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIIS and **Mr Nahim Razzaq, MP**, Member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. Panelists from India were **Mr Sabyasachi Dutta**, Executive Director, Asian Confluence and **Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee**, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Members of Parliament and politicians, senior government officials of Bangladesh and India, present

INAUGURAL SESSION

Welcome Address



Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed, SPP, PSC

Acting Director General, BISS

At the outset of his welcome address, Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed paid homage to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He noted that Bangladesh-India relation has reached a unique height in the last decade. He said that both India and Bangladesh stand to gain substantially from the rapid economic growth which is already taking place in their geographical vicinity. In this regard, he put emphasis on taking advantage of different regional and sub-regional initiatives.

He drew attention to the fact that apart from the geographical imperative that comes with being neighbors, the long and historical ties, cultural affinities, shared values and common goals of peace and development call for a cooperative partnership between Bangladesh and India aimed at mutual progress and prosperity.

He said that people of Bangladesh are thankful and grateful to the people of India for their extraordinary support provided during Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971. Since then, the bilateral relations between the two countries have widened and deepened to span over all aspects of bilateral relationships. India is a major trading partner of Bangladesh and the second largest source of imports. He, however, underscored that Bangladesh-India bilateral trade is tilted heavily in favour of India. He hoped that both the countries would take appropriate measures to reduce the trade gap by addressing non-tariff barriers and creating market for non-traditional goods.

Colonel Masud expressed the view that Bangladesh-India relations have come a long way which is based on mutual respect and cooperation. The landmark visit of Bangladesh's Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi in 2019 ushered a new era in the bilateral relation of the two countries. Since then,

successive initiatives and achievements have driven the relation into a new height. He added that cooperation has increased in the areas of energy—Bangladesh is now importing electricity from India which can be a stepping stone for the regional electricity grid in South Asia. He also mentioned about the historical Ganges Water Sharing Treaty signed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's first term in 1996 and peaceful exchange of enclaves between the two countries in 2015 through Land Boundary Agreement.

He opined that in the context of changing global and regional dynamics, Bangladesh and India need to engage closely to chart out the future direction of their relations. He stressed on finding new avenues for cooperation. He added that the two countries are among the world's top 10 countries by the size of population and both countries have a lot to contribute to the future of this region.

Colonel Masud finished his speech with the hope that the seminar will provide with valuable suggestions which would contribute significantly to further strengthen relations between the two countries.

Opening Remarks



Smt. Riva Ganguly Das

High Commissioner, High Commission of India to Bangladesh

In her opening remarks, High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, **Smt. Riva Ganguly Das** said that she was delighted to have Foreign Secretary of India, **Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla** and **HE Dr Gowher Rizvi**, Advisor to Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh on International Relation Affairs, at the seminar. She thanked Foreign Secretary for choosing Bangladesh for one of his first foreign visits since taking charge. She said that it truly is an indication of the importance India attaches to the bilateral relationship. She also thanked BISS for its cooperation in organizing the event and all the panelists, participants for making the seminar a success.

Keynote Speech



HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla

Foreign Secretary

Government of India

HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Foreign Secretary of Government of India started by stating that it was a pleasure for him to be in Dhaka, a city that always feels like a second home to him. He informed the audience that he had worked earlier in Dhaka as High Commissioner, which he considers to be one of the most fulfilling postings of his career. Even before that, he had travelled to this beautiful country often when he worked on the India-Bangladesh relationship. And so, he explained, it was a pleasure for him to be in Dhaka on one of his first visits abroad in his current capacity.

He then thanked BISS for hosting the event. He said that he was very grateful for the opportunity to greet so many old friends, while he came here to prepare for Indian Prime Minister's second visit to Bangladesh.

The Indian Foreign Secretary said that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been specially invited to participate in the inaugural ceremony of **Mujib Barsho**. India is looking forward to this visit, both because of the priority the Prime Minister attaches to this relationship, and even more so, because Bangabandhu is just so iconic—a globally-recognized statesman and iconic symbol of liberation for Bangladesh as well as for the subcontinent. For India, there is a special resonance to his name. He is as revered and as remembered in India, as he is in Bangladesh.

HE Shringla then wished the people of Bangladesh on the centenary of this great Son of Bengal—a man of letters, a man of action, courage and conviction, and most of all, a true hero, for he liberated from oppression the spirit of a people and brought forth a nation. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is Indian national hero too. India is honoured to be part of the celebrations, including the joint production of a special feature film on the life of Bangabandhu.

He commented that distance often helps with perspective. In the year that he had been away from **Sonar Bangla** he has had the opportunity to focus on the fundamentals of the two country's partnership. And he emphasized with great conviction that this is a relationship that is truly of the highest priority to India. As the former External Affairs Minister of India, the late Smt Sushma Swaraj, said in Dhaka two years ago, even in the implementation of India's "neighbourhood first" policy, it is "Bangladesh first" for India. The two countries are joined

by history, culture, and shared sacrifice just as much as they are joined by shared waters, the same cherished soil and by fraternal ties. 'Baanglar maati and Baanglar jol' enriches and nurtures both of the countries; they sustain societies, and they sustain the souls of the people of two countries. It is inevitable that the partnership between the two countries builds upon the deepest commonalities. And it is inconceivable to even contemplate anything else.

HE Shringla expressed the view that often, people tend to lose sight of these larger realities, especially in the noise and clamour of the immediate, and in the minutiae of the moment. But for those who are in the business of policy-making, there is little doubt about the abiding reality that India will always seek the closest possible ties with Bangladesh.

He further said that it is entirely in India's national interest to fully support Bangladesh's own efforts to build a strong, prosperous, progressive, peaceful and harmonious Bangladesh; to build a nation that stays true to the extraordinarily far-sighted vision of Bangabandhu. Bangladesh's astonishing successes in improving socio-economic indices—from infant mortality to women's education; from primary health to literacy—has been given new energy by the world's most impressive economic development rates. Today, it is Bangladesh that is leading Asia's development race, a miraculous achievement that merits every word of praise.

As Bangladesh builds its nation and as the benefits of development flow more rapidly to the people, it is inevitable that it should seek to benefit more from its strategic location and its rapidly-growing capabilities. As Bangladesh's largest neighbour on land and on sea, with the many ties that bind the two countries together, it is natural that the partnership between the two countries has been evolving to focus much more squarely on mutually-beneficial cooperation. It is this spirit, as well as the sagacity and statesmanship of the two countries' leadership, that has enabled them to address and resolve some of the hardest problems that bedevil relations between any neighbours—problems such as those of borders and land exchanges. The two countries have done so with maturity, grace and sophistication. Indeed, he argued that the manner in which Bangladesh and India have resolved such issues is a model for other countries.

It is in this overall context, that Bangladesh today has become India's largest development partner in the world; their largest trade partner in the region; and their 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. At the level of people to people ties, India's largest visa operation anywhere in the world is in Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshis constitute the largest number of tourist arrivals—by far—in India.

He opined that the closest possible cooperative relationship between Governments, businesses, civil society and people creates a process which necessitates mutuality of interests. Putting differently, a truly developed bilateral partnership, is one where one's interests are affected if its partner's interests are not served, and vice versa. That is what is called true mutualism and true symbiosis. The pace at which the two countries' relationship has expanded has gone beyond expectations and beyond systemic capacities of their respective establishments.

He stated that an impressive effort is put by both sides to address and reverse needless regulations and controls that had earlier prevented the expansion of trade, people-to-people ties and travel, and even security ties. The countries have resolved many such issues through a consistent and focused effort. The countries have sought to identify and eliminate obstacles to the partnership. In sum, the countries have worked to find quick, practical and practicable solutions.

HE Shringla then gave a few examples. In the past few years, the countries have gone from a situation of huge pendency periods and long waiting lists for visas to visit India, to the current stage where there are more

visitors from Bangladesh to India than from any other country. Connectivity to facilitate movement over land has been significantly improved, with all six pre-1965 era railway crossings likely to be completely restored in 2021. The establishment of end-to-end immigration services and customs arrangements has enabled the **Maitree** and **Bandhan** trains to become enormously popular connections between Kolkata and Dhaka, and Kolkata and Khulna respectively. He said that he was glad to know that the frequency of the services has expanded. According to him, India looked forward to working together to consider starting new services as well.

The Foreign Secretary informed that India is working with the list of locations which require separate entry permits, so as to facilitate seamless travel overland. They are also working more closely to simplify and expand trade. Easier and simpler trading systems offer scope to generate wealth and create jobs on both sides. There is enormous untapped potential for the businesses to establish footholds in each other's market. And the Governments must make extra efforts to facilitate our businesspersons and entrepreneurs doing business in each other's country.

HE Shringla said that one obvious example where the countries could and should do much more is in the management of the shared river waters. He said that he knows how sensitive this issue is in both countries, given that they are both densely-populated societies with extensive needs and dependence on life-giving rivers that run through their geographies. It is self-evident that good arrangements to share the waters of the 54 rivers that unite the countries in a manner that is fair and environmentally sustainable lies in broader national interests.

He was pleased to say that both countries recognize there is ample room for progress on each of the rivers that the countries share, and it is in this spirit that serious dialogue has resumed between the officials responsible for this important matter since August 2019. He assured that India remains committed to finding the best possible solutions to sharing scarcities and hardships fairly during the dry season and to improve water management so that the rivers can continue to sustain future generations as they have sustained the people of these lands for so many millennia.

He mentioned that it was in the spirit of finding common ground rather than being bogged down by a few differences that the countries have jointly agreed to work to enhance the navigability of waterways that serve as Bangladesh's historic north-south arteries of connectivity. The two countries have agreed to dredge the fairways of the Kushiara and Jamuna rivers, between Ashuganj and Zakiganj, and between Sirajganj and Daikhowa respectively, on an 80:20 cost sharing formula. This is being accompanied by a steady expansion of the Protocol on Inland Water Transport and Transit (PIWTT), and by joint efforts to improve inland water port facilities at key locations, such as the major river junction of Ashuganj.

The same spirit of finding common ground has enabled the two countries to come up with win-win solutions where, at no cost to Bangladesh, profitable businesses can be created. A standout example is India's decision to buy foreign-sourced LPG in bulk at Chattogram, and transport it using special trucks, run by Bangladeshi companies, to Tripura. This not only saves Indian consumers' money; it also generates incomes in Bangladesh—and reduces pollution and environmental impact that could have resulted from a longer road journey within India.

Similarly, the effort to improve trans-border connectivity—roads, ports, power transmission—is predicated on the understanding that these are truly of benefit to both economies. Such partnerships build two-way reliance, not one-way dependency. After all, if Bangladesh buys 1160 MW of electricity from India, this makes India increasingly reliant upon Bangladesh as a market. Similarly, if Bangladesh facilitates bilateral and cross-border connectivity to and through it, the measure will not only generate incomes, jobs and employment, but also enhance India's strategic and economic reliance on Bangladesh. Such an outcome is in the long-term interests of both sides, as it brings them closer to the point of complete mutuality of interests.

In other words, as he explained, the two countries' partnership will reach its true potential when they equally recognize that their interests converge and there is a mutuality of benefit. This is why India believes that the ongoing efforts to develop a robust partnership between the two militaries emphasize trust of a high order. Especially since India is willing to share with Bangladesh any and all military hardware being manufactured in India for use by Indian military. India also welcomes the opportunity for Indian officers to train at Bangladeshi premier military institutions, just as they are ready to open their military training institutes at all levels—from officer cadet training to specialized higher command training—to Bangladesh.

HE Shringla said, as the closest of neighbours, with so many shared cultural traits, it is also inevitable that events in one country creates ripples across the border in another country—irrespective of whether there is real justification for this. One recent example is the process of updating the National Register of Citizens in Assam, which has taken place entirely at the direction and under the supervision of the Supreme Court of India.

He clearly stated what the Indian leadership has repeatedly confirmed at the highest level to the Government of Bangladesh: this is a process that is entirely internal to India. Therefore, there will be no implications for the Government and people of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has India's assurance on that count.

There is also often interest and sometimes uninformed speculation about India's position on the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State of Myanmar, and its impact upon Bangladesh. He said clearly that India is deeply appreciative of the spirit of humanism that motivated Bangladesh to offer shelter to nearly one million displaced people. India fully recognizes and sympathizes with the enormous burden that Bangladesh is facing. As the only country that is an actual neighbour of both Bangladesh and Myanmar, India is committed to offering the fullest support for any mutually-acceptable solution that will enable the earliest possible return of displaced persons to their homes in Rakhine State and to a life of dignity. This should be done in a manner that is safe, secure and sustainable.

India has provided five tranches of aid to the camps in Cox's Bazar area through the Government of Bangladesh, and is prepared to do more. In parallel, India is investing in the socio-economic development of the Rakhine area, including housing, so that there is an incentive not only for people to return, but for all communities to focus on cooperative solutions for economic development, rather than compete for limited resources.

Towards this end, India is consistent in its interventions with the Government of Myanmar at all levels, on the importance of closing IDP camps, facilitating socio-economic development projects, and in offering a conducive environment to encourage displaced persons to return to their homes in Myanmar from Bangladesh.

In other words, there is no difference between India and Bangladesh on the way forward in addressing this major humanitarian problem. All India suggests in this regard is that it encourages diverse stakeholders to lower the rhetoric and find practical and pragmatic solutions, bearing in mind that the priority is finding a fair and dignified humanitarian outcome.

In the last part of his speech, HE Shringla quoted the great poet-philosopher, Kazi Nazrul Islam, who once wrote "We all share happiness and sorrow equally." He said that this noble emotion must motivate the two countries, as neighbours, to recognize that both sorrow and happiness do not respect borders or passports; in this globalized era, they arrive equally at everyone's doorstep. India's approach to Bangladesh will always be characterized by this sentiment. He finished with the hope that Indian Prime Minister's upcoming visit would fully exemplify India's strong sentiment of goodwill, trust and respect for Bangladesh.

Open Discussion



Shibly Noman from Jamuna TV, Rajshahi welcomed the Indian Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh and thanked him for visiting Bangladesh. He then asked why death is still taking place in border areas even though Bangladesh and India have both agreed to implement the use of non-lethal weapons on the border.

HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla replied that the issue of death in the border area is one that constantly come in the Bangladesh-India relations. According to him, the problem is related to the fact that densely populated sections of the society are living close to the border area, almost along the border in many places. It is also related to the very difficult geographical terrain surrounding the border and the criminal activity that takes place on the border area.

He said that it was the responsibility of both border guarding forces, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the Border Security Force (BSF) of India to ensure that the border is respected, safe and also that the activity detrimental to the interest of both countries do not take place. But despite that, a fair amount of cross border criminal activity happens.

He added that every death on the border is a problematic issue that the Indian government truly regrets. Death of every single human being diminishes us further. He said that the stated position is that 'one death is too many' in the border. Having said that he also acknowledged that the border guarding forces face many challenges, and there has been a fair amount of attacks on the border guarding forces of both countries.

He claimed that deaths on the border are not necessarily confined to the citizens of Bangladesh, an equal number of Indian citizens are also killed. He said that Bangladesh is looking at the deaths of Bangladeshi citizens only but statistics show that Bangladesh and Indian citizens are equal in terms of deaths and casualty in the border area. Statistics clearly shows, he argued, that criminality knows no geographical boundaries and criminal activities take place on both sides of the border. He informed that lately there have been a lot of attacks on the Indian border guarding forces. In many cases, they had to respond to the attacks by armed gangs on them. In 2019, 12 Indian citizens were killed, 4 were injured and 83 border guarding force personnel were injured and 1 was killed.



According to the Indian Foreign Secretary, the best way forward is to complete the fencing of the remaining stretch of the border of 165 kilometre using modern cut-proof fencing. This will give the countries an opportunity to improve cross-border security and at the same time to enhance cross-border trade of essential goods and basic commodities through rapid expansion of **Border Haats**. He called for close cooperation between the border guarding forces of both countries in order to create zero criminal activity zones. That was in his words, the way to go ahead: more cooperation and more joint border patrolling under the common

border management plan, completion of border fencing to ensure that whatever no illegal activity takes place in the border areas which can lead to instances where deaths occur. He ended his response by saying that the intention is to bring the number down as much as possible. He added that if in one year zero death on the border can actually be achieved, the stakeholders would want and try to try keep it that way.



Mehedi Hasan, from Daily Kaler Kantha said that India is known in the world stage as a secular democratic country. It is also famous for its commitment to peace, stability and prosperity. As neighbours and friends, if anything happens in India, it affects Bangladesh and vice versa. He then asked why India needs the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Referring to the insurance given by the Indian Foreign Secretary that the process will not hurt Bangladesh-India relations, he asked what measures India is taking to prevent any harm in the bilateral relation.

HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla replied that some of the initiatives taken by the Indian government have drawn public attention in both countries. Pointing to the fact that sometimes the information that spread is not factually accurate, he thanked the participant for providing him with the opportunity to give a perspective on the issue.

He said that the NRC is a process that is underway only in the state of Assam, under the supervision and direct guidance of the Supreme Court of India. The issue is driven by court, not by the executives or the government. This emanates from the 1985 agreement between the government of India and the political stakeholders of Assam at that time, and therefore it is clearly a process that is internal to India. Even after the publication of the final list of the updated NRC of Assam, those people who are not covered in the list, among which there are equal proportions of people of all religions represented, have the right to appeal to tribunals and to undergo a fairly elaborate appeal process. The government has assured that they will assist them and will make free legal advice available to people for filling their cases. Even after the tribunal appeal process is completed, the decision can still be brought to the high court and Supreme Court of India. This is a time-consuming and lengthy legal process and therefore there is no reason at this time to think that there will be any impact on Bangladesh. In fact, as far as India is concerned, it is an internal issue; and there is absolutely no way it will impact any other nations, particularly Bangladesh which is an important partner to India.



About the CAA, the Indian Foreign Secretary said that the issue has been misunderstood in many senses. He stated that the CAA is actually a proactive legislation which has been initiated on humanitarian grounds. Under this Act, people, who are refugees and political asylum seekers and have come to India within a certain cut-off time, will be allowed to apply for fast track citizenship. He said that there are hundreds and thousands of people in India who are currently homeless and stateless and this Act will enable them to seek citizenship in a faster track. That does not mean that the other people will not be able to apply for citizenship.

He added that India has a normal process of accepting applications of citizenship. For example, in the last ten year alone, as many as five thousand nationals from Pakistan have been made citizens of India; leave alone other neighbouring countries. There are people in India who have fled persecution and have been in India for a long time, and what they are doing is providing them with citizenship faster out of the cause of humanity because they have been living in India without the services of the state. He added that this Act does

not apply to the citizens of India—it only applies to the foreign nationals living in India. He emphasized that the CAA is not directed against any religion. He quoted the prime minister of India “I want to unequivocally assure my fellow Indians that the Citizen Amendment Act does not affect any citizen of India of any religion.” The act is designed only to help those who have faced persecution.

The Indian Foreign Secretary explained that it has been made clear on more than one occasion by the Indian leadership in the parliament. These are public records that can be accessed that this does not apply to the current government in Bangladesh. This applies to the post-1975 period, when the military and other governments of Bangladesh did not observe the spirit and letter of the constitution of Bangladesh which is secular, and as a result of which some people had to face persecution and come to India. He also acknowledged that currently, Bangladesh has substantially recognized the concerns of minorities in the constitution's provisions and laws.

He assured that the Act does not have any effect now; it is to legalize a large number of people, primarily from the subcontinent living in India. And as the Indian leadership has said, there is no link between the NRC in Assam and any other normal data gathering processes of CAA, because the latter has no bearing of existing Indian citizens.

Finally, he summarized that: a) CAA is not directed against any religion, b) it is supposed to have fast track humanitarian considerations of people fleeing persecution, and c) it does not impinge to the current Bangladesh government, which, he himself has witnessed being very sensitive to the concerns of minority communities. It addresses only past incidents where governments have not been as considerate or have not implemented the constitutional provisions in Bangladesh. He hoped that he had addressed some of the concerns, and he assured that in no way will any of the issues impact Bangladesh-India relationship, or would be allowed to impact the people-to-people relationship that exists between the two countries. This is purely internal to India, and if there is any impact, direct or indirect, intended or unintended, India will seek to mitigate.



Koushik Bos, Staff Reporter, Daily Janamot and Information and Technology Secretary of Dinajpur Press Club said that the Teesta issue has remained unresolved for a long time. He asked what measures are being taken by India to resolve this issue.

In reply **HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla** said that India is committed to finding an early and mutually acceptable conclusion regarding sharing water of Teesta. India knows that it is an emotive issue on both sides of the border but there is a limitation of the commitment of the Government of India in this regard. The agreement can only be finalized by the consent of stakeholders and they are working on to conclude it as early as possible. However, as he has mentioned in his remarks earlier, the countries can proceed on sharing the water of other rivers so that there is positive progress and people of both countries can benefit from the close partnership. He was glad to note that, in implementation of arrangements decided during the recent visit of the Indian Water Resources Secretary to Dhaka August 2019, both sides exchanged updated information on water flow of seven transboundary rivers that was done in February 2020. There is a need to expedite harmonization of this data so that water-sharing agreement can be finalized as early as possible, possibly within the year 2020.





Nahid Hossain, Channel 24, said that when the Foreign Secretary was the High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, he had taken a number of initiatives to simplify the visa issuing process. There is a popular demand from the Bangladeshi part for more simplification of the process. He asked what initiatives he would take to make the visa process more simplified now as he is the Foreign Secretary.

HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla replied that in 2016, Indian High Commission issued 0.5 million visas while at present it is issuing 1.6 million visas per year. He said that the audience would agree that tripling the number of visas and the number being not a small one is no small achievement. The fact that the Indian High Commission in Dhaka runs the largest visa operating process and system in the world is a testimony to the Bangladesh-India friendship and to the very vibrant people to people contacts between the two countries.

He opined that opening up the visa regime has been of great benefit to both countries. It has increased flows for tourism, medical purposes and cultural reasons, but most important of all it enabled the people to get to know each other better, and he believed that it was the most important tangible return that the countries are getting from a very liberalized visa regime. Even then, India is constantly working to innovate and improve the visa processes. There are now five-year multiple visas for certain categories, particularly for senior citizens, **muktijoddha** (freedom fighters) and businesses, etc. Also, Bangladeshi patients can visit the Indian hospitals with a regular tourist visa which was not possible earlier. Even when someone was sick, they had to wait to get a medical visa. Today, anyone can visit a hospital with a tourist visa unless they need to be hospitalized or go through major surgical processes; in the latter case they need a medical visa.



He informed that the Indian High Commission has opened fifteen visa application centres all over Bangladesh with the help of the State Bank of India. Bangladeshis can apply for a visa from any of these centres. In other words, they are bringing the visa to people and minimizing the inconvenience of people trying to seek an Indian visa. And during the visit of honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in October 2019, the government of India decided to remove all restrictions for Bangladesh travelers using the existing land ports on the Bangladesh-India border in a phased manner. He finished by saying that the Government of India is making efforts to simplify and facilitate travel so that people to people elements of this partnership remain to be the anchor of the friendship between the two neighbours.

Address by the Chief Guest



Dr Gowher Rizvi

**Advisor to Honourable Prime Minister on International Relation Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh**

At the outset of his speech, **Dr Gowher Rizvi** said that in all efforts regarding Bangladesh-India relations, the present Foreign Secretary of India had a central role. He appreciated the dedicated and consistent support of the Secretary in all affairs regarding Bangladesh-India relation over the last 10 years when he was in the Ministry of External Affairs dealing with Bangladesh, then directly as the High Commissioner and now as the Foreign Secretary. Dr Rizvi delivered gratitude to him on behalf of everyone and also acknowledged the supportive role he played while he was exalted as the Ambassador in Washington.

The Advisor referred to the beauty of Bangladesh-India relations as mentioned and pointed out by Foreign Secretary Mr Shringla. Dr Rizvi termed it as a “heaven-made relationship” which is totally mutually beneficial. While talking about Bangladesh-India relation, he commented that although now and then issues come up upon which the countries may disagree, and indeed will continue to disagree as all neighbours do, there is no outstanding issue that may adversely affect the relation. If some issues come up, both the countries have to take a long-term view of the bilateral relations. It is to the interest of Bangladesh, as much it is to India's there is no issue that cannot be resolved.

He referred to the point where the Indian Foreign Secretary had mentioned about the **Teesta** water sharing issue and informed that the countries have agreed to take the water sharing issue as an immediate priority. Dr Rizvi expressed the view that this process must go on, and not only based on one river but also addressing the other rivers as well. He informed that in August 2011, it was decided that instead of talking about a single river at a time, there should be basin-wide settlements and agreements. He demonstrated his satisfaction as the process has resumed, and progresses are made but also mentioned that none of the countries is happy with the pace. These things have to be expedited and the countries deserve better than bureaucratic insights or arguments.

Dr Rizvi commented that the India Foreign Secretary has enunciated all that has been achieved and agreed that these achievements are undeniable. He, however, also expressed his disappointment at the speed under which the issues have been agreed upon and being implemented. Despite the number of Line of Credit (LoCs) available, only the first one has been completed after almost ten years down the road. This truly needs serious attention, he emphasized. He informed that when the Prime Minister of India will be in Bangladesh in a couple of weeks, the Bangladesh's Prime Minister raise this issue. Otherwise, the opportunity cost of delay will be too heavy.

He suggested that we also need to take a fresh look and dream of articulating new visions regarding how far Bangladesh-India relations can go. It is certain that a number of agreements will be signed during the Prime Minister's visit, but it is more important to lay out a fresh vision. A roadmap was created in January 2010 which served its purpose well; but we need to go beyond it, he observed.

He applauded that some burning questions were articulated during the open-discussion and thanked the Indian Foreign Secretary for candidly answering them. He reiterated the fact that India's internal affair would not domestically have any impact and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh has also assured it again and again. He assured that Bangladesh has good reasons and good faith to move forward while not worrying about it.

The Advisor emphasized on the fact that Bangladesh is a secular society; here the commitment to secularism is absolutely central and the country does not want to have any situation where this secularism can be threatened. That is why he emphasized to work closely with India so that the secular society here grows from strong to stronger. In Bangladesh, he further emphasized, minorities are not only sacred but are also absolutely equal citizens. There is no question that their interest in a secular Bangladesh can be affected any way. He reassured that the Government of Bangladesh attaches the highest priority to the protection and welfare of the minority citizens. There is no way to look away if the minorities are affected. They are making valuable contribution to the growth and development of the country in every aspect and the government is willing to provide them with opportunities in every aspect.

Dr Rizvi also informed that Bangladesh is committed to Agenda 2030 and all disadvantaged or historically left-behind groups are being targeted so that they can be provided with jobs, skills and opportunities. In this regard, Bangladesh has also been working with India.

He stated that Bangladesh and India have achieved much together, created a relationship which would be envied by any two neighbours. The countries have resolved some issues lasting longer than seven years in a peaceful manner. In every case, the governments took stand in a manner that everything they do must not affect the citizens of either of the countries, i.e., the boundary settlements and enclaves, keeping people's interest in mind. He concluded his speech by saying that Bangladesh and India need to look forward to a long-term relationship and need to produce a long-term vision to settle all the issues rather than keeping them in ambiguity.

Closing Remarks by the Chair



Ambassador M Fazlul Karim
Chairman, BISS

Ambassador M Fazlul Karim expressed his gratitude to the Advisor to the Honourable Prime Minister Dr Gowher Rizvi, Excellency Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the Indian Foreign Secretary and Excellency Mr Ashok Malik, Advisor at the Ministry of External Affairs of India for attending the seminar.

He said that the great journey of Indo-Bangladesh cooperation in reality began in the battlefield of 1971. On this occasion, he recalled with deep gratitude the whole-hearted support Bangladesh received from the Government and the people of India during the critical days of their nationhood. He paid tribute to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman under whose wise leadership the Bangladeshis fought their war of liberation, whose birth centenary the country is celebrating this year. He also paid homage to those brave Indian soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. He commented that emotional bonds stemming from the invaluable contributions of the government and the people of India during the Liberation War remain a dominant factor in Bangladesh-India relations.

The Chairman said that there has been a phenomenal growth in Bangladesh-India relations in recent years with the two countries cooperating in myriad areas. He underscored that the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, laid the foundation of close and cooperative ties between Bangladesh and India and took immediate steps to resolve all outstanding issues between the two neighbours.

He said that the government of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been working relentlessly to further deepen and expand the all-round cooperation based on the principles of mutual respect, trust and confidence. The same spirit of cooperation of 1971 is guiding the relations between the two countries and the leaders of both countries are frequently in touch with a view to adding further momentum to this cooperation. As a result, the two countries have been able to resolve many bilateral issues including the implementation of the historic land boundary agreement, sharing of water of the Ganges and maritime boundary demarcation.

He observed that although the present bilateral engagements have spread to numerous areas and sectors, there are many more potential areas where the two countries can further deepen mutually beneficial cooperation such as in trade and investment, in science and technology, in education and culture. He emphasized that every opportunity must be seized to bring the two countries and peoples further closer and to place the bilateral cooperation on a significantly higher trajectory.

The Chairman concluded the session by thanking everyone—the speakers, discussants and the learned audience for their kind presence and active participation.

WORKING SESSION



The Inaugural Session of the seminar was followed by a Working Session titled **Economy, Connectivity and Regional Cooperation**. The session was chaired by **Dr Mustafizur Rahman**, Distinguished Fellow, CPD, Bangladesh. Presentations were made by **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIIS, **Mr Sabyasachi Dutta**, Executive Director, Asian Confluence, India, **Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee**, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India and **Mr Nahim Razzaq, MP**, Member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh. The presentations were followed by a vibrant open discussion.



Dr. Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, BISS, Bangladesh

Dr Mahfuz Kabir talked about Bangladesh-India trade, investment, connectivity and overall cooperation in terms of economic development. He observed that a timeline of cooperation between Bangladesh and India started right after the election of India. The Indian Prime Minister made a statement regarding Bangladesh-India cooperation and a specific determination was present in his statement about deepening the bilateral cooperation. There are basically five areas of cooperation. These are—security, trade, transportation, energy and people-to-people contact. The timeline of the development between the two countries started in 2019 and it will end in 2021 when Bangladesh will celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence. Thus, the priority areas of cooperation and the timeline to achieve the development in these areas are very clearly elaborated in the Prime Minister's office of India.

Dr Kabir identified the enabling factors that are supposed to enhance the cooperation between the two neighbours. First enabling factor is Bangladesh's rapid economic growth. The country is now enjoying 8 per cent of growth and it will create huge opportunity for Bangladesh economy. Second enabling factor is trade within the value chain. In the upstream there is textile industry and Bangladesh is making the clothing from the textiles imported from India. Thus, there is the huge value chain integration in textile and clothing. The other important enabling factors are: geographic proximity, common borders, investment linkages and expanding trade complementarities.

Dr Kabir then talked about expanding trade complementarities briefly. The trade between the two countries is increasing and the pattern of growth rate over the last two years is promising. In the last fiscal year, the growth rate was about 20 per cent. If this pattern of growth continues, Bangladesh can hope for US\$3.1 billion worth export to India. This will help to mitigate the existing huge trade deficit between the two countries. He informed the audience that the latest World Bank report, estimates the untapped trade potential between India and Bangladesh to be about US\$10 billion.

Regarding the trading pattern between the two countries he said that merchandising goods are dominating and service exports are also increasing. Service exports are quite promising since it worth US\$500 million. According to the latest data of the Bangladesh Bank, in the trade pattern service exports worth about 40 per cent of the total export to India. In terms of imports of services from India, it's basically the electricity transmission service which is worth 30 per cent.

He observed that Bangladesh is importing raw materials and intermediate goods from India. He also observed that while exporting goods to India, Bangladesh has to face problems due to anti-dumping duties; jute is an example in this regard. He noted that for Bangladesh's export to India, tariff barriers are not that

significant right now; the country is now more concerned about the non-tariff barriers (NTBs). There are actual non tariff-barriers and perceived non tariff-barriers. There is also the issue of non-tariff measures (NTMs). Many export items that Bangladesh is exporting to the world market are not being exported to India due to NTBs and NTMs. Antidumping duties on Bangladesh's Jute is the biggest NTM in the contemporary Bangladesh-India trade. Due to these non-tariff-barriers Bangladeshi traders have to face problems in trading in Indian market. According to many Bangladeshi traders, Indian trade regime is characterized by some obstacles. These are: (a) complicated administrative procedures, (b) stringent testing requirements and standard-related regulations, (c) para-tariffs, (d) frequent procedural changes and (e) arbitrary interpretations of the regulatory regimes. Therefore, on the whole, diversified NTBs and NTMs appear to be much more stringent than tariff barriers. Dr Kabir suggested that both of the countries should come together to address these non tariff-barriers. He recommended forming a committee comprising traders, exporters, policy makers and experts from both countries to study these NTBs and NTMs and find out proper solution to address these barriers.

Dr Kabir also touched upon the recent development in trade and investment between Bangladesh and India. India is investing in Bangladesh's Special Economic Zones (SEZ). India is basically investing in textile and clothing. According to him, this type of investment is good because it promotes diversified investment. He informed that according to the Bangladesh Bank report in 2019, India is the 8th biggest source of FDI for Bangladesh. He also mentioned about the latest rail link in Mongla-Khulna and Akhaura-Agartala which, he believes, would help in developing trade infrastructure between the two countries. There are also pledges made in the high-level political engagements in increasing trade and investment and improving land ports for trade facilitation. Since India is increasing investment in the Bangladesh's SEZs, Bangladesh needs to attract more Indian investment into the export-oriented sectors.

In conclusion, Dr Kabir proposed a 7-point agenda for strengthening Bangladesh-India ties. These are: (a) attracting Indian investment to increase exports to Indian market, (b) initiating a post-LDC trade strategy, (c) identifying new export products, (d) forming a high-level committee to look into the NTM and NTB issues case-by-case basis and to develop guidelines for dealing with them, (e) strengthening cooperation between Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute (BSTI) and Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), (f) making coastal shipping viable (there was a coastal shipping agreement between the two countries back in 2015 but the agreement is still not implemented. Therefore, this agreement needs to be operational as soon as possible), and (g) seeking India's technical support and investment in developing tourism sector.



Mr Sabyasachi Dutta

Executive Director, Asian Confluence, India

Mr Sabyasachi Dutta emphasized that Bangladesh along with its immediate neighbour India with the Bay of Bengal in the south and the Himalayas in the north essentially forms one ecosystem with the same waters, the same rivers and the same sediments. Therefore, the two countries are connected beyond the realm of mankind; the animal corridors, plant corridors, sea corridors and the issue of climate change connected the two neighbours in a number of ways. To explain the intimate connection built in this way he gave an example—there are lots of rocks in the Himalayas that come down through the river and lots of mining happens here in Bangladesh to collect these rocks. He observed that what happens to upstream of this ecosystem has a direct effect in the downstream.

Mr Dutta then talked about the second type of connectivity which, according to him, is to some extent related to pre-partition type of connectivity. For example, the railway connectivity is pre-partition type of connectivity. The two countries also have well-functioned air connectivity. India and Bangladesh are linked by knowledge network. The two countries also enjoy e-connectivity.

According to him, the two countries are notably well-connected by various types of connectivity. And he believes that obstacles related to trade facilitation and tariff-barriers can be addressed with enhanced level of connectivity. As the third type of connectivity, he emphasized on increasing connectivity between minds and hearts. He commented that both the countries are like a family. And if any problem arises in a family, it needs to engage more to find out the solution. Therefore, he believes, talking much more to each other will bring solutions.

Mr Dutta, also suggested some ways to overcome the obstacles related to connectivity. He suggested a shared history and shared culture through a special interest of tourism. For example, practicing Rabindranath Tagore's perspective on tourism can be a way of increasing connectivity between the two countries, he explains. He highlighted that eco-tourism can be an interesting avenue to increase connectivity. For example, the waterfalls of Meghalaya and the swamps of Sylhet can be an interesting place for eco tourism. There are lots of climate patterns in both the countries—the hills of north India cannot be found in Bangladesh. These can be a good source for eco-tourism that nature lovers will love to explore. And this tourism can be an added sector to the Bangladesh-India trade connectivity. He also proposed sharing the countries' agro and agro-horticulture products so that both countries can have supply of these products over the year. According to him, this will also help to mitigate the trade gap between the two countries.

Finally, he suggested linking institutions of both countries with a view to connect entrepreneurs, stakeholders and policy makers at the ground level especially in the bordering districts. He finishes by saying that a new ecosystem of engagement and the types of engagements can lead to deeper level of bonding, deeper level of trust and higher level of business and higher level of business in turn leads to lower trade gap



Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee

Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India

Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee started by recalling the popular song “ekti mujiborer theke lokkho mujiborer kantho”, and said that what Bangabandhu dreamt in his age for a golden Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal) is now being implemented by thousands of souls who are working for making his dream true. She then mentioned about a report titled “Why Bangladesh has done so well” going through which one can understand how far Bangladesh has gone. According to her, what Bangladesh has done is amazing.

Regarding connectivity, Dr Bhattacharjee said that both Bangladesh and India are well-connected. Apart from bilateralism, there is major focus on sub-regionalism. And the best example of this sub-regionalism is the BBIN. She then said about two important ways of connectivity—one is the Buddhism and the second is the Spice Route. In these two connectivity routes, South Asia is the centre. She also mentioned about the neighbourhood policy of India and said that Bangladesh is in the centre of India’s Neighbourhood policy. With this view, she believes that both the countries can go forward to achieve their destiny.



Mr Nahim Razzaq, MP

**Member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry
of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh**

Mr Nahim Razzaq, MP, thanked the organizers to organize such seminar which he mentioned to be the first seminar of this kind in the year of Mujibbarsha. He said that to achieve the goal of 21st century, both the countries need to engage in bilateral and multilateral relations. He noted that Bangladesh and India are members in many notable multilateral cooperation platforms. He expressed the view that both of the countries experienced excellent achievement in two sectors—one is combating terrorism to secure regional and sub-regional security, and the other is climate change.

Regarding bilateral relation between these two countries he said that geo-economic prospects, business and security are the important aspects of this relation. He observed that Bangladesh and India have very deep-rooted relations. The people-to-people connection between the two countries was manifested during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in which the people of this country received support from the people of India. Hence it is a long history of strong relations that both countries share. He suggested that in the 21st century, both countries need to focus more on enhancing people-to-people connection.

According to him, another core element that needs to get the attention is the exchange of information. There is lack of information sharing in both ends which needs to be addressed. Trust building is another important issue for going forward. It is needed to be seen that both countries' citizens are equal. It is important because to build the partnership, both countries need to trust each other.

Regarding relation with China, Mr Nahim Razzaq said that it is the age of Asians. And in this age, China is a big player. China is the second largest economy in the world. Every country wants to make relations with China in terms of trade and commerce. Bangladesh also wants to maintain a healthy relationship with China because there are ample opportunities of trade and commerce. India has also a long and healthy relationship with China in terms of business. China is the biggest market from where India imports.

According to him, connectivity in terms of transport and people-to-people connectivity is very much important for taking bilateral and multilateral relations between countries forward. Another important factor is trade and commerce. Although there are many trade-related agreements between Bangladesh and India, still large trade gap exists. There are tariff barriers but there are also scopes to deal with these barriers. He drew attention to another fact that although India is investing good amount in Bangladesh's SEZs, Bangladeshi businessmen are not seen to invest in India. There are challenges but there is also need to come forward. Therefore, the Bangladeshi business community needs to engage more through investing in India. Bangladesh

cannot just import from India but also needs to export more. Especially in the India's northeast state, Bangladeshi business houses have ample scopes to make investment.

Mr Nahim Razzaq also emphasized on regional joint collaboration or joint investment in energy projects. For example, Nepal has hydro-power potential of 40,000 megawatts. Bangladesh has already shown interest in 12 projects in Nepal. In this case, India also needs to come forward because the connecting lines need to go through India. In this case, therefore, there is need to work under joint working groups.

Mr Nahim Razzaq also talked about security issue. He said that the two countries must need to collaborate in combating terrorism with a view to ensure regional security. He observed that in the last 10/11 years, the two countries have been getting tremendous success in terms of combating terrorism and ensuring regional security. Now-a-days, Islamic fundamentalism and regional terror networks are getting attention and these two countries have collaborated to combat these terrorism activities successfully. Another important security issue is the cyber security. In the coming days of Bangladesh-India relations, cross-border cyber security issue will be an important issue.

Lastly, Mr Nahim Razzaq emphasized on more engagement, more people-to-people connection and exchange of information to further deepen the bilateral tie between Bangladesh and India. He commented that amidst the global context, Bangladesh and India need to explore the potential of the geo-economical aspects as well as the prospect of relationship with other regional countries and with the greater Asian Circle. It is also important to explore the potential of the old Silk Route and the Asian Highway. He stressed that sharing common ground of prosperity will bring ample opportunities to the two countries and will deepen the relations at the same time. He finished by saying that in the next year Bangladesh will be celebrating its 50th year of independence. On that glorious eve, honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina and the people of Bangladesh have greater aspiration to build a great partnership with the country's regional friends and the global circle.

Open Discussion

The working session was followed by a vibrant open discussion in which academics,



Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury referred to what Dr Bhattacharjee had said about Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Pointing to the comment of Chairman of the panel, Dr Mustafizur Rahman that the BBIN is taking much longer than it should have, he said that this is not really a good sign and there are some hesitations, some reluctance about how to overcome it. He added that if BBIN is not implemented properly, it will have impact on the progress of BIMSTEC as well and connectivity in general, since there is a link between the two. Bangladesh and India should learn a lesson from what and where BBIN has not moved as far as it should have and how can we move forward on that.

Ambassador Chowdhury fully agreed to what Mr Sabyasachi Dutta said about connectivity of the minds. This is the relationship between bloods. As Ambassador Chowdhury is a freedom fighter himself, he knows how deeply our history is embedded. Connectivity of mind is also dependent on the prevailing situation between the two countries. Assurances have been given by the Prime Minister of India, the Foreign Secretary of India that Bangladesh has nothing to worry regarding both CAA and NRC in terms of whatever is happening in India. Yet, the fact remains that there are questions inside Bangladesh. He added that although Bangladesh realizes that it is an NRC and CAA internal matter of India, if the rhetoric is not reduced at the political level, it raises some questions.

Referring to what Dr Mustafizur Rahman had pointed out about South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Ambassador Chowdhury said that SAARC has much higher brand value in Bangladesh than BIMSTEC or anything else. He added that on the last meeting of BIMSTEC on energy connectivity, SAARC was mentioned repeatedly as how it can be the role model to move forward. In his opinion, Bangladesh should take the initiative to put SAARC back on track, not at the cost of BIMSTEC but along with BIMSTEC.



Major General (Rtd) Imamuzzaman said that in order to promote trade, economic and technical co-operation between the two countries, there is a need to enhance people-to-people friendship and co-operation. He added that perception of some of our people regarding Bangladesh-India friendship is not up to the expected level. Due to wrong mindset of some of our people, most of the cooperation programmes do not achieve positive results. He asked the panel if we could think of some of the ways and means to improve the perception of people of both the countries so that we can develop everlasting friendship.



Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan referred to what Mr Sabyasachi said about having the pre-partition level of connectivity. He said that the pre-partition level of connectivity was on the premise of 'enemy state' perception. The bilateral relationship of both the countries is rooted in the mingling of the blood in 1971 which

is the pillar of the relationship. He fully endorsed the suggestion made by Mr Sabyasachi that we should have a new ecosystem of connectivity. It is absolutely right perspective to look into how to define and articulate the bilateral relations.

He, however, identified one aspect as missing; based on his personal experience having to work in Kolkata, he asked the panel why education sector is not opened enough, particularly the quality education. He posed questions to the Indian leaders why India does not open the engineering or medical sector for the students of Bangladesh and why they have to go to America or North America or Europe.

He said that every country has its own priorities and sensitivities. Canada and USA has bilateral trade of US\$2 billion, given their differences. So, he asked the panel why is struggle is going on to improve or promote Bangladesh-India bilateral trade. Pointing to the fact that Bangladesh and India exchange daily necessity products, he urged India to look at the sensitivity of the food supplies like export of onion to Bangladesh. He said that there is public perception and we should do diplomacy on this basis also. The leaders would have leverage if the mutual concerns are timely and appropriately addressed. His last point was why not India offers Bangladesh proactively the duty free facilities up to 2030 as European Union (EU) extended 3 years as a transition time for the graduating countries. He thinks that Indian leaders may seriously consider offering this proactively so that it helps to bolster the bilateral cooperation and investment.



Ms Shahreen Tilottoma from International Affairs Sub-Committee, Bangladesh Awami League referred to the World Bank's ranking of ease of doing business and said that Bangladesh has achieved improvement in this regard. While having a sustainable development graduation (within the development countries), Bangladesh is looking forward to have a strong economic growth in which the young people should be the strongest contributor in this regard. She suggested finding more opportunities for collaboration between young people of the two countries. She also called for strategic partnership between the chamber of commerce and young entrepreneurs of the two countries. She also emphasized that the young politicians who are interested in the commercial development and economic growth. Being a lawyer, she informed the audience that in India the commercial legal practice has seen a significant growth and she suggested such development in Bangladesh too. She also emphasized on Agenda 2030.

Mr ASMA Awal, former ambassador, referred to what Mr Nahim Razzaq had said about the private sector and their involvement. Mentioning the connectivity that Bangladesh-India had in 2015, he said that they had signed agreements regarding the coastal shipping, the use of two ports and internal water connectivity. Another proposal is in the process regarding the Pangaon, Chattogram and Krishnapatnam ports. He expressed the view that to make the transnational connectivity meaningful, the business community has to come forward, make money and only then it can go forward. He expressed his dissatisfaction that the statistics from 2015-2020 does not give a good picture in this regard. He also commented that the European model would not apply here unless the structure comes, the routes are used and businesses make money.



Mr Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, said that in academic discourse, relationship between the nation states can be categorized. As far as Bangladesh-India is concerned, in his view, neither it is transactional nor strategic. He said that he was heartened to hear



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what the Foreign Secretary of India said about the navigability of the rivers in the previous session. He opined that this cannot be done in isolation unless the two countries revisit the question of the sharing of the waters. While paying his fullest respect to the spirit, to the philosophy and to the understanding of independent sovereign states, he commented that what exists Bangladesh and India is not a neighbourhood relationship, it is a brotherly relationship. So there is obligation that merely sovereign decisions cannot be enacted. Referring to BIMSTEC, he said that he felt sad that the progress of it after decades has not been noteworthy whereas this organization was meant to step aside from the hurly-burly world politics and go straight into trade, finance, tourism and commerce.

Ms Tasmia Munir Ahmed, a practicing lawyer in High Court, agreed to what her colleague Shahreen said. She said that Indian High Commissioner is organizing every year a youth delegation visit to India from Bangladesh where around hundred youth delegates are going. She proposed engaging more delegation team to visit India so that more exchange of culture takes place.



Parvez Karim Abbasi, Assistant Professor of East West University,

said that for a long time, discussions have been going on over Bangladesh-India trade deficit. Saying that India is a very big country with a very big economy, he proposed to explore the possibility of starting off a free trade agreement with states in North-East India like Tripura, Manipur, Assam on an experimental basis, just like China does with states across Myanmar. Bangladeshi businessmen would invest over there, goods from our country would go over there and products would get assembled.



Mr Ali Ahmed, CEO of Bangladesh Foreign Trade Institute, said that he was trying to bring the attention back

to economics from politics although political discussions and political implications are very important. It is known to us that a China offers free trade agreement with Bangladesh and India and it has come up with Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which is going to be signed very soon. It means free trade agreement, connectivity and everything. He observed that we lack mutual recognition agreement. So, he proposed that that the two governments should sit for discussion on how they would go forward with these things.



Mihir Biswas from Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA) and coordinator of the Save the Buriganga Movement, referred to the Joint River Commission and suggested that a Joint Environmental Health Commission should be established as well. It will initiate talks about other issues like the Coronavirus, animal health, environmental health and other areas which are common for both of the countries.





Mr Salahud Din Ahmed, former member of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC), applauded Mr Nahim Razzak's statements. He added that if more young, enthusiastic and enlightened politicians from both countries come together and work with real zeal, the fear of being delayed by the bureaucracy would not be there.

Md Alamgir Hossain, Research Director in-Charge, Bangladesh Heritage Foundation, pointed out that although Bangladesh and India are undoubtedly good friends, the people in Bangladesh are not happy as much as they would expect to be. He questioned how effective different instruments are so far as the trade-relationships between the two countries are concerned. The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) offers Bangladesh duty free market to India but Bangladesh cannot avail it. The cost of transportation from Dhaka to Delhi is much higher than from Dhaka to US or Dhaka to the European Union countries. Goods are being unloaded in No Man's Land and then again reloaded because of check-ins which ultimately results in increasing the cost. Hence, even though there are available instruments, the relationship has not developed due to the development of other issues.



M. S. Siddiqui, legal Economist and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Bangla Chemical, referred to some terminologies used by Dr Mahfuz Kabir and wanted to know what he meant by perceived non-tariff barriers. When India imposed anti-dumping duty in June, the total export of Bangladesh was declining and India found alternative sources in other countries of Africa and Europe. The export of Jute is has also reduced due to the anti-dumping duty. Mentioning the issue of **Upadhyay Jamdani**, he pointed out that India is importing **Jamdani** from Bangladesh and illegally exporting it to other countries. He suggested that India should restrict the illegal export of **Upadhyay Jamdani** and allow Bangladesh to export its **Jamdani** to other countries. He also elaborated the trends in export by saying that the exporters primarily look forward to having the deal in India and when they face different issues, they bounce back and then move towards China. However, there is a language barrier as the Chinese traders are not proficient in English but still China is now the biggest source of import for Bangladesh. He reiterated that India must realize what non-tariff barrier is and investigate why the Bangladeshis are bouncing back to China.



Dr Shazzad Haider, International Affairs Secretary at Bangladesh Awami Jubo League opined that the main purpose of the gathering is the upcoming visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and that is why the Indian Foreign Secretary HE Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla was in Bangladesh. He added that Bangladesh should try to execute a win-win situation and questioned how we are preparing ourselves for that. He pointed out that many internal issues are taking place in India right now including the riots, particularly considering the fact that India is a Hindu majority country. The problem was persistent even before the visit of Donald Trump, President of the United States (US). He asked what the Government of Bangladesh can do to ensure a win-win situation.



Response of the Panelists



Appreciating how lot of interesting comments and questions came from the floor, **Dr Mahfuz Kabir** said that he would focus on the dynamics of the present world. Bangladesh is now in the verge of the fourth industrial revolution but the question remains how much the country has developed regarding services import and export. He mentioned that, from India, the country is importing US\$303 million worth of electricity there are other imports in the road, rail and shipping sectors. On the export side, the biggest share goes to office maintenance which is worth US\$202 million. He opined that the country has to transform its trading regime of service and more human capital intensity are required. The country has to identify new areas like cut-flowers which have large demands in India and also fresh fruits. He added that these will indeed increase employment opportunities as they are very employment-oriented sectors. He lauded the point raised by Ms Shahreen Tilottoma from the International Affairs Sub-Committee, Bangladesh Awami League and acknowledged the importance of legal service. The category of legal accounting management and consultancy being exported to India is worth US\$20 million. It is also a kind of human capital intensive, which can be taken up and encouraged.

Mr Sabyasachi Dutta reemphasized on the relationship with the seven-sisters states in the Northeast India which can establish new avenues for cooperation including trade. Considering the Bangladesh of tomorrow and the world of tomorrow, if the concern of blue economy is taken into account, the entire narrative totally goes to a different level. He stated that Bangladesh and India need to take the bilateral relations to the next level. He clarified his previous statements regarding the pre-partition stage and added that he only meant the pre-partition connectivity through roads and railways and nothing else.



Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee commented that she is hopeful when it comes about Indo-Bangladesh relationship and connectivity. She referred to Brexit and added that people became more enthusiastic about being inward-looking after the Brexit event but, at the same time, Bangladesh and India are talking about cooperation. This is a very positive thing according to her. The two countries have to realize where they were and what they already have achieved. She thinks that these realities should be recognized when talking about the bilateral relation. And ways to do better should also be sought. She proposed creating a graph of the relationship and then, she thinks, the positive development can be seen. She suggested that the two countries should be more optimistic instead of being upset. She also addressed the question on the BBIN issue and, once again, presented the analogy of Brexit. While people in other parts of the world are breaking up the preexisting ties, Bangladesh, India and their neighbours are providing a lesson. The negotiations may take a little time but the countries have to be positive about what is taking place in the South Asia. She mentioned that



India and Bangladesh have resolved the land boundary issue and two countries can indeed show light to the world together.

Mr Nahim Razzaq, MP appreciated the interest generated regarding the Indo-Bangladesh relations. He commented that at times countries to be patient and that is very true; but at the same time, they have to address the challenges. When it comes to connectivity, people-to-people connection or cooperation, both the countries have to work together. The mindset has to be there in the first place. Politicians, academicians, government officials and everyone else must understand that the present generation is very impatient; people want everything to happen now and want to see it now. A lot of bureaucratic and red tape aspects do exist when it comes to the internal issues; but if one looks at the external area, a lot of negotiations are taking place. He suggested that to be more pragmatic. A lot of things have happened during the last ten years including a significant number of cultural exchanges involving different cultural activists, participants and practitioners. Lots of business community engagements have also taken place; the two countries already have Top of Form Bottom of Form India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IBCCI). He suggested initiating something innovative, such as sub-regional cooperation in Asia to explore trade and investment opportunities.



Mr Razzaq recalled his meeting with the Chief Minister of West Bengal where Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee was also engaged. In the meeting they discussed why not the Northeast India including the Odisha was given a portfolio so that the business community of Bangladesh could be engaged more. He recommended that the central government of India can explore this idea. In his final points, he raised the question of engagement mentioning that the countries do lack communication and transfer of information. The last time when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina visited India, numerous agreements were signed but there was a huge backlash from the national newspapers and print media not knowing exactly what the terms and conditions were. He requested the High Commission of India and the Government of India to be more informative and engaged so that the Bangladeshi community understands what are the terms their country is subscribing to. He concluded his response by mentioning that the two countries need to be eye to eye, on par and equal to advance the relation further.

Concluding Remarks



Dr Mustafizur Rahman
Distinguished Fellow, CPD, Bangladesh

Dr Mustafizur Rahman said that bilateral cooperation between Bangladesh and India have been advancing in various forms. There are various forms of connectivity such as trade connectivity, investment connectivity, people-to-people connectivity, transport connectivity and logistics connectivity. These are being practiced between these two countries. Therefore, this confluence of connectivity is expected to take the relations forward. But there are also irritants. The two countries are still not fully able to realize the potentials of their relations. According to him, both the countries need to do more homework for deepening the bilateral cooperation.

Dr Rahman said that although Bangladesh's export to India is increasing and it has crossed US\$1 billion in the last fiscal year but at the same time the country's import from India was US\$7.7 billion. It implies there is bilateral deficit in the trade but according to him in a globalized world bilateral deficit is not a major concern. Bangladesh has bilateral deficit with India since the country import a lot of material from India. It benefits the country's consumers, exporters and entrepreneurs.

He noted that Bangladesh's bilateral deficit with India gave the opportunity of bilateral surplus of US\$5 billion with the United States. Bangladesh imports raw material from India and makes its Readymade Garments (RMG) and exports its RMG to the US market. Regarding Bangladesh-India trade deficit, Dr Rahman pointed out that both countries are realizing the export potentials. According to him, US\$1.2 billion is a peanut to India. Last year, India imported US\$514 billion worth products. And this US\$1.2 billion was one-fifth of 1 per cent of India's import. India is importing products that can be supplied by Bangladesh but India is not importing those products from Bangladesh. Therefore, Dr Rahman suggested finding out the irritants of this gap. How Bangladesh can get benefitted by the rise of India—this needs to be studied meticulously. To be economically developed, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable—Bangladesh needs to work on this issue.

Dr Rahman praised and addressed the non-tariff barriers that Dr Kabir mentioned in his presentation. He agreed that the main question is that in spite of the fact that India is giving us duty-free quota-free market access for all products barring 25 drugs, alcohol products, why Bangladesh is not realizing the potential of its export market to India. He commented that many of these non-tariff barriers are related with infrastructural bottlenecks and trade facilitation. Dr Rahman suggested that these NTBs can be addressed through deepening connectivity between two countries. The other NTBs related to standard certification and laboratory testing can be addressed by mutual recognition.

Dr Rahman shed light on the common river sharing issue between the two countries. With Bangladesh, India is upper riparian country but with China, India is the lower riparian country. Regarding the issue of common river sharing, there lies lots of interest and conflicts. These issues are also needed to be addressed properly. Dr Rahman informed that the negotiation on Teesta water sharing is making progress. And he is very much hopeful that there will be a positive news regarding the Teesta river sharing agreement when the honourable Indian Prime Minister would visit Bangladesh to attend the Bangabandhu's birth centenary.

Pointing to the fact that BBIN is taking more time than it is expected, Dr Rahman hoped that the standard operating system of BBIN will soon be operational. He emphasized that to be economically developed, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable—Bangladesh needs to work on the long-standing relationship with India and look forward to further developments. The lacuna which is constantly interrupting the relationship must be addressed and all the necessary stakeholder must work on behalf of the better interest of both of the countries. He lauded the optimistic attitude of Dr Bhattacharjee and hoped for better cooperation by mitigating the trade deficit between the two countries raised by Dr Kabir. He also acknowledged the importance of bridging the communication and advancing people to people contacts for sustained regional cooperation. Finally he thanked the panelists and the participants.

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