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Bangladesh and Paschim Banga¹: ‘Why this *Kolaveri Di*?’

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Abstract

Over the past few years Bangladesh and India have been painstakingly developing their bilateral relations. There was indeed a possibility that thereby a model of good neighbourliness could be created worthy of emulation in the rest of South Asia. Suddenly the appearance in the scene of the new Chief Minister of the State of West Bengal in the Indian Union appears to have thrown a spanner in the works. All developments in the area seem to be hostage to her perception of the self-interest of her State, vis-à-vis both New Delhi and Dhaka. As a result, the burgeoning relationship between Bangladesh and India – already characterised by a complex mix of reason and passion and subject to the vicissitudes of domestic politics in both countries – stands threatened. Much hard work and deep innovative thinking by both sides will be needed to successfully overcome the newly created impediments.

Introduction

It is rare in South Asia to have two governments entertain such friendly disposition towards each other as those of India and Bangladesh today. Of late, however, this chumminess is

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confronting severe strains. The relationship is being buffeted by repeated blows from a most unexpected source. Both country capitals seem to be in accord as to its identity. In detective novels there is a French adage, 'cherchez la femme'. It means 'look for the woman'. It assumes that in all likelihood the person responsible would be a female. Doubtless it is an archaic and sexist approach, unacceptable in modern times. It so happens in this particular case that both parties agree that the person is indeed a woman. She is Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of the Indian State, renamed 'Pachimbanga' by her administration, somewhat puzzlingly because it implies the existence of a 'purbobanga' or 'East Bangla' when there is none.

This is not to say that Mamata is actuated by any preconceived notion or sentiment of animosity towards Bangladesh. In fact her recent election to office was cheered by many Bangladeshis. Among them was Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, whose Awami League Party heads the coalition in Dhaka. Generally her government is largely perceived as one that is keen to widen and deepen relations with India (this is not true of most other political parties in Bangladesh, including the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, or BNP, of Begum Khaleda Zia). There were several reasons for the Bangladeshis' initial friendly perceptions of Mamata. First, Mamata is a Bengali-speaking woman, like the major Bangladeshi leaders. Second, hers was expected to be a kinder face in Kolkata, as far as Bangladesh was concerned, than those of her Marxist predecessors. There was no clear justification for such hope, or better still aspiration, than wishful thinking, soon to be belied by the rough and tumble of practical politics.

What appears to have become now a cascading crisis in India-Bangladesh relations is largely owed to the complexities that characterise the linkages and interactions in India's domestic political matrix (though there are also bilateral elements that must be taken cognisance of, as we shall soon see). The Union government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, structurally weak, is dependent on the support of the 19 Members of Parliament belonging to Mamata's Trinamool Congress who are a part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition.

Kolkata-Delhi Relations

For the price for such support, Mamata is seeking to exact much more than the proverbial pound of flesh. She demanded Rs 20,000 crores (there are 10 million to a crore, essentially an Indian mathematical calculation) to rebuild the battered economy she inherited from the Marxists (in her claims, though also generally endorsed by the common man on Kolkata's tramways, the local version of the 'Clapham omnibus'!) The UPA government and the Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, a fellow Bengali, have been slow to respond. The personal rapport between Pranab and Mamata may have also taken a beating after Mamata failed to accommodate Abhijit Mukherjee, Pranab's son, in her cabinet, and instead offered him the lesser position of Chairman West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. Be

that as it may, many of the Delhi government's policy decisions have now become hostage to Mamata's predilections.

She has been relentless over the past couple of years in badgering the Union government with annoying, and often seemingly idiosyncratic actions. For instance in June 2009 she succeeded in deferring the land acquisition amendment bill by two years. Then in December 2011 she blocked the passage of the 51 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) in single-brand retail trade, much to the annoyance of those Indians within and outside the government, philosophically committed to the somewhat new-found values of the 'free-market' (not to speak of deterring much needed FDI). Thereafter in February 2012 she managed to marshal the support of some fellow Chief Ministers to stop the "rolling out" of the National Counter-terrorism Centres (NCTC), a brain-child of the Home Minister P. Chidambaram on the grounds that it is an intrusion into the jurisdiction of the States by the Union (as the subject of 'law and order' is constitutionally a State-preserve). This list does not include issues that involve Bangladesh, which are enumerated later in this essay. Mamata was thus apparently unafraid to tread where angels would be chary. Taking on Pranab and Chidambaram (who are also seen as rivals vis-à-vis each other) simultaneously may be an act of 'quixotic' courage that dangerously borders on foolhardiness.

The victories that Mamata is winning on the home political front may eventually turn out to be Pyrrhic. For with regard to even the most docile political figures, of whom Manmohan Singh is usually seen as one, there is such a thing as the last straw on the camel's back. Well might he now be thinking, with devastating logic, that with friends like Mamata, who needs enemies? It does hark back to the mediaeval era in the annals of Indian history when rebellions in Bengal seemed to perennially vex the sultans and emperors of Delhi. However mighty otherwise, they could be easily poked in the eye by even minor detractors from the Gangetic delta, to whom Delhi, both geographically and psychologically, was hanooz door ast, 'yet very far'. That element of history seems to be repeating itself, albeit, as with all such historical repetitions, with a modern twist. Unlike those of the sultans and emperors, the present government of Delhi is a democracy which enjoins upon it the need to make uncomfortable, even at times unsavoury, compromises, as it is being forced to do with Mamata. But there is a serious analysis that if the election results in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab create circumstances whereby the UPA government would no longer require Mamata's support at the Centre, it would act to marginalise her and cut her down to size. Indeed what the UPA would have liked to do, situation permitting, is to try and bring about Mamata's political demise at the Centre at least, if not in the State, by inflicting upon her not just one, but many cuts. For now though, that idea remains a far-fetched 'consummation devoutly to be wished'.

Dhaka-Kolkata Relations

The embarrassments to the Manmohan government were not confined to domestic issues only. These also spread to relations with Bangladesh, with which the current ties were otherwise friendly, and out of which many had suggested a model be created in terms of determining India's behaviour pattern with its neighbours. That would seem unlikely now. Sheikh Hasina believes she has been generous to India, and arguably so, on security (by denying Indian insurgents safe haven and returning some prominent persons on India's 'wanted list') and transit (allowing the connection between India's north eastern states with others through Bangladesh territory). Both these issues were significant negotiating levers in diplomacy for Bangladesh with regard to India. It comes to Hasina as understandable hurt, compounded by a significant political cost, when returns for these gestures are assessed in Bangladesh as being insufficient.

Last year Mamata refused to accompany Manmohan in the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh in over a decade. It is possible that she was unwilling to play equal fiddle to the four other Chief Ministers accompanying Manmohan. But she also withheld support for the Teesta river water sharing accord between the two countries. As a result it was not signed during that visit though Bangladesh was most eager to do so. Mamata argued that providing 50 per cent of the river water to Bangladesh, as envisaged in the treaty, would render dry the northern parts of Paschimbanga. Pleas to her from both Dhaka and Delhi fell on deaf ears. Public opinion in Dhaka was inflamed. Its government was caught on the wrong foot. Delhi's discomfiture was palpable. It was sad to see the helplessness of the Prime minister of a rising power like India. The lack of ability to control at home naturally erodes the power to influence the world beyond.

Mamata is now poised to oppose the approval by the Indian Parliament of a piece of legislation that if adopted could have positive impact on India-Bangladesh relations. It is the Border Management Bill which the government wants to introduce, and if possible adopt, in this year's budget session of the Parliament. It is designed to facilitate the transfer to Bangladesh of 55 enclaves, currently tucked inside of Indian territory, in return for 111 such units from that country. This would be in accordance with a much touted agreement reached between Dhaka and Delhi, seen by many as the only positive outcome of the Manmohan trip, separating the visit from what would otherwise be only a jaunt! Importantly, this has already been passed by the Bangladesh Parliament, which would risk looking strange indeed if the Indian legislature does not reciprocate! And it cannot do so, as being a constitutional amendment the passage would require two-thirds majority in both houses, not possible without Mamata's endorsement. Finally, Mamata has of late been raising Cain with regard to the flow to Bangladesh of the Ganges waters at Farakka. She alleged that Bangladesh has been receiving much more in quanta than its due share due to mechanical failures in two of 108 sluice gates. She accused Delhi of keeping her in the dark about this. This caused consternation in Dhaka. It also raised ire in Delhi. Nonetheless to mollify her, the Indian government appointed a team of experts headed by R.C. Jha, Chairman of the Central Water Commission, to examine her allegations. The Bangladeshis were not amused.

Dhaka-Delhi Relations

Just as India's domestic politics impact on its relations with Bangladesh, those of Bangladesh impinge in the way its attitude towards the larger neighbour is shaped. While Bangladesh's previous Caretaker government had sought to put bilateral relations on an even keel for pragmatic reasons, few doubted the Awami League would undertake major initiatives in this regard. Sheikh Hasina was prudent enough not to rush things, and waited a year to visit India. But when she did so, a foundation to build upon was laid. Implementation of understandings was nonetheless slow, as they are wont to be, given the culture of suspicion that often tended to create impenetrable barriers despite the best intentions of both authorities. Much was placed in store by the greatly trumpeted return visit of Manmohan Singh who was to have been accompanied by the Chief Ministers of five Indian states bordering Bangladesh, including Mamata. The much heralded accord on the sharing of Teesta waters, and another on the enclaves were readied for signing. Expectations were naturally high. Then on the eve of the trip, Mamata cried off, refused to come, negated the water-sharing accord, and rendered the entire visit a damp squib. She is now also bent on ensuring that whatever was signed, such as the agreement on the exchange of enclaves, also does not make any headway in being carried forward.

All this put the Bangladesh government, in cricketing parlance, on the back-foot. The fiercely free media in that country, both printed and electronic, began to play merry hell with all policy decisions perceived to be disproportionately favouring India. The grant of transit was one such. Though some experts endeavoured to explain that it would earn Bangladesh ample revenues, and also bring in investments to improve the poor communications infrastructures, much of public opinion was un-persuaded. Unsurprisingly, making a point to advance pre-election popularity (elections are due in 2014 and relations with India are bound to become a major debating point between the two main adversaries), Khaleda Zia before a huge and approving public gathering cryptically announced: "no water, no transit!"

There is another issue that is feeding public wrath. It is the numerous killings of Bangladeshi civilians by Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) along the long borders, once described by the journal 'The Economist' as the "world's bloodiest". This, despite many assurances provided by Indian authorities that these would not recur. A 14-year-old Bangladeshi girl called Felani was shot dead some months ago, and recently the torture of a Bangladeshi peasant by some BSF members was recorded and aired, leading to white-hot anger in Bangladesh. This is not an issue on which the Centre could lay the blame on the States because the BSF reports to the Union Government. In February 2012 the Bangladeshi Home Minister Sahera Khatun raised the matter with Chidambaram. The outcome of the meeting, officially described as 'successful' will doubtless be keenly watched. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

Meanwhile some angry Bangladeshi youth, unencumbered by niceties that constrain governments, took matters into their own hands and launched what they called a “cyber war” aimed at official and commercial websites in India. In 10 days in February they hit more than 30,000 websites, including some they claimed to be ‘high value’ ones, defacing them with Bangladeshi flags, images of Bangladeshis killed or tortured by the BSF and lists of demands. Indians hit back in their own fashion. It was reported that Bangladeshis were aided by some Saudis, Malaysians and Indonesians, and the Indians by Israelis. Luckily, however, the damage was quickly brought under control, but not before it left a degree of bitter taste in the mouth on both sides. Such private warfare does not make for good inter-State relations.

This is, on the whole, not a desirable state of affairs. In Bangladesh at least, the informed public is on such edge that every action by Delhi is put under the microscope for the most intricate dissection. For instance, recently, Delhi has nominated as its envoy a career official, who, though long on experience is short on rank (he is a Joint Secretary, which anyone with any familiarity with the complexities of the pecking-order of the South Asian official system, will be aware, is a middling official and not quite the bureaucratic brahmin, while his Bangladeshi counterpart, both suave and senior, carries the status of a Minister of State). Reaction among some opinion-shaping analysts writing in the Dhaka media was critical. There was appreciation, however, that no slight was intended, only that the existing extreme sensitivities were overlooked. Mercifully, however, the elevation of a Joint Secretary to the next higher, and more acceptable, designation of Additional Secretary is normally a seamless progression which is usually only a matter of time. Also it is likely to happen soon in this case. Happily, this non-issue then is bound to disappear. But the very fact that such a debate, which could easily baffle a non-South Asian, did take place is indicative of the current fragility, at least in public perception, of the ties! Particularly when the perfect relationship between two friendly powers is one in which envoys should be irrelevant!

Historically, during the colonial period, the inhabitants of Eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh had never quite felt at ease with the middle class that dominated the-then Calcutta socially, politically and economically. This was the bhadralok (literally ‘gentlemen’), a Weberian status group, distinguishable by characteristics of dress, deportment, speech and culture from the common masses (the expression, though in vogue for decades, was introduced into the currency of serious sociological research by J.H. Broomfield in his book ‘Elite Conflict in Plural Society’). East Bengali Muslims were hardly represented in this group, and basically saw it, rightly or wrongly, as exploitative. Eventually, the 1947 partition facilitated the creation of a new bhadralok class in Dhaka who tended to nurture a sentiment of distrust towards their Calcutta forerunners. Contemporary Bangladeshis see in Mamata a bhadramahila (literally a ‘lady’) a female counterpart of the bhadralok of the classical mode sharing the same negative characteristics. Those championing Mamata, on the other hand, view her as the modern version of Debi Choudhurani. This was a female warrior in the Bengali author Bankim Chatterjee’s 19th century classic novel of the same name, giving battle to the feringees or ‘foreign elements’, in that case the British, in this case Delhi-based

rulers. That heroine, however, ultimately retreated into a life of demure domesticity, an unlikely transformation for Mamata anytime soon.

Conclusion

The bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh are often driven by a mix of reason and passion. Into this cauldron also flow the dynamics and effects of domestic politics both within India and Bangladesh. The result is at times unintended negative consequences. These are further exacerbated by the mercurial temperament of the new actor on the scene Mamata Banerjee. Some may see her as merely championing the cause of her own State. But the lack of subtlety in doing so may bring short term benefits but long term harm, because Bangladeshi authorities may be compelled by reasons of political pragmatism, to retaliate. That could have nasty bilateral ramifications, and would erode, and might even evaporate, years of hard work on both sides.

Visits between Dhaka and Delhi are unlikely to bridge the current divides, because both may be pushing open doors in each other's capitals. It is not the number of meetings but the outcome that is important. The answer may partly lie in enhanced people to people contact. It is surprising that despite mutual cultural admiration between Dhaka and Kolkata, Bangladeshi electronic transmissions still cannot be accessed in that Indian city. Given the nature of their politics, mental and intellectual connectivity will need to either precede, or at least simultaneously accompany physical connectivity. All this will require much hard work, and deep innovative thinking.

The constellation of forces for favourable relations is perhaps better now than ever before. Not to take advantage of it would be missing out on a rare opportunity. The cost of animosity is too great to contemplate. Bangladeshis feel that a greater responsibility for improvement of ties, under such circumstances, lies with the larger protagonist. Traditionally they see a variety of linkages with the Indian Bengal. Many fondly recall the fervent support that came from across the border during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. And ponder. They see as apt to the situation the query posed in a very popular song by Dhanush, a South Indian, in Tamlish (Tamilian English). It asks: 'Why this *Kolaveri Di?*'-meaning, 'why this killer-rage, lady?'

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