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Manmohan in Bangladesh: The Visit Revisited

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Abstract

The visit by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011 was billed as his most important foreign policy initiative of the year. It was to have been a paradigm for resolving intractable relations between neighbours, a model to be emulated in other similar situations. Instead, it fell a victim to the complexities and idiosyncrasies of India's domestic politics, and became what many saw as much ado about little. Some key agreements were not signed, despite public expectations rendering this important event one of more protocol than substance. The article analyses the reasons why. The essay points to some structural issues of centre-state relations in India that will require to be addressed with regard to foreign policy questions, particularly in terms of relations with other nations in the region. It examines how perceived national self-interests can often override even the closest of personal rapport as between Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India. One simple but profound lesson learnt from this episode is that one must not undertake major initiatives with regard to inter-State relations, even between the best of friends, without the most thorough preparations. Nonetheless, the authors give the visit a mixed grade, and argue that if an appropriate follow-up mechanism is put in place even now, there would be potentials for advance on whatever had been achieved, which while little now, can grow into much over time.

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Introduction

The long awaited visit of Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh (6-7 September 2011) is now over. It will get mixed grades. Without a doubt, there have been forward movements in terms of bilateral relations. At the same time it is widely believed that it has fallen short of expectations.

An important achievement was the Framework Agreement that the two Prime Ministers signed. It should set the tone for future relations. There were also several others inked. But significant were the ones that were *not* signed, though they were expected to have been. These relate to water-sharing and transit. There was an element of tit-for-tat in this.³ When India went back on the former due to the lack of endorsement from West Bengal's (or now Paschimbangla's) maverick Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Bangladesh followed suit on the latter. There does not appear to have been any lack of commitment on the part of Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina. She had indeed succeeded in evolving some kind of consensus that it was important now to settle issues with India, despite many differences within Bangladesh as to details. Unfortunately Singh was unable to get his act together, partly due to his government's weaknesses and the idiosyncrasies of Indian domestic politics. Unlike the situation in the Trojan Wars when Laocoon (Trojan priest) warned, which went unheeded, that he feared the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts, here was a matter of Greeks coming bearing no gifts at all!

Earlier Singh had sought to placate Bangladesh by making some dietary accommodation. Despite being a vegetarian, he agreed to partake in the *hilsa*, Bangladesh's favourite fish dish. Unfortunately it turned out that this was perhaps the only accommodation he could make. His experts had drawn up an agreement to share the water of the Teesta River, which seemed to have been endorsed by Bangladesh, and which would have removed an important apple of discord between the two countries.

The problem was the Teesta waters were to be shared with Bangladesh by the Indian state of Paschimbangla, now governed by a volatile Banerjee, who though an ally of Singh in the Center, was obviously not under his control. She was to have been one of five State Chief Ministers accompanying Singh to Dhaka.

Popular in Bangladesh as yet another lady politician in charge, like many in that country, Banerjee was unwilling to risk trading her domestic votes with foreign popularity, and balked at the last minute both at the treaty and at being in the delegation.

³ 'Dhaka Seeks Explanation for Postponing Teesta Deal', *Daily Star* (6 October 2011).

The Bangladeshis were not amused. This meant no deal signed on Teesta, and also no transit for India from Bangladesh. In Dhaka, memories of historical negative behaviour by the Calcutta *bhadralok* were revived, even though this time round it was now a *bhadramahila*.⁴ So instead of actually signing the deals, the leaders of both countries, in the 65-point joint statement at visits end, had to remain satisfied by making promises and pledges. But these in the context of South Asian inter-State politics, are notoriously more brittle than a lover's oaths.

Agreements Signed

The two major documents signed in the course of the visit involved the Framework Agreement, and another that related to the enclaves and land boundaries. A number of Memorandas of Understanding was also inked. These included the offer of duty free access to 46 Bangladeshi textile products, designed to reduce the ballooning trade gap (It is noteworthy that Bangladeshi experts forcefully argued that the impediments to trade lie not so much on the formal tariff wall, but on non-trade barriers or NTBs.)

(A) *Framework Agreement*

The framework agreement on cooperation for development was a tone setter. It recalled the two shared bonds of history, culture and values. It contained 12 points providing the template for future bilateral cooperation on a wide range of areas. These included, among others, water sharing, trade facilitation and connectivity, sub-regional cooperation, environment protection, information sharing, and security issues.⁵

This was an important document. It sought to create the necessary positive atmospherics for more detailed understandings. It recorded the political *will* between the two parties to forge cooperation. As everyone knows, the *will* is a prerequisite for *ways* that would follow.

⁴ The *bhadralok* literally meaning 'gentlemen' were a largely Weberian status-group, drawn from the Hindu community, influenced by Protestant Anglo-Saxon values, who dominated the socio-political life in 19th and early 20th century Bengal, generally criticised by liberal sociological analysts collaborating with the British Raj. For a detailed study, see J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). The important point that irked Muslim Bengalis, mainly from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, is that the *bhadralok* tended to look down upon them, or so they perceived. The *bhadramahila* is the female counterpart.

⁵ For details see the *Ministry of External Affairs website, India*, available at http://www.mea.gov.in/my_start.php?id=501018197&flg=1.

(B) *A Protocol On Land Boundary*

The two foreign Ministers signed a protocol (Protocol to the 1974 Mujib-Indira Land Boundary Agreement) concerning the demarcation of the land boundaries between the two countries, adversely possessed land and enclaves.⁶ This landmark agreement aimed at resolving a long-standing dispute that had been souring relations between the two countries for decades. Each country through a quirk of irrational border-demarcations earlier, owns bits and pieces of land inside the other's territory. These number 162 in total. Thus India 'adversely' occupies 551.8 acres of Bangladeshi land and the latter 'adversely' occupies 226.81 acres of the former's.⁷ The protocol included the settlement of the demarcation of the land boundary and transfer of adversely possessed land in the border.

Moreover, the residents in two of the more significant Bangladesh enclaves⁸, *Dahagram* and *Angarpota*, can now enjoy 24-hour 'unfettered access' to their mainland through the Tin Bigha Corridor (a strip of land formerly belonging to India on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border). An estimated 34,000 people live in the 111 Indian enclaves located in four districts of Bangladesh and 17,000 people reside in 51 Bangladeshi enclaves inside the Indian district of Cooch Behar. These enclaves would be exchanged between the two countries under the Mujib-Indira land boundary agreement on ratification of the protocol.

The disputes over boundary and enclaves originally aroused out of the anomalies in the Radcliffe Award in 1947. Over a decade after the division of British India in view of the problems arising out of boundary demarcation and enclaves, both India and Pakistan reached an agreement (known as the Nehru-Noon agreement) in 1958 that provided for 'exchange of enclaves on the basis of enclaves for enclaves without any consideration of territorial loss or gain.'⁹ Bangladesh inherited the problem after its independence in 1971. The Indira-Mujib agreement of 1974 laid the groundwork for demarcating the unidentified part of their border and the issues relating enclaves. However, being hostage to other problems of Indo-Bangla relations, the issues were not settled for such a long time.

Cutting the Gordian Knot of this difficult and complex issue must be considered a forward movement. This has been featuring on bilateral negotiations for over 35 years, and at one

⁶ For details see *the Ministry of External Affairs website, India*, available at http://www.mea.gov.in/mea_xpsite/declarestatement/2011/09/06js12.pdf.

⁷ Bibek Debroy, 'India Needs to Show Magnanimity to Resolve Outstanding Issues', *Weekly Holiday* (12 August 2011).

⁸ In Bengali, these are called *chitmohol*, signifying a chit of paper. These *chitmohol* are pieces of land that the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and Rangpur won or lost in gambling centuries ago.

⁹ Living With a Border in the Backyard, *The Telegraph* (1 September 2011). Also see, http://coochbehar.nic.in/htmfiles/tinbigha_contd.html

stage in the early 1990s, one of the authors was deeply involved in the negotiating process.¹⁰ The proof of the pudding will lie in the eating and both sides must ensure the requisite exchanges are affected within a given time-line. Any follow-up mechanism set up to implement the various outcomes of the visit must be mandated to ensure that.

(C) *Memorandas of Understanding (MoUs)*

A large number of Memorandas of Understanding (MoUs)¹¹ were signed in course of the visit. These were on renewable energy, facilitating Overland Transit Traffic between Bangladesh and Nepal, conservation of the Sunderbans as also of the Royal Bengal tigers, cooperation in the field of fisheries, educational cooperation between the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Dhaka University, academic cooperation between National Institute of Fashion Technology, India and BGMEA Institute of Fashion and Technology, Bangladesh, and cooperation between Doordarshan and Bangladesh Television (the state televisions of the respective countries). Individually each may not be significant in itself, but collectively they did manage to convey a predilection to agree on details, thus creating an overall positive ambience.

Agreement Not Signed: Teesta and Transit

Unfortunately the ambience did not succeed in achieving what was to have been the crowning glory of the visit, the agreement on the Teesta waters and another on transit.

Given the high expectations from the Singh visit, it was hoped that the two landmark treaties - Teesta water sharing agreement and Transit - would also be inked in Dhaka. The Teesta pact was indeed viewed as a crucial component of Singh's visit. However, the officials in Dhaka were informed by their Indian counterpart at the eleventh hour that the agreement would not be signed. By this time the Indian Prime Minister and his entourage had already arrived Dhaka, and the visit had commenced.

India's last minute U-turn to sign the Teesta treaty had subdued the fanfare in Dhaka markedly. In understandable retaliation, Bangladesh blocked the deal on sharing the Feni River waters and signing a 'letter of exchange' containing Dhaka's approval letting India use Chittagong and Mongla ports. This was a difficult decision for Hasina, but according to

¹⁰ Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, who in 1993, then as Director General for India at the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, headed a negotiating team to India on this specific subject.

¹¹ For details see the *Ministry of External Affairs website, India*, available at http://meaindia.nic.in/my_start.php?id=501018158

received wisdom, the right one. An investigative reporting has published a blow-by-blow account of how this came about.¹²

Originating in *So Lomo lake* in Sikkim, the Teesta flows through northern Paschimbanga of India before entering Bangladesh. An arrangement is already in place (under a 1983 agreement) that allows India and Bangladesh to share 75 per cent of its waters with the former using 39 per cent and the latter 36 per cent. However, there is need for a consensus between Delhi and Dhaka on the remaining (unallocated) 25 per cent.¹³ This was to have been the crux of the pact due to be signed in Dhaka.

Ostensibly the reason for Mamata's stiff opposition to the Teesta deal was that the negotiated agreement was detrimental for the farmers in North Bengal districts.¹⁴ While no official data or account is available, it is reported that Mamata had objected to giving Bangladesh 50,000 cusecs of water, as mentioned in the final draft of the interim treaty for Teesta water-sharing instead of 33,000 cusecs as in the initial draft.¹⁵ However, the Indian central government, including the Prime Minister, claimed that she had been consulted regularly on the issue and she agreed to visit Dhaka with other four Chief Ministers. After the visit of Singh, the Bangladesh Prime Minister also confirmed this when she said that 'New Delhi and Dhaka had reached an understanding on water-sharing in the Teesta and Feni rivers'.¹⁶

While Bangladesh had much stake in the proposed water sharing agreement on Teesta (and other common rivers for that matter¹⁷) given that it is a lower riparian country with many more numbers dependent on it, India also stood to gain enormously had the deal on Transit was signed in Dhaka, which would have been the case if the agreement on Teesta had gone through. India's North-eastern states are 'Bangladesh-locked'. For seamless connectivity between NEI and the Mainland India, between India and Bangladesh as well as with rest of Asia the transit deal was a categorical imperative, at least as far as India was concerned. The implications for NEI are discussed later in the piece.

While Mamata had been blamed for the less than hoped-for outcome in Dhaka, it seems that both parties were not thorough with regard to their preparations. There is no denying that

¹² *New Age* (10 September 2011).

¹³ Islam M. Fakrul and Higanos Yoshiro, 'Equitable Sharing of International Waters: A Proposal for Optimal Utilisation of The Teesta River', Bangladesh Development Initiative, available at <http://www.bdiusa.org/Publications/JBS/Volumes/Volume2/jbs2.2-4.pdf>.

¹⁴ Manmohan Says Mamata Assented to Teesta Deal, *The Hindu* (9 September 2011).

¹⁵ Reasons for U-turn, *Daily Star* (6 September 2011).

¹⁶ On his way back on board his special flight to Delhi the Indian Prime Minister himself told the media that 'the West Bengal government assented to a strategic water-sharing agreement with Bangladesh before backing out of it over the weekend'. See, Manmohan Says Mamata Assented to Teesta Deal, *The Hindu* (9 September 2011).

¹⁷ Bangladesh is criss-crossed by over 300 rivers. Out of its 57 trans-boundary rivers, 54 are common with India and the rest with Myanmar.

Sheikh Hasina's government took a political risk by stating readiness to sign a transit deal with India.

The issue is an intensely politically sensitive one in Bangladesh given the security concerns and the political polarisation in that country. However, a palpable shift in public opinion in recent years has shifted in favour of having a wider economic cooperation with India, including providing some kind of transit facilities to New Delhi (though modalities were and are being fiercely debated) and increasing wider connectivity in that region. The immediate past Caretaker Government of Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed was also persuaded of it and indeed took some steps in that direction.¹⁸ Thereafter Hasina's heavy investment, and indeed stake, in the relationship became a major driver of Indo-Bangladesh relationship, buttressed by Bangladesh's own by now rather widely perceived needs, shared by the common citizenry that acknowledge that a 'rising' India offers many economic opportunities. Nonetheless there was some criticism of the lack of transparency in the preparatory process. The delay now provides a window of opportunity for this to be corrected.

Various analysis and estimations indicate that transit would be beneficial for both stakeholders provided the users' fees and charges are settled on in line with international best practices.¹⁹ However, the Bangladesh government was apparently, according to some analysts, not adequately prepared at least in conveying how it was dealing with the issue and the rapidly evolving situation.²⁰ Experts believe that the emphasis by Dhaka on personal relationships and linkages tended to minimise the role of institutions, thereby eroding both their capacities and effectiveness.²¹

There is no doubt that the lion's share of the blame for the failure to sign agreements that were key rested on India's shoulders, while not necessarily on that of its Prime Minister, though, Mamata notwithstanding, it is indeed with Singh where the buck stops. It was a remarkable event between two friendly powers that the envoy of one was summoned to the Foreign Ministry of another to explain itself just three hours before its Prime Minister was about to land to a red-carpet welcome in the latter country with all the pomp and panoply

¹⁸ See, Sreeradha Dutta, *Caretaking Democracy: Political Process in Bangladesh 2006-2008* (New Delhi, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2009). Dutta writes: 'Free from partisan politics, the Caretaker Government was able to initiate and respond positively towards India. It was free from any anti-Indian pressures that undermine the ability of a government in Bangladesh to respond positively to various Indian overtures', p.108. She adds that 'under the Caretaker Government, Indo-Bangladesh relations improved considerably', p.86, while also referring to the assertion of Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, one of the authors who was then Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh that his country would never 'agree to any arrangement that would be contrary to our sovereign national interest', p.106.

¹⁹ 'The Big Bargain?', *The Star Magazine*, Volume 10, Issue 19, 20 May 2011.

²⁰ See, Mishandling of State Affairs Causes Pain for the Nation, *Weekly Holiday* (9 September 2011).

²¹ For an interesting study in this regard, 'Lessons from Dhaka Summit', *Daily Star* (8 September 2011), 'Ball is Now in India's Court', *Daily Star* (8 September 2011).

that protocol could muster.²² The warmth of Singh's reception was undeniable with his counterpart receiving him in the airport, a ritual once common but now relegated to being a thing of the past in the post-modern functional age.

Trade, Connectivity and Wider Cooperation between North-East India and Bangladesh

Despite the media, and also governmental furore (on both sides) created by Mamata's absence, Singh's entourage contained four Chief Ministers from North-east India (NEI). They were Manik Sarkar of Tripura, Tarun Gogoi of Assam, Mukul Sangma of Meghalaya and Pu Lalthanhawla of Mizoram. NEI is geographically, historically, linguistically and culturally more intimate with Bangladesh than mainland India.²³ For large swathes of Bangladesh, including the districts of the Sylhet and parts of Chittagong Divisions of Bangladesh, these Indian States are key.

While the caretaker government of Bangladesh (2007-09) had taken an initiative to normalise Indo-Bangla relations in 2007, as has been pointed out earlier, it was the Sheikh Awami League-led government of Hasina, installed in office in January 2009, that helped turn them around even further by satisfying New Delhi's assertions that the North-eastern insurgents should not find safe haven in Bangladesh. This had also fulfilled the first precondition for initiating long-term economic and infrastructure projects in NEI. New Delhi's apparent consensus with Dhaka on the *de facto* 'Teesta for Transit' trade-off aimed at greater economic development in its backward region. A transit deal with Bangladesh would naturally benefit India's landlocked region enormously. As a result, while the trip has been a setback for both India and Bangladesh, for NEI it is more so. NEI's connectivity with Mainland India, in particular, and the region, in general, largely depends on Bangladesh.

One key issue that needs further investigation is that of India's uncoordinated and unbalanced state-centre relations. While the Teesta is certainly a case to test the hypothesis, the Chief Ministers from the North-east region made it clear at a business gathering on the second day of the visit that if Bangladesh can win the heart of Indian central government through

²² 'Dhaka Seeks Explanation for Postponing Teesta Deal', *Daily Star* (6 September 2011).

²³ Bangladesh is geographically surrounded mostly by West Bengal and North-eastern states of India except for a small border with Myanmar to the far South-east and the Bay of Bengal to the South. Bangladesh shares a long border with West Bengal (2,216.7 km), Assam (263 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km) and Mizoram (318 km). North-east India's outlays to the sea are through Chittagong port in Bangladesh and via Bangladesh's rivers to Calcutta port. The region ships tea and other exportable by inland water transports through the rivers of Bangladesh for overseas shipment from Calcutta. However, with the partition of India, the region was cut off from its hinterland, formerly East Bengal. See Sobhan, Rehman. 'Rediscovering the Southern Silk Route: Integrating Asia's Transport Infrastructure' The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2000, and Islam, M. Shahidul, 'Bangladesh-China-Northeast India: Opportunities and Anxieties', ISAS Insights No. 36, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, September 2008).

negotiations, there could be many opportunities to be seized upon.²⁴ This is not unique in the case of India's relations with its eastern states and Bangladesh. Similar differences persist between Tamil Nadu vis-à-vis Delhi when comes to India's relations with Sri Lanka.

The trade-off between electric power and connectivity is a case that offers some immediate benefits for NEI and Bangladesh. According to the Chief Minister of Tripura, he is ready to export electricity to Bangladesh if New Delhi agrees to the plan. The region, being blessed with huge hydroelectric resources, is in a position to sell electricity to Bangladesh that has huge shortage of power.²⁵

Similarly, Bangladesh has much stake in its relationship with NEI given her export potential to the 'seven sister' states in the North-east. While trade between India and Bangladesh exceeded the US\$5 billion mark in 2010-11, there is much greater room to further increase the numbers, particularly if Bangladeshi products are allowed to access to NEI.

The rise of trade is not due to any significant breakthrough between the two neighbours (in the form of bilateral FTA (Free Trade Arrangement), for instance, but largely due to increasing economic growth both in India and Bangladesh. Indeed, to feed her steady economic growth, Bangladesh's trade (particularly imports) with many Asian countries has increased markedly in recent years.

This is also reflected in the fact that China replaced India as Bangladesh's largest trading partner with the two-way trade exceeding US\$7 billion in 2010-11. Similarly, China's investment in Bangladesh is also on the rise in line with the latter's increasingly better economic potentials.²⁶ In today's global economic matrix, all nations are in search of plural trading and investment partners, heeding the Nobel Laureate James Tobin's warning not to put 'all eggs into one basket'.²⁷

Given the geographical proximity, many Bangladeshi products can be exported to the NEI market more cost-effectively benefiting the latter's consumers. For instance, most wealthier Non-Resident Bangladeshis, residing mostly in the United Kingdom, belong to the Sylhet Division bordering NEI, and would be eager to invest in manufacturing industries in their hometown provided there was a market for them in the 'Seven Sisters'. But this has not materialised due to India's non-tariff barriers and other similar hurdles. It is not only the businesses in Bangladesh that demand for greater access to the NEI market. The region itself

²⁴ Tripura Offers Power for Connectivity, *Daily Star* (8 September 2011).

²⁵ Tripura Offers Power for Connectivity, *Daily Star* (8 September 2011). Also see Islam M. Shahidul 'Energy Cooperation between India and Bangladesh: Economics and Geo-politics', in *The Geopolitics of Energy in South Asia*, edited by Marie-Carine Lall, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.

²⁶ For these details see, India- Bangladesh: Go East, Old Man, *Economist* (30 August, 2011).

²⁷ Willem H. Buiter, 'James Tobin An appreciation of his contribution to economics' available at <http://www.nber.org/~wbuiter/tobin.pdf> . Accessed on 10 September 2011.

is seeking New Delhi's help in this regard, ironically including Bangladesh government's intercession with New Delhi in this regard. While India offered some tariff concessions during Singh's Dhaka visit, it was the Chief Minister of Tripura who raised his voice calling on New Delhi to do more concerning the removal of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers to facilitate the market access of Bangladeshi products in India.²⁸

There is a much room for two-way investments. The facilities that Bangladesh has lately offered to various Indian companies should be reciprocated. NEI is a virgin area into which large quantum of Bangladeshi investment can pour, if the appropriate incentives are offered. Progress in Bangladesh is creating greater capacity to invest abroad, and new Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, who by definition would be cautious and conservative, would prefer to invest closer to home than in faraway markets.

The enthusiasm and environment that have been created in NEI following the dramatic fall in insurgency, with assistance from Bangladesh, can only be sustained if both regions allow natural trade to develop, exploiting each other's complementarities. Increasing people to people connectivity, infrastructure development, cultural exchanges and free flow of information (including removing the hurdles to show the Bangladeshi TV channels) can help narrow the various gaps that have been created following the division of 1947 to an otherwise a century-old well-integrated region. Such a development will bring progress and prosperity to, Bangladesh of course, but also India's north-east, doing more perhaps to stem the insurgencies, present and future, than through those morally, emotionally and financially costly military operations. Due to the exigencies of modern-day international politics, what should have been natural trading and other links between Bangladesh and India's north-east, have become dependent upon, and subject to, the formalities, and to a certain extent the vagaries, of Dhaka-New Delhi relations. Just like the waters of the rivers in question, these relationships must also be allowed to flow naturally, in an unimpeded fashion, so that the accruing benefits can be shared by all. If the visit has contributed at all to this idea taking hold, it has scored a significantly positive point.

Some Extrapolations

It has been said, a saying usually connected with romance in literature but very apt in this political setting: 'Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: It might have

²⁸ The Chief Minister of Tripura remarked during the Dhaka trip that 'waiving of tariff on the export of 46 garment items is not everything. Both the governments should sit soon to simplify the process so that the 46 garment products could be exported smoothly.' See Tripura Offers Power for Connectivity, *The Daily Star* (8 September 2011).

been!²⁹ This visit will be remembered for not what it actually achieved, but what it might have.

Both sides had hyped up its importance, but with a modicum of reason. Hasina had managed to seize the spirit of Bangladesh which was at equilibrium when an understanding with India would have gone down well with her people now focused more on external linkages for prosperity than on instinctive Indo-phobia.³⁰

On the eve of the visit, a leading Indian newspaper spoke of it crafting ‘a new paradigm in a complicated bilateral relationship’.³¹ Sanjaya Baru, a well-known Indian analyst, noted that the trip could be the ‘most important foreign policy initiative’ of Singh this year. An influential Bangladeshi media editor, Mahfuz Anam, rhetorically asked: ‘Will the Indian Prime Minister make or repeat history, implying the hope that he would make it.’³² Alas what happened was a repeat of history, yet another failure to grasp the opportunities that an unique moment, one that in Nehruvian language ‘comes but rarely’ in nations’ lives, with hope giving way, if not to despair, most certainly to a sense of resignation.

The historian E.H. Carr has elegantly argued that, the building of any idealistic superstructure among nations, such as one of peace, must await the digging of appropriate foundations.³³ This is sound logic. But the wait cannot be unending. The time to forge ahead is almost always never absolutely ripe. In this case, Hasina was able to ready Bangladesh as much as one possibly could, for with regard to India, there will always be the wary recalcitrants.

Singh, however, had sufficient time to dig his preparatory foundations, but was unable to do so. Was it because he was too weak, heading a government riddled with allegations of corruption and incompetence, shaken by the power of the people reflected in the Anna Hazare phenomenon, helpless in the face of the challenges of dissatisfied allies like Mamata? Is the central government in India so vulnerable to the vagaries of such politics? If that be so, there are deeper and more ominous concerns, about India, possessing the potentials to respond as one powerful unit, not just to the more placable Bangladesh, but to the more adversarial Pakistan or China.

India’s greatest foreign policy challenge must be to design a single and coherent one that it is capable of executing as a central subject. If foreign entities begin to find it incumbent upon

²⁹ The quote is from the poem ‘Maud Muller’, written in 1856, by the American Poet John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892).

³⁰ For a general analysis of the shifting mood, see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘Come September, Manmohan Comes to Dhaka’, ISAS Brief No. 214, 15 August 2011.

³¹ Editorial, *Hindu* (6 September 2011).

³² Commentary, *Daily Star* (6 September 2011).

³³ This is made, with its tinge of Marxist thinking, in his classic work *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan) Reprinted 2001.

them to deal with the units of the Indian federation separately, ‘India, the emerging power’, as Cohen described it, loses much of its meaning.³⁴ What one witnessed in Dhaka in the first week of September, was not an India that had, in (US President) Barack Obama’s words ‘already risen’, but one struggling to find its own two feet.

The Way Forward

To his credit though it must be said where an individual role was called for, Singh acquitted himself with superb aplomb. In fact his erudite speech at the Dhaka University Senate House played a yeoman’s role in calming the negative passions on other counts.

Some low-hanging fruits were indeed plucked. And the resolution of the enclaves issue that had been hanging fire for decades, was no mean achievement. The biggest disappointment was, of course, the failure to sign the Teesta waters deal. Once that had happened, Hasina was in no position to sign on the transit, and that was understood on the Indian side. A weakened Hasina would not have been of any benefit to India, and forcing a transit agreement would be a Pyrrhic victory that India could ill afford. A lesson learnt from this episode, a simple but profound one, that one must not attempt to undertake major initiatives in inter-State relations, even between the best of friends, without the most thorough preparations.

There is a political tradition in South Asia, as in many other parts of the world that major agreements are only signed at summit levels during bilateral visits. Unfortunately such occasions are rare in South Asia. Indo-Bangladesh Prime Ministers do not visit each other with relentless regularity.

The previous trip to Bangladesh by an Indian Prime Minister was a dozen years ago. Compare this with the frequency of interactions in each other’s capitals, say of the leaders of Britain and France. Also for such favourable constellation of forces to exist, as they now do on both sides, could take years. Therefore, it would be wise and even fruitful to keep up the momentum, and work towards such understandings at the next opportune occasion which could be a visit to India by Hasina, who has been formally invited to do so.

To maintain and enhance the state of preparedness, the two governments could set up a joint task force, co-headed by senior Cabinet Ministers from both sides to monitor not just pacts agreed upon, but also make progress on those still pending. The teams should meet on regular intervals, for in this case, forward movement should not only happen, but also be seen to happen, just as in the case of justice, which must not only be done, but also seen to be done.

³⁴ Stephen Philip Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

It will be more acceptable, for both sides, for the result of the Singh visit to be assessed like a glass half full, than like a full glass, half of whose contents were accidentally spilled in course of a trip that was much ado about little.

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