

# **Narendra Modi's Visit to Bangladesh: Bilateral Agreements and Electoral Calculations**

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## **Summary**

*On 26 March 2021, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Dhaka for the commemoration of three events: Mujib Borsho (the birth centenary of the father of the Bangladesh nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman), 50 years of the India-Bangladesh diplomatic ties and 50 years of Bangladesh's war of liberation.<sup>1</sup> During his two-day trip, Modi visited several places of political significance. However, his visit to the temple of the founder of the Matua sect in Orakandi sparked a row between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and opposition political parties back home, as it was seen as a step to influence the votes of the Matua community in the high decibel assembly elections in the Indian state of West Bengal, where his party, the BJP has high stakes.*

*This paper looks at the key areas of agreement between India and Bangladesh during Modi's visit. It then analyses Modi's public statement about being imprisoned during 'Recognise Bangladesh Satyagraha (Struggle for Truth) in 1971 and examines the electoral prospects of the Orakandi visit. Finally, it discusses the immediate reason for the protests during his visit to Bangladesh.*

## **India-Bangladesh Cooperation and Partnership**

In recent times, trade in goods between India and Bangladesh has declined. For example, bilateral trade in goods fell by 7.82 per cent to US\$ 9.45 billion (S\$12.71 billion) in the 2019-2020 financial year as compared to US\$10.25 billion (S\$13.79 billion) in 2018-19.<sup>2</sup> However, politically, the two governments have managed to keep their relationship on an even keel despite tensions brewing over the process of preparing the publication of the final list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the Indian state of Assam and the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India. Both the NRC and CAA invariably target Bangladesh and its citizens.

To improve bilateral relations, during Modi's visit to Bangladesh, the two countries agreed on various issues and announced and inaugurated<sup>3</sup> some important projects. As Modi was in

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<sup>1</sup> Adrija Roychowdhury, 'PM Modi in Bangladesh: What is the significance of the places on his itinerary?', *The Indian Express*, 26 March 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/pm-narendra-modi-bangladesh-itinerary-explained-7235564/>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Nayanima Basu, 'Dhaka wants New Delhi to forego "stringent checks" on garments as both work on trade pact', *The Print*, 27 March 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/dhaka-wants-new-delhi-to-forego-stringent-checks-on-garments-as-both-work-on-trade-pact/490022/>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh', 27 March 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33746/>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

Dhaka to commemorate the birth centenary of Mujibur Rahman and mark 50 years of the country's liberation, he articulated the founder's vision in a special op-ed written for Bangladesh's national daily, *The Daily Star*. About Mujib, Modi wrote:

"...despite all the persecutions he suffered, Bangabandhu [as Mujibur Rahman is popularly known] retained a generosity of spirit that is a mark of true greatness... It was this rare combination of deep-seated belief in his own ideals, and yet the openness of mind to accept a different opinion, that made Bangabandhu one of the greatest statesmen of our times... India and Bangladesh were able to finally overcome the complications of history through the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement...But had Bangabandhu been at the helm longer, this achievement may have come much earlier. Had that happened, our cooperation would have reached a different orbit altogether, enabling development, economic growth and shared security."<sup>4</sup>

Along with Mujibur Rahman's daughter, Bangladesh's current prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, Modi inaugurated Bangabandhu-Bapu<sup>5</sup> Digital Exhibition in Dhaka. To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the India-Bangladesh friendship, commemorative postage stamps were released by the two countries, and it was further decided that 6 December should be commemorated as *Maitri Diwas* (Friendship Day), the day when India recognised Bangladesh in 1971. India announced the establishment of the Bangabandhu Chair at the University of Delhi. To popularise Mujib and his works, popular Indian film director, Shyam Benegal is making a biopic film on Mujibur Rahman which is produced by the two governments. The Indian government also agreed to consider Bangladesh's proposal to name the road that runs from Mujib Nagar to Nadia on the Bangladesh-India border as 'Shadhinota Shorok'<sup>6</sup> for its historical significance.<sup>7</sup> The foundation stone was laid for a memorial in honour of the martyrs of the Indian armed forces who sacrificed their lives during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 at Ashuganj, Brahmanbaria.<sup>8</sup>

Further, on the topic of cooperation and connectivity in his op-ed mentioned above, Modi wrote:

"Our [India-Bangladesh] people-to-people exchanges remain robust as ever. We have also made good progress in the area of connectivity. Cargo from Bangladesh can move to Nepal and Bhutan through India. We are in the process of implementing a similar arrangement for Indian cargo to reach India's North Eastern States through Bangladesh. We are making concerted efforts to operationalise our inland waterways, which will allow Bangladesh barges to reach all the way to Varanasi and Sahibganj in India. Last year [in

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<sup>4</sup> Narendra Modi, 'Imagining a different South Asia with Bangabandhu', *The Daily Star*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/imagining-different-south-asia-bangabandhu-2066929>. Accessed on 31 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 'Bapu' refers to the term of endearment for Mahatma Gandhi.

<sup>6</sup> A 25 kilometre-long road between Mujibnagar in Bangladesh and Nadia in India was used by East Pakistan's Bengali leaders to enter India after the Pakistani army started its atrocities.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh', op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

2020], we also commenced cargo and parcel services via railways, a move which has directly benefited the consumers and producers in both countries.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the major areas of cooperation between India and Bangladesh is over their 54 transboundary rivers. In 1996, the two countries signed a treaty to share waters from the river Ganges. Subsequently, they agreed on many other river water-related agreements. However, the conclusion of the interim agreement on River Teesta in 2011 has caused ripples in their bilateral relations. Under the draft interim agreement, India would get 42.5 per cent and Bangladesh 37.5 per cent of the total waters of River Teesta during the lean season. This agreement had been shelved by the chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. In line with past trends, during her meeting with Modi, Hasina reiterated the need to conclude the interim agreement on Teesta waters. The Indian side requested Bangladesh for the early finalisation of the pending draft related to the sharing of waters of the River Feni, which was also agreed upon in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

Before Modi’s visit to Dhaka, the Water Resources Secretaries from the two countries met on 16 March 2021 in New Delhi. In that meeting, the two sides agreed “to expand cooperation across the entire gamut of water resources issues, including a framework for sharing of river waters, mitigation of pollution, riverbank protection, flood management, basin management, etc.”<sup>11</sup> A joint technical group has been set up to look at these matters. To enhance bilateral trade, both Modi and Hasina underscored the need to remove non-tariff barriers. Bangladesh has invited Indian investment in jute mills under a public-private partnership.<sup>12</sup> The two countries agreed to strengthen sub-regional cooperation, including with Nepal and Bhutan. India requested for the early finalisation of the modalities to implement the Katihar-Parbotipur-Bornagar cross border electricity interconnection.<sup>13</sup> The foundation stone was laid for the Rooppur Power Evacuation Project of five packages (Amin Bazar-Kaliakoir, Rooppur-Dhaka, Rooppur-Gopalganj, Rooppur-Dhamrai and Rooppur-Bogra).<sup>14</sup>

Bangladesh reiterated its eagerness to be a partner in the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project. The two leaders also agreed to an early operationalisation of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement.<sup>15</sup> Former Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka, Deb Mukharji, observes that Bangladesh’s enthusiasm about such connectivity projects is new as until not too long ago, it had been wary of such connectivity. Dhaka has sought a detailed proposal from India on connectivity between Guwahati and Chittagong, and also of transit between Mahendraganj in Meghalaya to Hili in West

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<sup>9</sup> Narendra Modi, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, ‘Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh’, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, ‘India-Bangladesh Water Resources Secretary Level Meeting: Both Sides Agree to Expand Cooperation Across Entire Gamut of Water Resources Issues’, 17 March 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1705370>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India ‘Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh’, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Bengal.<sup>16</sup> Hasina's offer of services of the airports in Chittagong, Sylhet and Saidpur in northern Bangladesh to neighbouring areas in India has "positive consequences" for the region<sup>17</sup> as it will boost trade, tourism and people movement.

To facilitate trade and people's movement, both sides proposed new bilateral connectivity routes. Three border *haats* (small markets) were inaugurated: Nalikata (India)-Saydabad (Bangladesh); Ryngku (India)-Bagan Bari (Bangladesh); and Bholagunj (India)-Bholagunj (Bangladesh).<sup>18</sup> Also, Mitali Express' passenger train service on the Dhaka-New Jalpaiguri-Dhaka route through Chilahati-Haldibari rail link was inaugurated.<sup>19</sup>

One of the politically tense issues between India and Bangladesh is the repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar. In the past, differences between the two countries over the Rohingya issue have been made public.<sup>20</sup> During his visit, Modi appreciated the generosity of Bangladesh in sheltering and providing humanitarian assistance to the 1.1 million forcibly displaced persons from the Rakhine State of Myanmar. To this end, Hasina requested India, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, to play a strong role in the early repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas to Myanmar.<sup>21</sup>

## Public Address and Statement

During his address at a function to celebrate the country's National Day at National Parade Square, Modi boasted about his role in the liberation of Bangladesh from West Pakistan. He said, "Joining the freedom struggle for the independence of Bangladesh was one of the first times that I took part in any movement. I must have been 20-22 years old when I and many of my colleagues took part in the Satyagraha for the freedom of the people of Bangladesh. In support of Bangladesh's independence, I was also arrested and jailed."<sup>22</sup>

Leaders from the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sparred over Modi's claim. Two Congressmen, Shashi Tharoor and Jairam Ramesh, questioned the veracity of this statement.<sup>23</sup> On this issue, well-known historian Srinath Raghavan, author of *1971: A Global*

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<sup>16</sup> Deb Mukharji, 'Indo-Bangladesh ties have deepened. But some issues remain', *The Indian Express*, 27 March 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-bangladesh-visit-meets-sheikh-hasina-foreign-policy-7249647/>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh', op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Amit Ranjan, 'The Rohingya Crisis – A Challenge for India and Bangladesh.' ISAS Working Paper No. 271, 25 September 2021. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/271-the-rohingya-crisis-oco-a-challenge-for-india-and-bangladesh/>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh', op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'English translation of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's address at Bangladesh National Day Program', 29 March 2021. <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33738/English+translation+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modis+address+at+Bangladesh+National+Day+Program>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>23</sup> 'Congress, BJP Spar Over PM Modi's "I Did Satyagraha" Remark In Bangladesh', *NDTV*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/congress-bjp-spar-over-pm-narendra-modis-i-did-satyagraha-remark-in-bangladesh-2399979>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

*History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, tweeted, “The claim that ANYONE did Satyagraha for the freedom of Bangladesh and were arrested is too ridiculous to require refutation.”<sup>24</sup>

In the book *Sangharshmaa Gujarat*, written by Modi and published in 1978, he makes no mention of his participation in *Satyagraha* for the recognition of Bangladesh by India and its consequent repercussion of going to jail.<sup>25</sup> His imprisonment in Delhi’s Tihar Jail due to his participation in Bangladesh *Satyagraha* is mentioned but only on the back cover of that book.<sup>26</sup> The e-version of the book that was re-published in September 2020 does not have the same back cover or blurb as shared by his supporters on Tweeter.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Modi’s claim found support from the members of the BJP and his supporters who tweeted the citation of the “Liberation War Honour” award conferred to former prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in 2015. As Vajpayee was unwell, Modi received the award on his behalf during a visit to Dhaka in 2015. The citation reads: “To press the demand for [the] Indian Government’s expedited support to Bangladesh’s Liberation War, [Bharatiya] Jana Sangh [People’s Organisation]<sup>28</sup> held a Gana [People’s] Satyagraha during 1-11 August and their volunteers organised a huge rally in front of the Indian Parliament House on 12 August 1971. Shri Vajpayee took a firm stand at national and international levels for the cause of Bangladesh and its striving people.”<sup>29</sup>

Vikash Anand, an associate editor of the BJP’s magazine, *Kamal Sandesh*, who is also working on a monograph of the history of the Bihar branch of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, informed me that Vajpayee led the ‘recognise Bangladesh Satyagraha’ from 1 to 11 August 1971 in which, quoting from the ‘About Us’ mouthpiece of the Sangh, he said about 28,000 members and sympathisers were arrested across India. On the last day of the Satyagraha, Vajpayee addressed a big rally in Delhi that notably ended with a protest against the India-USSR friendship treaty that was signed on 9 August 1971.<sup>30</sup> According to a news report in *The Times of India* on 12 August 1971, whose clipping was re-published by the same newspaper on 27 March 2021, around 10,000 Jana Sangh activists were arrested for participating in that rally in Delhi.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Srinath Raghavan’s tweet 26 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/srinathraghava3/status/1375441147607179265>.

<sup>25</sup> Shudhabarata Sengupta, ‘A Sataygrah and Asatyagraha: Narendra Modi and the Liberation of Bangladesh’, *The Wire*, 27 March 2021, <https://thewire.in/history/a-sataygrah-and-asatyagraha-narendra-modi-and-the-liberation-of-bangladesh>. Accessed on 27 March 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Anmol Alphonso, ‘Did PM Modi Take Part In Satyagraha For Bangladesh? What We Know So Far’, *Boomlive*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-check/narendra-modi-bangladesh-bjp-jana-sangh-1971-bangladesh-freedom-jana-sangh-satyagraha-12525>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Jana Sangha was formed by Shyama Prasad Mukherji in 1951. In 1977, the Jana Sangh merged with the Janata Party. In 1980, the Jana Sangha faction broke out from the Janata Party over the issue of dual membership and formed the Bharatiya Janata Party.

<sup>29</sup> Amit Malviya’s tweet on 26 March 2021. <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1375467144515833857/photo/1>

<sup>30</sup> Shudhabarata Sengupta, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Modi’s satyagraha talk in Dhaka sparks online war’, *The Times of India*, 27 March 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/modis-satyagraha-talk-in-dhaka-sparks-online-war/articleshow/81717548.cms>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

There is no concrete historical document available yet which can validate Modi's claim, though 550 Satyagrahis were arrested during the 'recognise Bangladesh Satyagraha' in Gujarat.<sup>32</sup>

## Electoral Significance of the Orakandi Visit

When in Dhaka, Modi paid rich tribute to the martyrs of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 at Dhaka's National Martyrs Memorial at Savar. He then visited the mausoleum of Mujibur Rahman in Tungipara. He also performed *pooja* (prayers) at the Jeshoreshwari Kali Shaktipeeth in Satkhira, which is considered one of the 51 *shaktipeeths* (significant shrines) in the Puranic tradition.<sup>33</sup> In Dhaka, Modi interacted with 14 leaders from the opposition political parties of Bangladesh and discussed diverse issues between India and Bangladesh.<sup>34</sup> He also held a meeting with community leaders from the minority religious groups there.<sup>35</sup>

However, the visit that created a political row in India was that to Hari Mandir in Orakandi. There, Modi sought blessings, interacted with the descendants of Hari Chand Thakur and addressed the representatives of the Matua community. He announced plans to upgrade the middle school for girls at Orakandi and set up a primary school. He also said that efforts would be made to ease the travel of a large number of people from India to Orakandi to participate in *Baruni Snan* (holy mass bath) on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Thakur,<sup>36</sup> who founded the Matua sect in Orakandi in about 1860 CE. Matuas regard Thakur as God and look at him as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu or Krishna.<sup>37</sup>

Historically, in colonial Bengal, a tiny prosperous population among the Namasudras, who were considered as untouchables by the higher caste Hindus, felt the pinch of social discrimination very badly. To establish themselves, the prosperous Namasudras started defying the social authority of the upper caste Hindus that gradually led to the beginning of protests in 1872.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, the protests took the form of an organised movement for social upliftment. The growth of the Vaishnav sect, exclusively among the Namasudras, brought greater cohesion and solidarity within the community. To make the movement

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<sup>32</sup> 'Satyagraha Statistics: Province-wise Table of Satyagrahis' *About Us*, 25 August 1971. Clippings shared with the author by Vikash Anand.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Prime Minister performs Pooja at Jeshoreshwari Kali Shaktipeeth', 27 March 2021, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33741/Prime+Minister+performs+Pooja+at+Jeshoreshwari+Kali+Shaktipeeth>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Press Release on Prime Minister's meeting with Opposition Leaders in Bangladesh', 26 March 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33735/Press+Release+on+Prime+Ministers+meeting+with+Opposition+Leaders+in+Bangladesh>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 'Press Release on Prime Minister's meeting with Community Leaders in Bangladesh', 26 March 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33733/Press+Release+on+Prime+Ministers+meeting+with+Community+Leaders+in+Bangladesh>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Prime Minister visits Hari Mandir and attends Community Reception at Orakandi', 27 March 2021, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33744/Prime+Minister+visits+Hari+Mandir+and+attends+Community+Reception+at+Orakandi>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Adrija Roychowdhury, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *The Namasudra Movement* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2005), p. 3.

stronger, the upper strata of the Namasudras articulated the spirit of protest against the socially privileged Hindu upper caste in the minds of their poor and illiterate kinsmen.<sup>39</sup>

On the question of dividing Bengal at the time of India's Partition, a section of Dalits, under the leadership of Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal, joined Dr B R Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Caste Federation and opposed it, while another large segment of the Dalits sided with P R Thakur, also a Namasudra, who supported the Hindu Mahasabha-Congress' campaign to divide Bengal into two parts, with West Bengal serving as a Hindu majority state within India.<sup>40</sup> Mandal even supported the cause for Pakistan, and after the Partition of India, became the first law minister of the newly-born country. However, in 1950, Mandal resigned from his position and returned to India citing bad treatment of the Hindus in Liaquat Ali Khan's Pakistan.

Following the division of Bengal, Thakur, disillusioned with the Congress, reinvigorated the Matua movement. By the 1990s, the Namasudras regrouped themselves under this organisation's banner to show their political effectiveness.<sup>41</sup> In 2011, Mamata became a member of the Matua Mahasangha.<sup>42</sup>

Demographically, the Matuas are spread out over the North (24 Parganas [group of villages]), South (24 Parganas), Nadia and the smaller parts of Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Cooch Behar and Bardhaman<sup>43</sup> districts of West Bengal. It is estimated that the Matuas could influence the electoral results for at least 30 assembly seats in West Bengal.<sup>44</sup> In the 2019 parliamentary elections, many Matuas voted for the BJP after they were promised that their citizenship-related woes would be over with the CAA coming into effect.<sup>45</sup> However, the Matuas are no longer a united house. Even the Thakur family, which leads the Matua movement, is politically divided.<sup>46</sup> For instance, Shantanu Thakur, grandson of *Boro Maa* (Elder Mother) Binapani Devi Thakur, contested the 2019 parliamentary elections on a BJP ticket and defeated his aunt and then sitting Trinamool Congress (TMC) Member of Parliament from Bongaon, Mamata Bala Thakur. There is also the emergence of Ambedkarites in the community who believe that the NRC and CAA are unlikely to ease their problems.<sup>47</sup>

Politically, Modi's visit to Orakandi drew a strong reaction from TMC, the BJP's chief political competitor in the on-going assembly elections in West Bengal. Members of the TMC wrote to the Election Commission (EC) of India about Modi's violation of the electoral code of conduct. The TMC has also expressed displeasure and asked why, Shantanu Thakur, was

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'The Return of Caste to Bengal', *The Indian Express*, 1 April 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/west-bengal-assembly-elections-2021-caste-politics-bjp-tmc-7253385/>. Accessed on 1 April 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Adrija Roychowdhury, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'The Return of Caste to Bengal', op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

taken on the visit.<sup>48</sup> In its letter to the EC, the TMC has demanded “deterrent punitive” action against Modi for violating the code of conduct.<sup>49</sup>

## Protests against Modi’s Visit to Bangladesh

The NRC remains one of the more contentious issues between India and Bangladesh. In 2019, when Hasina visited India, Modi assured her that the NRC is an internal matter of the country. In a reply to the media on a question concerning the NRC, Hasina said, “I have spoken with PM Modi and I am satisfied.”<sup>50</sup> Since then, Bangladesh has maintained this position on the NRC. Even before Modi’s current visit to Bangladesh, the foreign policy advisor to Bangladesh, Gowhar Rizvi, in an interview with Shubhajit Roy of *The Indian Express*, said, “[The] (NRC) [is an] internal exercise, why should we [Bangladesh] raise it?”<sup>51</sup>

However, the situation on the ground is different. After the Indian Parliament passed the CAA<sup>52</sup> in December 2019, there were protests in Bangladesh. Around 12 organisations, including Sadharon Chhatro Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, Bangladesh Student Union, Ganasamhati Andolan, Bangladesh Student Federation, Rashtrochinta and MuktiForum, participate in a protest rally along with individual activists, professors, journalists and writers at Shahbagh in Dhaka.<sup>53</sup>

The CAA says, “Provided that for the person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community in Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, the aggregate period of residence or service of [the] Government in India as required under this clause shall be read as ‘not less than five years’ in place of ‘not less than eleven years’”<sup>54</sup> Putting Bangladesh in the category where religious minorities are being persecuted was objected by the Hasina government.

As an after-effect of the CAA, Bangladesh cancelled the visits of its Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momin scheduled from 12 to 14 December 2019 and Home Minister Asaduzzaman

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<sup>48</sup> “Unethical act”: PM Modi violated poll code during Bangladesh, TMC tells EC’, *The Times of India*, 30 March 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/unethical-act-pm-modi-violated-poll-code-during-bangladesh-visit-tmc-tells-ec/articleshow/81759435.cms>. Accessed on 1 April 2021.

<sup>49</sup> ANI tweet on 30 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/ANI/status/1376822242730905609/photo/2>.

<sup>50</sup> Indrani Bagchi, ‘Modi assured NRC process won’t affect Bangladesh’, *The Times of India*, 4 October 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/modi-assured-nrc-process-wont-affect-bangladesh-hasina/articleshow/71432172.cms>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Shubhajit Roy, ‘Gowhar Rizvi: “(NRC) internal exercise, why should we raise it?”’, *The Indian Express*, 26 March 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bangladesh-foreign-affairs-advisor-gowhar-rizvi-nrc-internal-exercise-why-should-we-raise-it-7245509/>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Unlike for the Indian government, Indian protestors against the NRC and CAA do not view them as separate from each other but rather hyphenated.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Bangladeshi forum rallies in protest of Indian NRC-CAA’, 20 December 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/modi-assured-nrc-process-wont-affect-bangladesh-hasina/articleshow/71432172.cms>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department), Government of India, ‘The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019’, 12 December 2019 <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

Khan on 13 December 2019.<sup>55</sup> The reasons behind these cancellations were not given but it was ostensibly a sign of the displeasure over repeated reference by the Indian leadership about minority persecution in Bangladesh.<sup>56</sup> Momin responded to Indian Home Minister Amit Shah's reference to 'atrocities' against Hindu women in Bangladesh between 2000 and 2003, while introducing the CAA Bill in the Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha), and repeated some of those words in the Upper House.<sup>57</sup> Refuting Shah's claims, Momin said, "There are very few countries where communal harmony is as good as in Bangladesh. If he [Amit Shah] stayed in Bangladesh for a few months, he would see exemplary communal harmony in our country."<sup>58</sup> He added that, "We believe that religion is a personal affair, but festivals belong to all."<sup>59</sup>

After a gap of a few months, bilateral relations improved marginally and some of the cancelled visits were rescheduled. In March 2020, when Modi was supposed to visit Dhaka to join the celebrations marking Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary, many civil society organisations opposed it. Various outfits were organised together under the banner of Samamana Islami Dalgulo and Islami Andolan Bangladesh to carry out protests.<sup>60</sup> Hefazat-e-Islam and Jamiat-Ulama-e-Islam demanded that the Bangladesh government cancel Modi's visit for the centenary celebrations of Mujibur Rahman in March 2020.<sup>61</sup> However, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the then-proposed visit.

During Modi's recent visit, protest rallies were held against his arrival to Bangladesh. In those protests at least 10 people were killed and dozens injured. Clashes between the protestors and security forces started after the Friday prayers in Dhaka, Brahammanbaria, near the India-Bangladesh border, and the coastal city of Chattogram. An Islamist group called Hefazat-e-Islam led street processions. Violence continued even the next day in Brahammanbaria<sup>62</sup> where several Hindu temples were also attacked.<sup>63</sup> The Hefazat accused Modi of stoking violence against the Muslims in India. Even the leftist organisations and other groups held protests against Modi's visit to Bangladesh.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, 'Bangladesh cancels Foreign, Home Ministers' India visits', *The Hindu*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bangladesh-cancels-foreign-ministers-delhi-visit/article30284126.ece>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Shubajit Roy, 'Ahead of Modi's Dhaka Trip, Protests Held Against CAA', *The Indian Express*, 7 March 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/pm-modi-dhaka-trip-citizenship-amendment-act-cao-protests-6303034/>. Accessed on 7 March 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Suhasini Haider, 'Coronavirus, CAA put a pause on high-level visits', *The Hindu*, 7 March 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-cao-put-a-pause-on-high-level-visits/article31010485.ece>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Julfikar Ali Malik and Emily Schmall, 'At Least 10 Killed in Protests Against Modi's Visit to Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/asia/bangladesh-protests-modi.html>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Ruma Paul, 'Bangladesh violence spreads after Modi visit, attacks on Hindu temples, train', *Reuters*, 28 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-india-protest/bangladesh-violence-spreads-after-modi-visit-attacks-on-hindu-temples-train-idUSL4N2LQ01T>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

<sup>64</sup> 'Violent protests spread in Bangladesh after Modi visit', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/28/violent-protests-spread-in-bangladesh-after-modi-visit>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

## Conclusion

The two countries agreed on several issues during Modi's visit to Bangladesh. However, some bilateral issues, such as that relating to River Teesta and the fallout of the NRC and the CAA remain inconclusive. The Teesta water issue is difficult to conclude as West Bengal also needs the river's waters to address its shortage. Likewise, on the NRC, the two governments may see its policy rationale as an "internal matter of India" but it has serious ramifications on people living in the borderland regions. Also, in Assam where the NRC process was carried out, those who did not manage to get their names in the final list that was published in August 2019 face an uncertain future.

The visit to Orakandi may or may not bring the expected electoral benefits to the BJP in the assembly elections of West Bengal, but it will certainly make the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh more suspicious in the eyes of the Islamic radicals.

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