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Modi, Hasina and Mamata:
The Triangular Tryst with Trust

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India and Bangladesh are generally seen to be two friendliest South Asian neighbours. The credit is largely owed to the relationship of trust that has developed between the two national leaders, Prime Ministers Narendra Modi of India and Sheikh Hasina Wazed of Bangladesh. However, there are complexities woven into the relationship between the two countries that have deep historical roots in the way Kolkata and Dhaka have related to each other for over a century. All sides, including New Delhi, need to take note of and respond to these issues if the relationship is to be made sustainable. The structure of trust between the apex leaders will need to be expanded to include Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of India's border state of West Bengal, who holds the key to the resolution of the critical Indo-Bangla differences on cross-border water sharing. Importantly, the Indian government would need to play a disproportionately greater role to make efforts to bring the aspirations for a potentially very positive and mutually-rewarding partnership to fruition.

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For a neighbour, one would rather have a friend than an enemy. That stands to reason. An enemy would always be perceived as a potential trouble maker, a persistent source of threat. However, a friend can also be demanding. This can sometimes verge on extreme stress. To keep the amity going, considerable emotional and material resources may need to be expended. Bangladesh and India appear to have learnt this rather incontrovertible axiom well. Happily, both countries have opted for friendship and shunned the slightest thought of an alternative scenario. They have chosen this to be, to cite a famous quote by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, their 'tryst with destiny'. In particular, the two leaders at the national level, Prime Ministers Narendra Modi of India and Sheikh Hasina Wazed of Bangladesh, appear to have enormous trust in each other. This is because each sees the other as being able to provide the wherewithal to advance his or her electoral interests by bringing the benefits of Indo-Bangla partnership to the relevant constituents. This, despite the simple but profound assertion by Hedley Bull, the acknowledged father of the Anglo-Saxon school of international relations, in his epic tome *The Anarchical Society*, that "the deepest fears of the smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours".

The Indian Union has more of devolution woven into its fabric than initially meets the eye. As such, a third actor has become a part of what is now a triangle that can impact seriously upon these cosy ties at the national level in the two countries. That role is taken up by Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of India's West Bengal state. She has the wherewithal to throw a spanner into the wheel of this Modi-Hasina bonhomie. She will need to be adequately integrated into this evolving triangular tryst with trust so that she could work with Modi to transform this trust into mutual benefits for the two countries. That might be necessary to persuade Hasina that her enthusiastic espousal of chumminess with India must be one of 'give and take', rather than of 'give and give', as in the view of some her detractors.

Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been on a winning streak in Indian politics of late. They presently control 17 of India's 29 state governments. This list, however, does not include three of the four Indian states surrounding Bangladesh. Even the fourth, Assam, has men and women in control who entertain considerable reservations about their sovereign neighbour. As such, in the Kautilyan paradigm of circles or '*mandalas*', a fashionably resurgent theory derived from India's classical political tradition, New Delhi lies beyond the rim around Dhaka. Therefore, while New Delhi and Dhaka may share commonalities, the same may not

be true of the immediate Indian environment that encircles Bangladesh. The geographical proximity would dictate their having to share scarce natural resources such as water.

The Teesta River that flows from West Bengal into Bangladesh is a case in point. Mamata argues that there is not enough water there to be shared in a manner that Dhaka wants. Consequently, it remains the apple of discord between India and Bangladesh, with New Delhi being more amenable to Dhaka's wishes and interests than Kolkata, which is reluctant to make sacrifices simply to feed New Delhi's higher geopolitical aspirations of better international understandings. To Mamata, New Delhi's generosity towards Dhaka cannot extend to what she believes to be her state's entitlement. Bangladesh does not consider its share of water to be released as an act of generosity on New Delhi's or anyone's part, but as its right. The chasm between the two thus deepens.

While Mamata's position, perceived as intransigence by the Bangladeshis, became a significant apple of discord between Dhaka and Kolkata, public opinion in Bangladesh, as reflected in the mainstream and social media, was not entirely persuaded that it was fair of the Union government of Modi in New Delhi to lay all the blame at Mamata's door. In the belief and trust that Hasina's contribution to furthering Indo-Bangladesh relations would be recognised and rewarded, the Bangladesh government had offered Delhi much of what the latter wanted in a silver salver. The first was the total denial of the Bangladesh terrain for use by Indian insurgents. This included the return, in custody, of some major Indian separatist leaders to the New Delhi authorities. Hasina's second contribution was the provision of connectivity between different parts of India through Bangladesh's territory, thus helping link India's northeast states to the rest of the country, long seen by previous Dhaka governments as a key negotiating lever. Third, though both countries perhaps stand to gain by it, the Land Boundary Agreement was finally signed. Fourthly, in disputes between the two major regional protagonists, India and Pakistan, Bangladesh clearly sided with India', for example, in the cancellation of the Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in Islamabad last year. As was often the case with the previous Bangladesh governments as well, Hasina has never sought to use Pakistan in any way to counter or balance Indian influence (though Dhaka has had its own problems with Islamabad such as the latter's opposition to war-crimes trial, an electoral commitment by Hasina's Awami League-led government.) Finally, the Hasina government, in line with the value-system she champions, has run secular governance in her country, which won many Indian hearts, despite a burgeoning sense of religiosity in the Muslim-majority

Bangladesh. Given these facts, Bangladesh thought it was in order to expect a heavy dose of reciprocity from Delhi. Indeed such were the expectations when Hasina's long-awaited bilateral visit to India was scheduled.

That took some time in organising, and after some postponements, was finally effected in April 2017, the first by a Bangladesh Prime Minister in seven years. The reason for the delay was ascribed to scheduling issues but the real cause, as is widely believed, was New Delhi's unconcealed desire to enter into a defence pact with Dhaka. The general impression in Dhaka was that India was wary of the increasing economic and military ties between China and Bangladesh. Apart from Beijing's commitment to Dhaka of a massive US$24 billion or so to infrastructural investments, there has also been the delivery of two Chinese submarines, following, though not as a result of, the visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh. Now this placed Hasina between Scylla and Charybdis. She was in no position to rub the wrong way, either China which has large support in the Bangladesh polity whose armed forces are major beneficiaries of procurements of Chinese hardware, or India, a major supporter of her government.

Moreover, for many among the Bangladeshi public, the puzzle was about which perceived enemy was the proposed Indo-Bangla defence pact to be directed against? So through some skilful manoeuvring, she managed to lower the level of agreement to a Memorandum of Understanding, displaying considerable ability to run with the hare and hunt with the hound. There was an offer of a US$500 million credit for defence purchases, not from China of course, which some recipients may have liked, however illogical that aspiration would be, but from India (It would be akin to paying Peter to profit Paul!). Whether this would be an albatross around the recipient's neck, as credit is actually money advanced that must be returned, will depend on the quality of hardware provided, and the Bangladeshis could be quite finicky in this regard since there is credit involved.

Be that as it may, New Delhi-Dhaka relations cannot be isolated from the Dhaka-Kolkata relationship that is rooted in a complex history which is worth at least a brief summation. What is now Bangladesh is a state balanced in an equilibrium of its 'Muslimness' and 'Bengaliness' – a mix of ethnicity and religion – buttressed by a cultural ethos of secularist tolerance based on the syncretic beliefs derived from varied exposures of its people to different belief systems. While a majority of the Bengali people were Muslims during the British Raj in the Indian

Subcontinent, their concentration was largely in East Bengal. During that period, particularly the period of the East India Company (1757-1857), the remnants of the Muslim nobility in Calcutta (today's Kolkata) bemoaned having to play second fiddle to the rising Bengali middle class, 'bhadralok', mostly Hindus, who were seen to be thick with the British rulers. The British, during both the company era and after the Crown assumed control of all Indian possessions, including Bengal, were past masters at 'divide et impera' (divide and rule), a common principle in ancient Rome (as mentioned by the historian Traiano Boccalini, who, however, attributes its origin to Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great). As such, the simmering discontent among the Muslims, which was beginning to slowly evolve into a separatist consciousness, was given a fillip by Lord Curzon, the British India Viceroy, in 1905, when he decided to hive off the eastern part of Bengal and combine it with Assam.

The Partition of Bengal was seen by the Muslims as a great boon. It gave a territorial content to the Muslim sentiments and brought their 'community consciousness' a step closer to 'nationalism'. This partition (Mark 1) was to be first of three (Mark 2 at India-Pakistan independence in 1947 and Mark 3 at the nascence of Bangladesh in 1971) that led to the present three state-sovereign framework of the erstwhile British India. The anti-British stirrings among the Muslims were calmed. The All-India Muslim League was founded in Dhaka in 1906, importantly with its stipulation of loyalty to the British India government. This clearly Muslim-majority new province was seen as a gift to the community by Lord Curzon. Dhaka began to thrive and prosper. However, the 'bhadralok' in Calcutta were severely disappointed, and initiated a violent movement that eventually led to the revocation of the Partition in 1911, to the dismay of Bengali Muslims. For the Calcutta 'bhadralok', the victory was a tad Pyrrhic. What the British gave them in one hand, they took away in another by shifting the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi.

From then on, the motivation that drove the Muslims in Bengal has been the endeavour to translate their demographic majority into political power. Their role as East Pakistanis within the framework of Pakistan was strikingly similar. This also meant that the Muslim interests in Bengal were different from the Muslim interests in other places in British India such as the United Province where the community was in a minority. For instance, the weightage to minorities in elections went against their interest. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League that forged a sense of peace between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the rest of British India would give the Muslims in Bengal

only 40 per cent of the seats in the legislature despite their constituting 52.6 per cent of the population; hence, the adverse reaction of the Bengal Muslim leadership to it. Similarly its support to the 'Khilafat Movement', the protest led by M K Gandhi against the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire, that broadly united Hindus and Muslims across India for a while. Such all-India Muslim causes still generated some support among the Urdu-speaking Muslim Calcuttans like Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, but were, by and large, peripheral to those representing the more indigenous Bengali Muslims, particularly, though not only, the Muslims from East Bengal, including its masses of tenants and peasants.

Their urges were represented by a very skilful politician, A K Fazlul Huq. The Government of India Act 1935 enlarged the electorate substantially and further enfranchised the Muslims and lower-caste Hindus. The policy of 'separate electorates' gave, in a legislature of 250, 117 seats to the Muslims, 78 to the Hindus, and 30 to the 'lower (Scheduled) castes'. The Muslims in Bengal thus received a 'built-in bias' to power. Huq tapped on these opportunities and floated his 'Krishak Praja Party – more reflective of the common Muslim (Atraf) aspirations than those of the upper echelons of Muslim society (Ashraf) as reflected by the Muslim League of Khwaja Nazimuddin in Bengal (a scion of the Dhaka Nawab Family). In a move that would have undoubtedly improved communal relations, Huq, after the 1937 elections, turned first to the Congress to form a coalition. The Congress turned him down, and with it, the opportunity for an understanding with the most secular segment of the Muslim leadership (a lesson that can be an appropriate one for Modi and Mamata), as well as progressive Hindu leaders.

Expectedly, Huq turned to the Muslim League for support for a coalition government and obtained it. This had a significant impact on the future of Bengal politics. First, it led to a closing of ranks among the Muslims of Ashraf and Atraf origins, conservatives and progressives. Second, as a result of its association with various Huq-inspired reforms (some victims of which were the large Hindu *zamindars* (landlords), it gave the party a progressive flavour it never had, enabling it to retain a wide mass support in Bengal in later years. Third, when Huq fell out with the Muslim League eventually, particularly over disputes on policy with its leader M A Jinnah (such as when the latter wanted Huq to resign from the Defence Council), he joined overtly Hindu extremist groups such as that led by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. This cost Huq the support of a significant section of Bengali Muslims. They now reposed their confidence in the League and its Premier Nazimuddin.

However, Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, who succeeded Nazimuddin as Premier in April 1946 and, who was the political mentor of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, later to be *bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal) and Father of the independent Bangladesh nation in 1971 (also the father of Sheikh Hasina), reportedly mulled for a while over the idea of a 'Republic' of United Bengal. He was supported in this project by such Muslim politicians as Abul Hashim and Fazlur Rahman, as also more radicalised non-Muslims like Sarat Bose, brother of Subhas Bose, who was seeking a military liberation of India with German and thereafter Japanese support during the then on-going Second World War. However, opposition came from the *bhadralok* who, perhaps fearing a perennial Muslim political domination, forced the Congress to reject any such all-Bengal unity and instead preferred 'partition' along the lines of the 'Radcliffe Award'. This was a very different stance than that adopted during Partition Mark 1, a fact that was not lost on the Muslims. Once again, East Bengal was separated from the western half, and joined, not to Assam but to Pakistan.

This was followed by two and half decades of struggle by East Bengalis, or East Pakistanis, to translate, once again, demographic superiority as the claim to political power. Failing this, a military struggle for liberation ensued, leading to the Indo-Pakistan War in 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh. It is very likely, therefore, that contemporary relations between India and Bangladesh will have roots in the intricacies of their differences over perceived self-interests, often marked by sparring between the two countries, that have always troubled the relationship between Dhaka and Calcutta, now Mamata's Kolkata. This brief historical analysis also advances the extrapolation that Bangladeshis often see their interests as being separate from not only those of non-sovereign units like West Bengal, but also those of other regional state protagonists like India, and the erstwhile and present-day Pakistan. Indeed, it could be argued that the central challenge for Bangladesh is to act in consonance with but remain distinct from its regional neighbours.

The basic thrust of this paper is to make an initial assessment of Hasina's April visit to New Delhi, while the jury on it is still out on both sides. Rather than on the protocol pomp and circumstance of which there was plenty, necessary for a pronounced recognition of Bangladesh's sovereignty, the substantive examination must entail a study of the 22 or so agreements signed. These total an amount of US$10 billion, including the commercial worth of private sector arrangements, of which US$5 billion or so would be in loans. However, the glow surrounding the mention of the mega-figures seems to erode somewhat when the fine-

print is amplified. Here, New Delhi would need to be circumspect, for quarters in Bangladesh could not be persuaded that all faults lie at Mamata's door!

An amount US$1.6 billion is to fund a debt facility for the construction of a 1320-megawatt power project, designated as 'moitree' or friendship collaboration, pointing to the fact that 'friendship projects' are not a Chinese priority. Bangladesh, of course, badly needs electricity but the snag is that the project is located at a place called Rampal in the Sunderbans, Bangladesh's pride mangrove forest, which, the environmentalists claim, will be at great risk due to the project's impact. A significant portion, perhaps around US$3.5 billion, would also be spent on a hydro-power facility but this is to be built in Nepal, and the arrangements for transmittal are said to preclude direct purchase from Nepal. As is not unknown in such agreements, the pricing set by Indian companies is said to be a tad above that dictated by the market. This is particularly true of a project already agreed upon in Tripura, equipment for which were said to have passed through Bangladesh without payment of any duties. Another aspect that leaves a bit of a sour taste in the public mouth in Bangladesh is the huge trade imbalance in favour of India – Bangladesh's imports being to the tune of US$5.45 billion compared to exports of a paltry US$689.72 million (Financial Year 2015-16). Bangladeshis complain of too many informal non-trade barriers standing in the way. There was some joy in Dhaka when India offered, in an effort to bring some balance into the disequilibrium, duty-free market access to most Bangladeshi products in 2011 but this dissipated when New Delhi slapped a 12.36 per cent countervailing duty on Bangladeshi apparels in the following year. This is Bangladesh's main export item and some Dhaka business houses believe that, if all structural impediments are removed, exports of these products alone could fetch billions of dollars.

Apart from this, there are some other factors that have come under Bangladesh's social media scrutiny. A former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Farooq Sobhan, and now a highly respectable analyst, has pointed to the negative ramifications of huge amounts, around US$10 billion or so, being remitted by Indian businesses from Bangladesh to their country. This is seen by many as a drain on the country's financial resources. Also there are massive benefits to the Indian economy, accruing from Bangladeshi tourists and their purchases in India. Bangladeshis do not usually find accept the criticism about illegal migration of their compatriots to India and, instead, underscore the fact that, following the agreement on mutual transfer of 'enclaves' and despite the widely-held belief to the contrary, even the legally

permissible migration to India does not take place. True, Bangladeshis are migration-prone and tend to travel to improve their quality of life. However, most argue that they would go where pastures are greener than those that India could offer. The Assam state government in India, a BJP-ruled one, says it wants to build a fence to keep Bangladeshis out. This would normally be very puzzling, were it not for the analysis that this is being done to pander to local Assamese political requirements.

Over the years, the Bangladeshi sense of nationhood has evolved and strengthened. In order to make the bilateral relations sustainable, which is what must be of interest to both states, certain measures need to be undertaken and certain thoughts must always be kept at the back of the mind. In this respect, India, the larger of the two in terms of size, population, power and resources, will perhaps be required to bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility. Delivery on pledges would be important, most certainly, including on water-sharing.

First, for a powerful neighbour like India, it is not enough to merely recognise Bangladesh's sovereignty. Bangladesh has matured enough into statehood to be desirous of exercising its independent status unimpeded. It is no longer, as Bengal was, just an actor on the sub-continental matrix. It is a key global player. The fruition of its aspirations for progress and stability largely depends on its international linkages. Many of these now reach out beyond South Asia. It needs to interact with Europe, and the United States; and with China. These partners satisfy many of Bangladesh's economic and strategic needs. It would not be in New Delhi's interest to press Hasina into a position where she would need to make a choice between China and India. Hasina has shown herself to be an astute politician, and she needs to take positions that are not only rational but also seen to be rational. As such, to force upon her a requirement to choose between Delhi and Beijing would be an unwise move on the part of India.

Second, Bangladesh remains a secular and, though often seen as lacking perfect institutions, a fiercely democratic polity. Hasina has so far managed to keep her country clear of the wind of fundamentalism sweeping across Pakistan, Afghanistan and Maldives, the three other Muslim-majority states of South Asia. The elements constituting Bangladeshi national identity are complex – there is the language, culture, and religion. Though conforming to tolerant strains, the fact remains that nearly 89.6 per cent of Bangladeshis are Muslims. This is evident in some accommodation which the government, even given its penchant for progressive politics, has

been making with the right wing ‘Hefazat I Islam’ of late. An example is equating Qawami madrassa degrees with those of universities. Another is favouring the removal of the statue of the Greek Titan-goddess Themis, clad in a sari which damages its pristine classical appeal to any Bangladeshi votary of ancient Greek traditions, from the Supreme Court precincts. The government would argue that the placation is cosmetic rather than substantive; yet it points to the fact that there is an electorate out there, which has a complex mix of values that Hasina wishes to win over. New Delhi needs to be more aware of this fact, and also of the fact that the electoral gains of Hindu nationalism in India at the level of the central government and many regions of the vast country could alienate South Asian Muslim populations, even of overtly secular polities like Bangladesh to the point of influencing their government policy. This is the lesson of history: whenever Bangladeshis sense either their ‘Bengaliness’ or ‘Muslimness’ threatened, there is a tendency to shift emphasis to redress the balance.

Third, to build sustainability in India-Bangladesh relations, small short-term gains at larger long-term costs must be avoided by both sides. Dhaka must not seem over-dependent on the government of the day in New Delhi for India’s support, and vice-versa. Both New Delhi and Dhaka would need to appreciate that governments do change, so a people-to-people relationship is a prerequisite. Cultural contacts, easy mobility of persons, understandings between the vibrant civil societies of both countries, and empathy at intellectual and artistic levels are important.

However, most importantly, the thesis in this paper is that the three principal characters in the unfolding relationship in eastern South Asia – Modi, Hasina, and Mamata – have to trust one another, understand one another’s political aspirations and limitations, and build a lasting partnership for the benefit of all concerned. It is their tryst with such a sense of mutual trust that they must learn to keep.

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