



INDIA - BANGLADESH RELATIONS - GS II MAINS

Q. How the geo-political importance of Bangladesh turns its relation with India into a “golden chapter” and what are the irritants affecting the transformation in India-Bangladesh relations? Elucidate (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *Strengthening bonds: Modi and Hasina’s strategic dialogue elevates India-Bangladesh relations*

What's in the news?

- The recent visit by Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina marked the first state visit by a foreign leader during PM Modi’s third term.

Key takeaways:

- Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi have been relentless in advancing the bilateral relations between Delhi and Dhaka over the last decade and turning India and Bangladesh into valuable partners of each other.
- The productive consequences of the two leaders’ commitment to overhaul ties have been hailed as marking a “**golden chapter**” (‘sonali adhyay’) in the history of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations.

Outcomes of the Recent India-Bangladesh Bilateral Meeting:

- Unveiling the ‘**vision for a shared future**’ and turning the “**extraordinary relationship**” of the last decade into a “**transformational partnership**”.
- Focus on the **unfinished agenda of connectivity** that includes the easing of visa procedures, freer movement of goods, cross-border energy and electricity flows, and the building of digital bridges.
- Commencement of the long overdue negotiations on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (**CEPA**) between India and Bangladesh.

Geo-political Importance of Bangladesh to India:

- Bangladesh holds huge significance for India. It can be gauged by the fact that Bangladesh is not merely central for India’s ‘**Neighbourhood First policy**’ but also crucial for New Delhi’s ‘**Act East policy**’ which aims to cement ties between India and South East Asia.
- Geopolitically, Bangladesh is an important partner for India for the following reasons.
 - Security of North-East
 - Bridge to Southeast Asia
 - Securing sea lines of communication
 - Fighting terrorism and deradicalization
 - Balancing assertive China.



Areas of Cooperation Between India and Bangladesh:

1. Economic Engagement:

- Bangladesh is **India's biggest trading partner in South Asia** while India is the second largest trading partner of Bangladesh. In FY23, the total trade between the two countries touched USD 14.22 bn.
- India has provided **duty free access** to Bangladesh on all goods except tobacco and alcohol under **South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)** since 2011.
- Six border haats have been approved by the India and Bangladesh governments.
- In April 2023, both the countries agreed to settle a part of bilateral trade transactions in their own currencies.
- The two countries are also preparing to sign the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (**CEPA**) for substantial enhancement of trade and commercial partnership between the two countries.
 - This will increase job opportunities and raise the standard of living in both the countries.
- However, there are some challenges too in the trade relations between the two countries including huge trade asymmetry, issue of non-tariff barriers, lack of proper infrastructure to ensure smooth flow of goods, etc.

2. Connectivity:

- Connectivity is vital for India and Bangladesh for a smooth flow of goods across the border.
- Better trade infrastructure benefits the bordering states of both the nations, raising the level of income. Besides, Bangladesh is India's gateway to its North eastern states as well as South East Asia.
- Currently, there are several operational rail links connecting the two countries. The **Haldibari-Chilahati rail link** is functional from 2020.
- Three train services are currently operating between countries namely **Maitree Express, Bandhan Express and Mithali Express**. **Mithali Express**, connecting the northern part of West Bengal with Dhaka, was inaugurated by the Prime Minister's of both the countries in 2021.
- Apart from that, the **Kolkata–Dhaka Bus (1999) and the Dhaka–Agartala Bus (2001)** are the primary road links between the two countries.
- Further, India uses Bangladeshi ports for the northeast. In this, Bangladesh is also benefited by the traffic coming through the ports.
- **BBIN** (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement is a multinational corridor aiming to enhance connectivity in the eastern states of South Asia.
 - The agreement will permit the member states to ply their vehicles in each other's territory for transportation of cargo and passengers, including third country transport and personal vehicles.
 - Currently, Bhutan's parliament has not approved the corridor. However, it is functional in the other three countries.

3. Energy:



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- India and Bangladesh cooperate sector as well. Currently, Bangladesh imports 116MV of energy from India. **Joint Working Group (JWG) / Joint Steering Committee (JSC)** have been established to provide an institutional framework to provide bilateral cooperation in cross border trade of electricity.

4. Tourism:

- Tourism is a big aspect of India-Bangladesh relations, especially medical tourism.
- A large number of people from Bangladesh visit India for medical treatment. More than 35% of India's international medical patients are from Bangladesh.
 - Bangladesh alone contributes to more than 50% of India's revenue from medical tourism.

5. Cooperation at Multilateral Platforms:

- India and Bangladesh are partners in several regional multilateral organisations such as **SAARC**, **BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**.
- During COVID, both countries showed solidarity in setting up the SAARC Emergency Response Fund to counter the effects of global pandemics in the South Asian region.
- On global platforms, India and Bangladesh show solidarity on various issues. For example, Bangladesh supports India's bid for a permanent seat in UNSC. Also, both countries are working together in achieving SDGs.

6. Defence Cooperation:

- Various Joint exercises of **Army (Exercise Sampriti)** and **Navy (Exercise Milan)** take place between the two countries.
- Unfortunately, India's defence engagement with Bangladesh is much lower than that of China. **China is the only country which has formal defence agreement with the Indian neighbour, while India's efforts in the direction are always marred with suspicion.**

7. Other Areas of Cooperation:

- India and Bangladesh also cooperate in promoting cultural unity between the two nations. Politically, India supports the democratic institutions and values in Bangladesh.

Major Irritants Between India and Bangladesh

- While India Bangladesh relations have flourished since 2009, there are certain issues that pose a challenge to these cordial relations.
- These include demarcation of land and maritime boundary, shelter to Indian insurgent groups, illegal migration, water sharing, human trafficking, drug trafficking, balance of trade, transit rights, the China factor, etc.

1. Illegal Immigration:



- A large number of migrants, including refugees as well as economic migrants from Bangladesh, enter illegally into India. This is a pressing issue in India, especially in the North-eastern states bordering Bangladesh who fear that their resources, security as well as culture is being compromised.
- The Supreme Court's direction to the government to conduct a **National Registration of Citizenship (NRC)** in the state of Assam raised concerns in Bangladesh.
 - The **Rohingya crisis** has further complicated the issue.
- The issue of climate change is going to aggravate the issue. As a low lying state, Bangladesh will bear the brunt of climate change and thus pushing more population to migrate in India.

2. The China Factor:

- Bangladesh leaning towards China would be detrimental for India's regional standing and strategic aspirations.
- In 2002, Bangladesh (BNP) signed a defence cooperation agreement with China. In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a visit to Bangladesh where the relation between Bangladesh and China was elevated to being strategic partners.
- In 2017, China supplied 2 Ming class submarines to Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh is an active member of the Belt and Road Initiative by China, under which China is investing heavily in Bangladesh.
- Under its **String of Pearls strategy**, China aims to encircle India by building strategic posts in India's neighbour, to check India's growing influence in the region.

3. River Water Disputes:

- A long-standing dispute exists between India and Bangladesh over the appropriate allocation, and development, of the water resources of the Ganges River.
- A comprehensive bilateral treaty was signed by Indian Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 1996 which talked about sharing of Ganges water at Farakka.
- Currently, **Teesta Water dispute** is one of the major impediments in the cordial relations between India-Bangladesh relations.
 - Teesta originates in the Himalayas and flows through Sikkim, West Bengal to merge with Brahmaputra (Jamuna) in Bangladesh.
 - While Bangladesh has sought equitable distribution of river water on lines of 1996 Ganga Water Treaty, the agreement has not been resolved due to objections from the West Bengal government.
- Apart from Teesta, negotiations are also underway for Feni and Barak river.

4. Drug Smuggling and Human Trafficking:

- There have been many incidences of cross border drug smuggling & human trafficking. Humans (especially children & women) are trafficked & various animal & bird species are poached through these borders.



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- These issues need to be redressed to strengthen the bilateral relations. Some measures could be the establishment of a Joint Task Force to combat cross-border drug trafficking, implementing smart border management and establishing a digital connectivity corridor.

Way Forward:

- India should implement the **Neighbourhood First policy** of prioritizing support to its smaller neighbors to gain their confidence especially given China's presence.
- India should **leverage the shared culture-history and economic complementarities** and build people to people relationships to build strong relationships between two nations.
- It should also proactively resolve outstanding issues like the Teesta **water treaty**.

India and Bangladesh share an organic and a multi-faceted relation. A proactive involvement to increase cooperation and resolve impending issue will not only be beneficial for the two neighbours but for the whole region.

