

REPORT OF EIGHTH ROUND OF INDIA BANGLADESH FRIENDSHIP DIALOGUE

DAY 1

Enriching the bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh further, the eighth round of India Bangladesh Friendship Dialogue commenced on 2nd of July in Guwahati. The inaugural event was graced by Md. ShahriarAlam, Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Government of Bangladesh, Sh. M.J. Akbar, Minister of State, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Shri SarbanandaSonowal, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam, Capt. Alok Bansal, Director, India Foundation, Sh.Dipok Kr, Borthakur, Vice Chairman, State Innovation and Transformation Aayog (SITA), Government of Assam and Ms.Sreeradha Dutta, Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), and Sh.PankajDebnath, Member of National Parliament of Bangladesh. Besides, the event also witnessed the presence of many other esteemed and learned dignitaries.

Shri Borthakur delivered the inaugural speech where he reminded all present of the shared linguistic, cultural and historical heritage and the common troubled past that entwines both nations in an intricate bond. He stressed upon how the river Brahmaputra can open up immense developmental possibilities for trade and commerce, and thereby, bring about prosperity to both nations.

Capt. Alok Bansal threw light upon the significance of the Guwahati Dialogue. He said that this maiden event in NE had its genesis in the idea that such events should not be limited to "mainstream" regions alone, but must be extended to all those regions that share borders with Bangladesh.

Keynote speakers M.J. Akbar discussed the long trajectory of bilateral relations between the two nations. Elucidating upon the slogan of the dialogue- "Brave new world"- a phrase borrowed from Aldous Huxley's novel by the same name, he said that in order to materialize the "New World" envisaged by both the nations, the governments of both the countries are required to have courage; and must work alongside the principles of sovereignty, equality and mutual trust.

Mr. Md. ShahriarAlam, the other keynote speaker, said that ties between the two nations can be cemented by an equitable share of benefits. He talked about the need to combat terrorism and climate change, and the need for market accessibility in order to achieve collective prosperity

In his presidential remarks, Shri Sarbanada Sonowal, Chief Minister of Assam focused upon how Prime Minister Modi's Look East Policy for shared growth and prosperity set a benchmark for bilateral relations between nations. He assured that unswerving efforts are being made by the Government to achieve the goals and targets of the policy. Involving students and the youth in such dialogues can boost conflict-resolution and aid policy-making, he claimed

The Vote of Thanks was delivered by Sh.PankajDebnath, member of the National Parliament of Bangladesh. He asserted that we can grow hand in hand with greater connectivity, sharing of knowledge and expertise, and by establishing diplomatic ties.

This was followed by a short cultural programme wherein performers from both India and Bangladesh put up splendid performances.

DAY 2 : First Working Session: Changing World Order and Bangladesh India Relationship

Dr Sreeradha Dutta shed light on India's bilateral relations. The land-boundary agreement particularly settled the raw nerves. What Bangladesh has done for terrorism in India is far beyond what we had dreamt of. There have been debates relating to the Rampal Project, environmental issues between the two countries.

The second speaker Manzarul Islam drew upon the hatred, xenophobia, islamophobia being spilled by political leaders, he reflected how important it is to realise meaning in times of chaos. Energy is a major security problem in Bangladesh as well as poverty and maritime security concerns. People have largely put it across that they would never prefer any development at the cost of environment.

Discussant NaniGopalMahanta put across the burning issues that loom large between the two countries: cross-border terrorism, boundary dispute, illegal border trade, illegal trespassing. Dr Mahantarecounted the deep roots of culture, history between the two countries.

Journalist Mr ManjurulAhson Bulbul expressed how courageous PM Hasina has turned out to be and that she would go to any extent as long as it concerns the betterment and development of Bangladesh.

Viewing recent relations being affected by internal issues Capt. Alok Bansal expressed his concern that China's intrusion may affect India- Bangladesh relations. On terrorist activities going beyond national boundaries he has rightly said "Every fundamentalist is a potential terrorist." More numbers of youth joining the 'IS' is a narrative which demands a counter narrative for resistance. Systematised deradicalisation can be the effective forward move.

Second Working Session

The second working session had as its focus area as "Drivers of Mutual Prosperity". Chaired by Amb.VeenaSikri, Former High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh, it focussed on issues at the micro and *glocalized* levels. Dr. Ainun Nishat of BRAC University Dhaka and Sh. Dhruv C. Katoch, Director of India Foundation was the Lead Speakers. The discussants included Prof. Dr. Quazi Kholiqzaman Ahmed of Dhaka University, Sh. Sabyasachi Dutta, Director of Asian Confluence Adv. Mahbub Ali, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh and Dr. Sreeradha Dutta, Director of MAKAIS.

Dr. Ainun Nishat emphasised on the need to introduce joint ventures for enhancing navigational connectivity, water management and hydro-electricity generation. He also asserted that transparency in all government decisions will help build trust and acceptance among people of both the nations

Sh. Dhruv C. Katoch focussed on energy-security, cross-border security and the need to build positive narratives and goodwill between the two nations. He said that to combat the various threats disrupting Indo-Bangladesh relations, the defence forces, intelligence agencies and the governments of both the countries should co-operate and act jointly.

Prof. Dr. Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmed talked of the ways in which making optimum use of the waterways will open up scopes for earning livelihood for the locals of both the nations. He talked about Joint River and basin management and the need to adhere to global standards for arriving at conclusions regarding water sharing in the Teesta River.

Sh. Sabyasacchi Dutta highlighted upon the role of tourism in bringing about growth and prosperity between the two nations. Tourism, he said will not only bring in revenues but will also generate means of livelihood for the locals of the region and integrate the region

Adv. Mahbub Ali underlined the need to explore new avenues in natural and mineral resources. The easy access of Indian VISA by people of Bangladesh was also urged upon by Ali.

Dr. Sreeradha Dutta foregrounded the illegal activities that happen in the trans water boundaries, and the need to come up with effective mechanisms to counter this. She emphasised on developing border-*haats* so that trade can be carried out legally. She also stressed upon the need for education in the border-area, and the need for combating cattle-smuggling and human trafficking.

Third Working Session : Boosting Connectivity

The third session was focussed on boosting connectivity between the two nations. Amb. Pinak Chakrabarty viewed that Connectivity and security will broadly ensure the development of the North Eastern regions as well as Bangladesh. There should be a joint effort to tackle cyber crimes, to explore untapped marine resources and to beat down climatic hazards by focusing on renewable energy.

Dr Muazzem spoke on the economic benefits accrued from the sea ports. He reflected on regional and sub regional projecting not getting adequate priority by Indian government. Mr Shri Kauser Hilaly has spoken about the immense tourism possibilities in Assam targeting the average Bangladeshi tourists.

Dr. Ainun Nishat, another discussant talked about how navigation can foster connectivity issues, however, the expenses incurred needs to be addressed. It is feasible only when it is a profitable business. Tariff imposed on Bangladeshi goods should be attractive for better transaction so that both nations are benefitted. One cannot ignore the financial dimension in regards to railway connectivity.

Ms Shubhrashtha said that transit routes through Bangladesh can minimise a lot of cost in terms of transportation. Ironically, after decades of independence this type of connectivity is still new. Stressing on the need to solve security and development issues simultaneously because they are not antagonistic in nature, she also shed light on the linking of textile and fabric industries of Bangladesh and North East. She articulated that connectivity between the two nations should be pursued with renewed focus.

The next speaker Dr. Delwar Hossain recounted connectivity as an instrument of development and also a discourse.

DAY 3: Fourth Working Session

This session was themed as “Designing Long-Term and Forward looking mechanisms for sustenance of good relationships”.

Dr. Qazi Kholiuzzaman Ahmed urged multinational companies of India to also target Bangladesh for their investments. This, he said will boost the economy and generate employment. He also focussed on the responsibility of Internal Security Forces in combating trans-border smuggling

Sh. Tarun Vijay talked about the concept of ‘Astha Padma’ - the eight milestones that will bind people of both nations. He also talked about how a brave and secular spirit will help the sustenance of good relationships. Sh. Vijay discussed how a prosperous future can be shared by both nations through developing education, connectivity, healthcare and the security forces.

Dr. K.K. Dwivedi narrated how investments and turnovers have seen a boost over the past year and how the export-import trade between both the nations have helped both economies to grow. He also talked about the need for developing, dredging mechanisms, transit facilities and business opportunities.

H.E. Syed Muazzam Ali talked of the need to develop knowledge based societies and people-to-people relationships. He also stressed upon developing borderline economic zones.

Sh. R.P. Sarmah focussed on the importance of border management, good transport and communication system and the inclusion of students in shaping amicable Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Sh. Shishir Shil talked about the need to include the history of 1971 War for Liberation and India’s contribution in it in the academic syllabi of both countries. This, he said, will help build goodwill. He focussed on the need to build a Joint Education Task Force.

Sh. Binod Bawri said that for long-term and forward looking mechanisms for sustenance of good relationships, we need to bring about increase in trade and commerce, travel, tourism and technology.

Valedictory Session

The Valedictory Session of India-Bangladesh Friendship Dialogue began with the playing of the National Anthem of both the countries. The session was chaired by His Excellency Shri Tathagata Roy, Honourable Governor, State of Tripura. The keynote address was delivered by Mr. Md. Shahriar Alam, Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, who shared his wonderful experience during the last two days in the city of Guwahati before the august audience. He spoke on how the different issues like Changing World Order and Bangladesh India Relationship, Drivers of Mutual Prosperity, Boosting Connectivity, Designing Long Term and Forward looking mechanisms for sustenance of good relationship occupied the esteemed speakers and discussants. He said that there is doubt in the fact that India Bangladesh ties are not only long-lasting and time-tested, but there is also a huge possibility of increasing people-to-people contact between the two nations. Though India Bangladesh friendship ties under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are at an all-time high, he stressed the need to remove the different irritants like terrorism and poverty plaguing the two nations. He reminded everyone how the triangle comprising Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, North East fall under the poorest regions of the world and how that can be addressed with shared resources, expertise and boosting connectivity through Regional and Continental Highways, Rail Networks, Sea Ports and Coastal Shipping. Further he added that there is a huge aspiration for peace and collective prosperity and the partnership between India and Bangladesh based on trust and sovereignty can set a benchmark for the rest of the world to emulate.

The next speaker Shri Ram Madhav, National General Secretary, BJP and Director, India Foundation elucidated the noble vision of Prime Minister Modi "SabkaSaath, Sabka Vikas" where the latter considers Bangladesh as a true partner in the development of the East. He articulated that the cow is sacred to the Indians but Life is more sacred to them and he condemns the lynching of people by the so called cow savers. He expressed the hope that just like the people of India expect to see Narendra Modi for many years after 2019 rendering his service to the nation, the people of Bangladesh too would like to see Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for many years in the service of the nation. He spoke at length about how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman envisioned Bangladesh as a secular nation state and his efficient daughter Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is carrying out his dream in the best possible manner. While referring to the issue of illegal movement of cattle across the border from India to Bangladesh, he stressed the need to devise means to check such activities. He also referred to issues of religion and religious fundamentalism that the two neighbouring nations are to deal with a strong hand. He reflected that though India and Bangladesh have reached common ground so far as combating terrorism and trade and commerce are concerned but issues like water sharing need to be dealt with. He assured that government of India is committed to fulfil the assurances given by previous governments. Acknowledging the fact that both nations face certain external and internal challenges, he hoped that it shouldn't deter the two nations to deviate from their cherished values

like democracy, secularism and love for peace while confronting challenges like terrorism and religious fundamentalism that will ensure the two neighbours to move forward together. He hoped that under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Hasina, the two nations will scale new heights of progress in the field of education, health and commerce and further consolidate their bilateral ties.

In the Valedictory address by Shri Himanta Biswa Sarmah, Minister of Finance, Government of Assam, the august gathering was reminded of the different issues discussed in the dialogue process and expressed his gratitude at organizing the event in the city of Guwahati. He said that he would be failing on his duty if he doesn't mention how the people of Assam feel about the problem of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. He further added that with the completion of National Register of Citizens, those illegal immigrants would be identified and the issue will be taken up the Government of India and with the Government of Bangladesh for an amicable solution. He expressed his gratitude towards Hasina Government for uprooting the bases of different insurgent groups like ULFA and thus contributing to peace and tranquillity of the North Eastern States. The Minister said that the north-eastern states and Bangladesh can join hands to create world class institutions and facilities in the areas of education and health care. He further added that transit of goods to the Northeast from other parts of India through Bangladesh can benefit Dhaka not only by means of earning transit fee but it will also improve the service sector in Bangladesh. It will also serve the cause of North east as it will cut down the expenses of transportation.

In his enlightening Presidential remarks, Shri Tathagata Roy, Hon'ble Governor, State of Tripura, remarked that Bangladesh is one nation that was created on the bedrock of its linguistic identity. He spoke at length how Bangladesh and India not only share the same culture, values and civilization but even the National Anthem of the two nations were composed by the same literary genius which is not a small deal. He recollected one of the highly attended assemblies of crowd in the Brigade Parade Ground, Kolkata in the year 1972 where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made his historic speech where he envisioned Bangladesh as a secular country where people of all religions can freely practice their religious beliefs. He regretted how religious fundamentalism and extremism tried to mar his dream by demolitions of Hindu temples and offering resistance to celebrations of Hindu festivals though under the leadership of Bongobandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina the minorities are now feeling safe and their interests protected.

He expressed his personal opinion that as per international law all lower riparian states are entitled to have their share of water and India cannot deny water to Bangladesh. He was very vocal in the expression of his opinion that if India feels that sharing of water will lead to shortage of water in India, then even the shortage can be shared. He stressed upon the need of sharing water not only of Teesta but also of other rivers that flows to Bangladesh. He expressed his fears that if China constructs dams in the Siang River, it will not only be detrimental to India, but it will also affect Bangladesh.

He spoke on the relationship between Kazi Nazrul Islam and Shyama Prasad Mookherjee which forms the bedrock to understand the relationship between India and Bangladesh. Recounting episodes of genocide by Pakistani Army, he stressed on the need to keep the fundamentalist forces at bay. In his enriching speech, he tried to map the different rivers that flow from India to Bangladesh and deliberated how the two nations can be benefitted through water sharing and ensuring better connectivity. He discussed at length the literary works of different writers like Syed Mujtaba Ali who knew fifteen languages to Kazi Nazrul Islam. He acknowledged that the government of Bangladesh has done more than India can expect to ensure that the country is not used as a sanctuary by militant outfits like ULFA as such insurgent groups have been hounded out from Bangladesh; however some Bangladeshi extremists have found sanctuary in India. He also urged that granting of medical VISAs to Bangladeshi nationals should be done on an urgent basis to ensure better friendship ties.

With this the Guwahati Declaration was adopted and the program was concluded.

