



**Proceedings of Country Lecture on  
Recent Developments in Bangladesh-India Bilateral Relations and Its Prospects**

Organised by  
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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised its 13<sup>th</sup> Country Lecture titled **“Recent Developments in Bangladesh-India Bilateral Relations and Its Prospects”** at the BISS Auditorium on Monday, 14 September 2015. The lecture was delivered by **H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran**, High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh. **Major General AKM Abdur Rahman**, ndc, psc, the Director General of BISS delivered the Address of Welcome. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS chaired the session. Following the lecture, a lively open discussion took place where distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives of multi-disciplinary professional bodies, representatives from the foreign missions, government and non-government agencies, policy makers and members of the media actively participated.

## Welcome Address

In his opening remarks, **Major General AKM Abdur Rahman**, ndc, psc, the Director General



of BISS welcomed all to the Country Lecture and said that BISS has been regularly organising these lectures with a view to enrich people's understanding about countries with which Bangladesh has significant bilateral relations. He expressed his heartfelt gratitude and thanks to H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran, High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh on behalf of all members of BISS for being present despite his busy schedule.

Major General Rahman said that India is now certainly one of the most important neighbours of Bangladesh and one of the key development partners of the country. He acknowledged the extraordinary assistance India provided during the War of Liberation of Bangladesh conveying gratitude to the people of India through the High Commissioner for their support. He added that India has attained commendable economic development and is emerging as a powerhouse in the areas of education, science, technology and innovation. He mentioned that the economy of Bangladesh has also been growing over six per cent for the last one decade. It has also achieved most of the MDGs and made significant advancement in poverty eradication, women empowerment, health care facility and education.

Noting the recent developments of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India, he argued that the relations have witnessed a significant upswing over the past decade. During the period, the two countries have signed a number of treaties that encouraged trade and economic cooperation, provided easier connectivity resulting in more people-to-people contact and addressed a number of security issues. He also added that during the recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh in June 2015, both countries signed twenty two agreements. India extended a US\$ 02 billion line of credit to Bangladesh and pledged US\$ 05 billion worth of investments. As per the agreements, India is also going to invest in setting up of 3000 MW LNG based power plant and 1600 MW coal fired power plant. On the other hand, both countries have also increased their trade from US\$ 03 billion to over US\$ 05 billion in the last five years.

General Rahman also put insight on the very important Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) signed between Bangladesh and India with execution from 31 July 2015. He termed it as a new chapter of Bangladesh-India bilateral relations and this has certainly paved the way to resolve other long lasting issues between the two friendly countries. He concluded his speech by rendering heartfelt gratitude to the learned audience and hoped that the lecture delivered by H.E. Pankaj Saran would further enhance bilateral relations and bolster cooperation between the two nations.

## Lecture by H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran



H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran, the High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh, structured his lecture into two parts. In first part, he highlighted the recent developments of Bangladesh-India relations. Then, in the second part, he discussed the future prospects of bilateral relations. Again, he divided recent developments in three clusters. While the first cluster included the issues which either have been resolved or have come closer to resolution, the second incorporated the new areas of cooperation and the third one included the issues which are in working progress.



He recalled his last year's visit in BISS where the dominant question was what would be the impact of India's General Election in Bangladesh-India relations. He argued that it is now sixteen months since the new government in India took office. Given the scale of the change in India, it is reasonable for Bangladesh to expect positive developments of bilateral relations with a new set of policy makers in India. Initial months of the new government in India focused on establishing new equations and getting to know each other. This was manifested in a series of high level contacts between the two governments. The scale and frequency of these contacts was truly impressive. It reflected the implementation of India's "neighbourhood first policy" on the

one hand and Bangladesh's desire to reach out to the new Indian leadership on the other. Both complemented each other. The first exposure of Bangladesh government to India was the surprise invitation in the inauguration ceremony of the new government in India on 26 May 2014. He termed the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2015 as historic and added that the meeting of the two Prime Ministers was not so easy because of India's internal political dynamics though it was done. He emphasised that the visit of Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal was very significant which indicated a shift in the bilateral relations. The joint declaration was named as *Notun Prajanma: Nayi Disha* and it was for the first time that a joint declaration was given a title. It was an important document which covered almost all important aspects of Bangladesh-India relations. He commented that there were three types of achievements of the visit which included joint documents, MoUs and some other symbolic events.

H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran then talked about the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). He said that whatever in the past, the agreement was signed within the twelve months after the new government taking office in India. The Indian parliament decided to enact the particular amendment despite having high degree of internal political debate. He then focused on the issues like strengthening security cooperation, deepening development partnership, energy cooperation, trade and investment facilitation, connectivity, TV exchanges and people-to-people contacts. He



said that Bangladesh exported to India over US\$ 600 million in FY 2015. Bangladesh has gained new trade facilities due to the positive impacts of the duty free regimes. He argued that by the increasing number of immigrants, the growing intensification of the relationship can be understood. H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran then talked about the issues like harnessing advantages of geographical contiguity, building framework for economic inter-linkages, operationalising the concept of sub-regional cooperation (BBIN), provision of third country transit facilities to each other, new modes of connectivity such as the water and the sea, blue economy, science and technology, environment, education and health care. He also spoke on preventing illegal trade in the border and legalising border trade, strengthening institutions, dealing with scarce resources such as water, irregular movement of people, combating drug trafficking and other forms of

illegal activity, border infrastructure and bridging the trade gap. Lastly, he commented that both Bangladesh and India have had an active, dynamic and wide ranging relationship marked by goodwill and a problem-solving approach.

On the question of future prospects, H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran commented that no relationship can be taken for granted, nor can it be based on a sense of victimhood. Prospects would continue to be good as long as there is political will on both sides, there will be public support for the relationship, and the advantages are felt by the people and have broad consensus on common objectives. Prospects also depend on how both countries evolve in terms of their economic, social and cultural attributes. He argued that both countries cannot be isolated from wider regional and global developments. Asia is changing and so is the world. The prospects of future will depend on how Bangladesh and India use this new found freedom and how both implement what has been agreed upon. But the starting point is needed to have a vision for them. In conclusion he added that the relationship with Bangladesh is very important for India and strong relations between the two countries can open new prospects for both of them.

### **Open Discussion**



Following the lecture, a lively open discussion took place where distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives of multi-disciplinary professional bodies, representatives from the foreign missions, government and non-government agencies, policy makers and members of the media actively participated.

**Ambassador Humayun Kamal** congratulated Indian government and Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh for resolving the issue of land boundary. He commented that it has given a lot of optimism and confidence for both countries to resolve major issues by negotiation. He discussed some other issues which need immediate resolution. The first one is border killing. He recognised it as a very sensitive and emotional issue and urged for a possible immediate solution. The second one is about visa restriction. He said that a huge number of Bangladeshis are used to go to India for religious and medical purposes. He requested India for easing the visa



restriction. He also raised the issue of connectivity among neighbouring countries and commented that the land locked countries like Nepal and Bhutan are facing difficulties. Hence, effective connectivity in the region can help all the countries. He also emphasized on a developed rail service between Bangladesh and India. He urged for an immediate solution of the difficulties faced by Bangladesh to export jute in India.



**Major General (Retd.) Ferdous Mian**, Former Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS pointed out concerns about the Water Linking Project of India. He discussed that how the project is going to create devastating effect on Bangladesh. He asked the view of H. E. Mr Pankaj Saran on the project and its further solution.



**Professor Ainun Nishat** talked about water issues. He commented that basin wise approach should be taken to develop and protect the rivers. He argued that institutional frameworks are needed to develop the water management issue.

**Ambassador Shamim Ahmed** commented that the relations between India and Bangladesh have now reached a new height over the last few years and thanked Mr. Pankaj Saran for his contribution in this development. He also said that even though being close neighbouring countries, bilateral contact between the two countries' policymakers are more businesslike rather than friendly communications. He urged for more frequent contact between the two countries for resolving many debatable issues.



**Mohammad Nurul Huda**, Former Inspector General of Bangladesh Police, raised some of the recent developments in India and how such developments can affect Bangladesh. The issues are mainly India's ban on meat export to Bangladesh and stopping smuggling of cattle in Bangladesh. He asked: Is there any potential threat that extremists can use it as a factor instigating terrorism.

**Shahriar Zaman**, Reporter, Dhaka Tribune, brought the topic of "Falani case" and wanted to know how such incidents might have impacted on border security forces. He also wanted to know the latest updates regarding the Ganges water barrage.

**Badiul Alam**, Reporter, New Age, mentioned that even though both countries have policies of not allowing terrorists to use own land against other, it has been reported that Jhum Liberation Army has been operating from Mijoram and fighting for Jhumland in Khagrachori and Rangamati and using Mijoram as their training ground. He also added that self proclaimed Foreign Minister of Jhumland residing in Mijoram has been promoting anti-Bangladesh ideas as well.

### **Responses by H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran**



H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran said that border killing is very unfortunate and has been discussed in highest levels. The security forces are committed to bring down the number of border killing to zero. He opined that it is a shared responsibility of both countries to keep peace in the border areas. Regarding visa restriction, he agreed that India needs to improve the service. He informed that three visa centres have already been opened in Barisal, Rampur and Mymensingh. Now

there is total ten visa centres in Bangladesh. He commented that the visa system of today is much better and flexible than three or four years before.

On the issue of connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan, he said that India has already permitted Nepal and Bhutan to use the transit route of India. He hoped that trade among the neighbouring countries would be growing up. He then talked about the issue of improving rail service system. He agreed that some technical problem is still existed. There has been a discussion on Khulna-Kolkata train service and Agartala-Belonia bus service. He termed the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement as successful one. Regarding the question of jute export to India, he replied that India has already received message about the concern of Bangladesh and looked into the matter. On the issue of River Linking Project, Mr. Saran said that both countries are negotiating on water issue. He emphasised that it is also important on how do both countries manage water. He assured that India will not do anything which creates problem for Bangladesh. He emphasised that there is a need of dialogue to understand what the project is. He hoped that “water” is the key issue of bilateral negotiation now, and it will be settled soon.

Mr. Saran said that good relations between two countries mainly dependent on political will. Understanding between Bangladesh and India has changed lot. Both countries have learned gradually from dealing with their initial traumas like partition, border issues, political assassinations, shaky institutions, huge insecurities in both sides, etc. He added that the visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India to attend the funeral of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s wife Suvra Mukherjee within six to seven hours time was an act of courage and an example for rest of the region. He mentioned that the hallmark of Bangladesh foreign policy has been the constant promotion of the idea of regional cooperation. Bangladesh has been a pioneer on the regional and sub-regional cooperation like SAARC and was consistent on promoting regional cooperation. He agreed that more meetings and bilateral contacts between the two countries are needed; even telephone calls should be in use in good times and bad times frequently to promote bilateral contacts easily and effectively.

H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran stated that connectivity is must for bilateral relations. There are both good and bad connectivity; good connectivity needs to be discovered to enhance trade and economic relations as well as to address trans-national crimes, extremism, insurgency, terrorism, etc. He remarked that in future both countries need to build more good connectivity which will benefit both of them, mainly emphasising on geographical connectivity. H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran said that the number of recent border killings has also gone down but it needs to be zero. He again opined that border has to be peaceful and border



crossing must be in the legal framework. Better understandings and communications between the two countries need to be ensured and any activity that promotes illegal crossing needs to be stopped. Illegal activities not only lead to illegal monetary transaction but also lead to use of transaction of illegal drugs and weapons. Regarding the Ganges issue, he mentioned that materials are available now and we need to take measures. On the issues of Jhum Liberation Army and Jhumland, H. E. Mr. Pankaj Saran said that it is the case of security agency and they will further look in this matter. He hoped that both Bangladesh and India have entered into a new era and moved forward in practicing the policy of cooperation and India will try to ensure no such activity, which has negative effect in Bangladesh.

### **Summing up by the Chair**

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIIS said that the Country Lecture on India is an attempt to take stock of the important recent developments in Bangladesh-India relations and how these have created a very positive atmosphere to address some of the other lingering challenges as well as the various emerging issues. Bangladesh-India ties have grown from strength to strength as mutual understanding and mutual respect grows stronger, resulting in expansion of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. He added that Bangladesh-India relations today are at their best in forty years.



He mentioned that there were many ups and downs in Bangladesh-India relations. But what is clear is that when both sides have shown greater understanding of each other's needs and interests, the relations curve moved sharply upwards. During these periods, he named some of the few important positive developments between Bangladesh and India - signing of the Ganges water treaty; the CHT treaty; increasing cooperation in traditional and nontraditional security issues, including cooperation in border management, countering terrorism, militancy and transnational crimes; mutual liberalisation of trade and market access regimes; investment; gradually increasing connectivity by land (both road, and rail) as well as by water and air; greater cooperation in sharing of power and energy;

infrastructure building; settlement of the maritime boundary dispute; ratification and implementation of the LBA; enhanced partnership in regional and international cooperation; and the numerous other less visible but equally significant and fast increasing cooperation in education; culture; science and technology as well as people-to-people exchanges. It is now imperative on both sides to sustain the momentum and continue to move forward together towards a better and brighter shared future for two countries and two peoples. The recent milestone, visit to Bangladesh by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has contributed tremendously in adding to this momentum.

Ambassador Ahmad mentioned that the only way forward for both countries is possible by sustaining the present friendship and cooperation. He talked about the ratification of land boundary treaty and its implementation as one of the most recent achievements. He commented that this has been possible by three main steps - abiding and inherent goodwill and the feeling of Kinship despite having occasional hiccups; hard work and efforts at different levels; and courage and determination of the political leaders at critical times. He opined that the LBA has proved that with empathy, goodwill and patience, future problems can easily be avoided. He also opined that the government, civil society and other need to continue to uphold mutual trust between the two countries.

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad summed up the session stating his gratitude to the audience for their enthusiastic and informative participation which has helped others to enrich their knowledge. At the end, he extended his special thanks to the Ambassador, H.E. Mr. Pankaj Saran and rendered his heartfelt gratitude to the members of academia, representatives of think tank, media and officers and his colleagues from the MoFA and the BISS officials for their participation.