

Building Good Neighborly Relations: Bangladesh Perspective

Shah Abdul Halim

The secular elite, not to speak of the nationalists, in Bangladesh often get confused why Indian leaders make statements that throw their friends in Bangladesh in difficult situation. They are perplexed. They are confused what to do in the face India's shameless behavior that tantamount to interference in the internal affairs of sovereign Bangladesh. The elite in Bangladesh found it difficult to defend Indian's brazen dictation on Bangladesh. The freedom loving people of Bangladesh, irrespective of shades of opinion, are not really ready to tolerate any foreign dictation, even if it is India that helped Bangladesh in the liberation war. They are the last people to tolerate Indian hegemony. Ironically however during the last few months Indian government behaved in a manner that made the people of Bangladesh suspicious about the evil Indian design.

In May 2007 Indian High Commissioner Pinak Ranjan Chakrabarty while addressing a function at Sitakunda Hindu temple at Chittagong raised objection to Bangladesh having a religious ministry and advised Bangladesh to pursue meaningful secularism as in India. The High Commissioner said: Bangladesh is a secular country but there is no real practice of secularism ... as there is a religious ministry. The High Commissioner said that democracy is very strong in India as there is no division among the people of different faiths and values and real secularism is practiced in India. He suggested that Bangladesh follow India for practicing real secularism which would help Bangladesh establish a strong democratic country removing all differences among people of different beliefs and values.

The people of Bangladesh however are fully convinced that India is not a secular country. Hindu religion is dominant in every sphere of Indian life. Hindu religion is reflected in the Indian national monogram, national anthem and even in currency. India is a country where communal riots against minorities have taken place more than any other country. In fact there have been more riots in independent India than in the 150 years of British colonial rule. According to Sachar Committee Report (November 2006) Muslim share in the government job is just 4.9 percent although they represent 13.4 percent of the Indian population.

The report states: "In the field of literacy the Committee found that the rate among Muslims was far below the national average. The gap between Muslims and the general average is greater in urban areas and women. 25 percent of Muslim children in the 6-14 year age group have either never attended school or have dropped out. Expansion of educational opportunities since independence has not led to a convergence of attainment levels between Muslims and all others. Drop out rates among Muslims are higher at the level of primary, middle and higher secondary. The disparity in graduation attainment rates is widening since 1970 between Muslims

and all other categories in both urban and rural areas. In premier college only one out of 25 under graduate students and one out of 50 post-graduate students is a Muslim. Unemployment rate among Muslim graduates is the highest among all socio-religious communities.

“The average amount of bank loan disbursed to the Muslims is 2/3 of the amount disbursed to other minorities. In some cases it is half. Some banks have identified a number of Muslim concentration areas as negative geographical zones where bank credit and other facilities are not easily provided.

“The presence of Muslims has been found to be only 3 percent in the IAS, 1.8 percent in the IFS and 4 percent in the IPS. The share of Muslims in employment in various departments is abysmally low at all levels. Muslim community has a representation of only 4.5 percent in Indian Railways while 98.7 percent of them are positioned at lower levels. Representation of Muslims is very low in the universities and in banks. Their share in police constables is only 6 percent, in health 4.4 percent, in transport 6.5 percent.”

On the contrary, as reported in the newspapers, in Bangladesh 40 percent of primary teachers, 32 percent of high school teachers and 27 percent of college-university teachers are non-Muslim. The statistics include teachers working both in public and private educational institutions. 19 percent of government employees of Bangladesh are non-Muslims. Nobody in Bangladesh is denied admission in educational institutions for being members of the minority community. In Bangladesh job seekers and entrepreneurs of minority community are not discriminated on religious ground. The minorities constitute 10 percent plus of the total population of Bangladesh. On the whole this is the picture. Even then Indian officials and leaders advocate Bangladesh to adopt secularism as state principle.

Again in July 2007 visiting Indian State Minister for Commerce Joiram Ramesh while addressing a press conference in Dhaka reiterated that ‘India wants to see a secular Bangladesh’. Such naked interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh has created adverse effect on the people of Bangladesh. The question is what India is up to? What really she wants?

The people of Bangladesh because of Indian attitude are reluctant to believe the call, as reflected in the statements of their leaders, to improve ties with Bangladesh. Indian minister for external affairs Pranab Mukharji visited Bangladesh in March 2007 and Indian foreign secretary Shib Shankar Menon visited Bangladesh in June 2007 for two days. Both of them emphasized the importance of improving bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. The people of Bangladesh however are unwilling to believe the sincerity of the Indian leaders particularly when BSF is killing like birds innocent nationals of Bangladesh in the border areas. BSF killed 450 innocent civilians in the bordering districts of Bangladesh in a period of four years only. According to a survey conducted by Odhikar, an NGO, India killed 479

innocent civilians of Bangladesh in border areas between October 2001 and October 2006.

The question is if India continues such unfriendly activities and makes such blatant interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh, how bilateral relations can make meaningful progress and be further strengthened?

India is demanding from Bangladesh land transit to its seven north-eastern states whereas India is reluctant to give Bangladesh land transit facilities to China at Chumbi Valley point (Darjeeling Corridor), which is approximately 100 kilometers off from Bangladesh border. India despite repeated requests from Bangladesh did not agree to provide 25 kilometers corridor-passage to facilitate trade between Bangladesh and Nepal. If India was generous to allow this corridor that would have enabled landlocked Nepal to use Bangladesh seaport at Chittagong. The irony is that India wants to use Bangladesh seaport at Chittagong for its own benefit while she is reluctant to give the same facilities to Nepal.

India continues to occupy Bangladesh territory illegally. She continues to occupy Padua which is not a disputed land. India illegally by using force occupied Talpotti, which is within the Bangladesh maritime jurisdiction. Bangladesh after liberation in 1971 at the behest of India handed over Berubari to India. But until now India in return did not handover to Bangladesh Tin Bigha Corridor to Angorpota-Dahagram enclave permanently which India is honor bound to handover to Bangladesh under the treaty. India only allowed Bangladesh to use the corridor for certain hours at the day time creating obstacles to Bangladesh nationals of this enclave to move to mainland Bangladesh at night time even for medical reason. The problem of 51 enclaves of Bangladesh within India continues to hound bilateral relations. Border demarcation between the two countries has not made satisfactory progress. It appears from the behavior of India that she does not believe in reciprocal approach in building good neighborly relations and believes in dictating small neighbors. The people of Bangladesh however are not ready to tolerate any bullying and intimidation.

Withdrawal of Ganges water at Farakka by India has created serious environmental hazards in Bangladesh. Now India is constructing dam at Tipaimukh to divert water further depriving Bangladesh. India is constructing groins in the common rivers causing soil erosion on the Bangladesh side of the rivers resulting loss of Bangladesh territories. India not yet fully implemented Mujib-Indira accord.

If India really desires cordial relations with Bangladesh and wants transit facilities to use Bangladesh seaport at Chittagong than she must solve all outstanding issues, must change her attitude, must stop smuggling of Phensidyl across the border to destroy the moral fiber of the youths of Bangladesh, must withdraw all tariff and non-tariff barriers so that Bangladesh products can enter Indian market. Bangladesh can provide India facilities to use sea port at Chittagong in a package deal covering all important

issues between the two countries and only after all outstanding irritant problems are amicably resolved and not before. We cannot loose our leverage and be a pawn at the Indian hands.

What has been discussed in the foregoing paragraphs are some of the pivotal issues of Bangladesh-India relations for which any serious researcher of the contemporary history must be looking for appropriate guidance. It is equally important for any serious student of international relations to study the contemporary history of Bangladesh-India relations. What is however more important is to study the history of the region for that will help to understand the psychology of the people of the regional states, how their leaders are likely to behave and react in new situation and environment?

'The Indian Doctrine' by Barrister M. B .I. Munshi is a landmark publication on the recent political history of the region providing guidance on Indian mental makeup. The book includes three chapters on Indian relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The book will help to understand many critical aspects of bilateral relations not only between Bangladesh and India which is our principal concern, but also assist to know much about India-Nepal and India-Sri Lanka relations.

'The Indian Doctrine' undoubtedly is a new addition that will help not only academicians but also Bangladesh policy planners to formulate appropriate strategy while chalking out Bangladesh foreign policy as far as bilateral relations with India is concerned.

M. B. I. Munshi's book throws light on the big brotherly attitude of India towards its neighbors and how Indian intelligence network is active in the region and behind many turmoil of the region. Only recently Bangladesh press reported that a foreign intelligence agency of a neighboring country has further extended its network and engaged 680 personnel to cover the urban districts of Bangladesh. The report claimed that 40 women agents alone are working in Dhaka city under the supervision of the Station Chief of this agency. According to another report five lac Indians are living in Bangladesh illegally who entered Bangladesh as tourists and did not return after the expiry of the visa. The report apprehended that some of these people might be involved in smuggling of explosives which in the recent past entered Bangladesh from India. This is no doubt the cause of concern for Bangladesh for it might endanger country's national security.

The author of the book and the publisher 'Bangladesh Research Forum' deserve our thanks and appreciation for providing such a wonderful book. Paper, printing, getup, design of the book is befitting. Price is Tk. 300.00. It would have been better if the price of the book could be less to keep the book within the purchasing capacity of the common buyer. The book deserves wide publicity.

Another scholarly book deserving attention of the academicians and foreign policy experts is 'Authentic Voices of South Asia'. Eight eminent scholars of Bangladesh,

Pakistan, Afghanistan and India have contributed to this book edited by Brig. (retd.) Usman Khalid, Director of 'London Institute of South Asia' which is the publisher of the book. This is another outstanding work on the history of Indian relations with its neighbors. The 354-page book is highly recommended for any serious student of South Asian affairs particularly those studying the condition of religious and ethnic minorities in India, India's behavior with Dalits, Sikhs and Kashmiries and above all India's reprehensible activities to set off strife and conflict in its neighboring countries.#

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