

VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: DHAKA WOES

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In India, the growing and deepening ties between New Delhi and Dhaka are widely touted as an unmitigated diplomatic success. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India, then, assumes great significance. The view from our eastern neighbour, though, is not as rosy. Sarwar Jahan Chowdhury, writing in *The Dhaka Tribune*, remarks, "The renewal of the [BJP](#) government in Delhi for another term isn't something very pleasant for Bangladesh — uncertainty about the consequence of [NRC](#) in Assam, little Indian support on the Rohingya issue, persecution of Muslims in India, oppression of Kashmiris, and more."

After recounting some of the diplomatic highs between the two countries, Chowdhury implies that the relationship with Bangladesh is particularly significant for India: "Bangladesh's good relations with India and support for the latter have helped India ward off, to some extent, the notion that India is disliked in South Asia by its neighbours due to its big-brotherly behaviour. It is also important for Bangladesh to resume the already reasonably good tie with its big neighbour after the re-election of the incumbent and try resolving the other bilateral issue with the latter. The people of Bangladesh are generally a bit suspicious about India, and give and takes with tangible benefits would actually help to mend this traditional doubt. Hence, the ongoing trip of Bangladeshi PM to India bears significance."

The key breakthrough now required is on the issue of sharing of the Teesta's waters: "The water sharing issue of more common rivers including Teesta has got bogged down in the conflict between Delhi and the West Bengal state government of populist [Mamata Banerjee](#). On one hand, water sharing of international rivers is a subject of the centre, on the other Delhi keeps telling Bangladesh that it has to move in the spirit of federalism and take Kolkata on board before making a decision on water. Mamata, on the other hand, says she needs central compensation in terms of investment in water preservation before she agrees to release due share of Bangladesh's water. This has been going on for years now. It's time for Modi to act and solve the issue. There are options, and which one he takes is India's internal matter. There is no point dragging Bangladesh into India's internal spirit of the federalism debate."

Optimism on India

The editorial in *The Dhaka Tribune* on October 4, though, is much more positive about India: "For Bangladesh, staying on the path to sustainable development involves fostering a strong partnership with neighbouring India. In that regard, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been tireless in her efforts, and her current visit to India is an example of the sort of diplomacy required to ensure Bangladesh's position in the world, and to ensure that our citizens are provided for."

It also remarks on the significance of the concrete outcomes from the visit: "Most importantly, the main purpose of this visit is the signing of almost a dozen memorandums of understanding, covering a diverse range of issues such as youth and sports, ocean research, ICT, and the establishment of economic zones."

The sedition albatross

The charge of sedition filed against 49 artists, intellectuals and other public figures due to their open letter to Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) appears to have ceded, in a limited sense, the democratic, liberal moral high-ground that India once enjoyed vis-a-vis Pakistan. The October 6 editorial in Dawn begins on an alarmist, rhetorical note: “India’s descent into totalitarianism is acquiring chilling new dimensions by the day.”

After remarking on the fact that the letter merely opposed the ideology and working of the ruling party and government, the editorial goes on to criticise the BJP government for what it perceives as its high-handed, anti-democratic behaviour: “Since it came to power at the centre five years ago, the BJP has embarked upon an organised and relentless campaign to not only quash dissent in the public discourse but to vilify such dissent as being ‘unpatriotic’.”

The editorial is symptomatic of a larger trend that can be spotted in the Pakistan print media — particularly in Dawn and The Express Tribune. Beginning with the reports of lynchings that became common after the BJP came to power in 2014, political developments in India have been used to discredit New Delhi’s stance on bilateral and multilateral issues. This position relies on a logical leap — that the Indian state is a reflection of the politics of the government of the day. This is most visible currently, with the Kashmir issue.

The real nub of the argument in the editorial, though, comes at the end, when a comparison with the situation in Kashmir is drawn and the Indian media is criticised for being a “cheerleader of the government”. The editorial ends on the following note: “This craven surrender (by the Indian media) was perhaps never better illustrated than when... Kashmir was stripped of its special autonomy two months ago. The triumphalism that coursed through the media landscape, with barely a murmur of dissent — above all, the total media blackout in the beleaguered territory — leaves no doubt that the world’s biggest democracy is no longer worthy of that distinction.”

A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders — in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

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