



### AGITATION IN BANGLADESH ON MODI'S VISIT

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived Dhaka for a two-day official visit on 26 March, 2021. Bangladesh hoped that Modi's participation in the celebrations of the country's Golden Jubilee and participation in birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, also known as the founder of Bangladesh, would be memorable. However, the visit led to a vehement protest across the country on his arrival to Dhaka. At least twelve people have been killed and many wounded as security forces opened fire to quell protests in different parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> Modi being a staunch follower of RSS ideology his presence resultantly in Dhaka sparked the protest and violence across Bangladesh is a sheer embarrassment in diplomatic ties of both countries. The womens' rights activist of Bangladesh, Shireen Huq, asserts that "After the BJP came to power in India in 2014, the anti-India sentiments turned into more of an anti-Modi feeling in Bangladesh".<sup>2</sup>

Critics in Bangladesh and elsewhere have held Modi responsible for provocations of the masses on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bangladesh. His exclusionary and Hindu nationalist mindset of escalating religious polarization in India and unfair policies against minorities, especially, Muslim community

<sup>1</sup> "At least 12 people killed in Bangladesh storm," *Hindustan Times*, April 02, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/at-least-12-people-killed-in-bangladesh-storm/story-OccONTDoZcqZ5L157UzYyL>

<sup>2</sup> AnbarasanEthirajan, "Why Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh led to 12 deaths," *BBC News*, March 13, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56586210>

living in India triggered demonstrations in Muslim-majority Bangladesh and urged Modi not to visit Bangladesh. The demonstrators also castigated Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for inviting him.<sup>3</sup>

Leaders of Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan were also invited as guests of honor, while Modi was supposed to cap off 10 days long celebration that ultimately paved the way for nationwide protests. Initially, a group of students of seminaries and the so-called Islamists held a protest on 26 March after the Friday prayers at a mosque in Dhaka. They took their shoes in hands, chanted anti-Modi and anti-India slogans, to show him disrespect and opposed his visit to Dhaka.<sup>4</sup> Soon, clashes erupted, police used tear gas and batons to disperse the crowd. Protests then spread to other parts of the country by leaps and bounds. A hard-line group, Hefazat-e-Islam, called for a countrywide shutdown strike on 28 March to condemn the attacks by the law enforcement agencies on the peaceful rallies.<sup>5</sup>

The incidents had incited public outrage across the country. Even, the supporters of ruling party condemned the brutal crackdown on the peaceful protesters. Though India and Bangladesh have cordial relationships, there still remains an undercurrent of anti-India sentiment among the Bangladeshis. The rise of Hindu nationalist regime in India has further exacerbated the relations of both countries. Some controversial events under Bharatiya Janata Party BJP regime in India inflicted severe blow to India-Bangladesh relations. For instance, in 2019 election rallies, Modi and other senior leaders of BJP rubbished the illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh into Indian West Bengal and Assam states. However, Bangladeshi officials later denied Indian false accusations.<sup>6</sup> The incumbent Indian Home Minister, Amit Shah, during 2019 polarized election campaign, termed unauthorized Muslim immigrants as “termites” maintained that the BJP government will “pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.”<sup>7</sup>

Shah's statement opened the way to a barrage of criticism all across Bangladesh. Yet another discriminatory and contentious move of introducing Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 by Modi regime to give citizenship to non-Muslims religious minorities facing religious persecution in

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<sup>3</sup> Modi's visit to Bangladesh sets off violent protests, *The New York Times*, March 28, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/26/world/asia/bangladesh-protests-narendra-modi.html>

<sup>4</sup> Staff, S. “At least 13 killed in Bangladesh in protests against PM Modi's visit,” *Scroll.in*, March 29, 2021. <https://scroll.in/latest/990823/at-least-10-killed-in-bangladesh-as-protests-against-pm-modis-visit-continue>

<sup>5</sup> “Violent protests spread in Bangladesh after Modi visit,” *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/28/violent-protests-spread-in-bangladesh-after-modi-visit>

<sup>6</sup> Ethirajan, “Why Narendra Modi's visit,” *BBC News*.

<sup>7</sup> Devjyot Ghoshal, “Amit Shah Vows to Throw Illegal Immigrants into Bay of Bengal,” April 12, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-election-speech-idUSKCN1RO1YD>

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh further caused resentments among the Bangladeshis. By definition, the act does not include Muslims and was perceived as an anti-Muslim act that took Dhaka by surprise.<sup>8</sup>

India and Bangladesh are also embroiled in water dispute, both states in December 2020, held a virtual summit that was attributed to discuss strengthening of trade, investment transportation links and water sharing of Teesta River. New Delhi in the summit was reluctant to discuss the issue of water sharing that flows into Bangladesh from Sikkim and West Bengal states of India. Bangladesh being a lower riparian state urged India to share more water from the Teesta River. The appeal of Dhaka as far as water sharing with India is concerned is unacceptable to New Delhi by virtue of mounting pressure of the Indian West Bengal state.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Imran Saleh Prince, the organizing secretary of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) argues that "As India hasn't resolved the Teesta matter, Bangladesh was forced to look toward China for assistance. India still has time to take action so that we don't have to seek help from China,"<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Subir Bhaumik, editorial director of The Eastern Link news site articulates that Indian strained relations with its neighbours might have compelled Dhaka to tilt towards Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina, who is considered to be the closest ally of India seems to be disappointed with Modi over Teesta River water sharing as no agreement over water sharing happened as yet. The government of Bangladesh and its people has a great deal of reservation over New Delhi's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and killing of over 1,200 Bangladeshis across border by Indian forces in last two decades and describing Muslim immigrants as 'termites' by India's Home Minister Amit Shah has further hurt sentiments of Bangladeshis. The growing fiercely anger on Modi's visit to Bangladesh is a lucid warning to New Delhi that if the genuine grievances of its neighbour are unaddressed, India would be conceived being a friend only with the government in Dhaka but not with the people of Bangladesh. In short, Modi is a polarizing figure in the region and his visit to Dhaka, caused an embarrassment in India-Bangladesh relations.

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<sup>8</sup> Why India's new citizenship bill is controversial," *BBC News*, November 11, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>

<sup>9</sup> Deutsche Welle ([www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com)), "Why the Bangladesh-India Friendship is Under Pressure," DW.COM, April 3, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-bangladesh-ties/a-56473457>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.