

THE CURRENT TRAJECTORY OF INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Source: Photo Courtesy: The Business Standard

Introduction

Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India have been at a historic low since the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in August 2024. While the student-led uprising demanding quota reforms leading to overthrowing Sheikh Hasina government seriously set back India's Bangladesh policy, recent developments in bilateral ties have indicated further drift, marked by growing mistrust.

On the Indian side, the state institutions, segments of civil society, and the media have expressed concerns over the safety of Bangladeshi Hindus and their religious and private properties. The real issue for Bangladesh, on the other side, is Sheikh Hasina's refuge in India and her political activism, who is trying under New Delhi's protection and patronage to turn the international community against the August 'revolution' and the resultant Prof. Yunus-led interim setup. Despite claims and pledges from both sides to work closely, normalization in bilateral relations seems a distant dream.

Several factors can be seen at work behind the substantially deteriorating relationship between the two South Asian neighbors, that was considered too close just a few months ago. These include India's distrustful view of the mass movement leading to Hasina's fall; India's decision to provide space to Hasina for her activities despite Dhaka's resentment; Indian media and Hindu nationalist elements manipulating sentiments of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh to malign Dhaka globally; and an unwillingness on New Delhi's part to mend diplomatic ties based on equality and respect for Bangladesh's sovereignty.

A Public Smear Campaign against Bangladesh

Bangladesh has faced criticism from the international community for supposedly inadequate measures to ensure the safety of its minorities, mostly Hindus. The authorities in Dhaka, however, claim that attacks on Hindus and their properties did take place amid chaos in the country immediately following the fall of Hasina government. However, strict measures to ensure protection of minorities were taken as soon as order was restored.¹ The Indian media, on the other side, portrays Bangladesh as a country that is allegedly on the path to 'ethnic cleansing' of its Hindu minority.² Its coverage following the arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a Hindu monk in Chittagong, turned into an orchestrated media and public campaign against Dhaka, with state institutions, political parties, Hindu nationalist groups, and the general public joining it lately.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has repeatedly called upon the Interim government to protect minorities. For its part, Dhaka has characterized Indian concerns regarding safety of Hindus in Bangladesh as "exaggerated" and out of proportion, with the Chief Advisor labelling it "Indian Aggression".³ As per the official sources in Bangladesh, targeting of Hindus in some parts of the country was due to political, not religious reasons.⁴ Complaining of a disinformation campaign against Dhaka viral on the Indian screens, Bangladeshi officials have also urged the Indian media to send their representatives to the country to verify the ground situation by themselves.⁵

Following the relentless media campaign against Bangladesh, Indian political parties stepped in to show sympathies for Bangladeshi Hindus and win support domestically. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological patron, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have been using the rhetoric of communal tensions in Bangladesh in order to solidify their Hindu support base.⁶ The opposition Congress party and West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress also peddled the same

1 "Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus Urges Unity to Counter 'Indian Aggression,'" *The Economic Times*, December 4, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/bangladeshs-muhammad-yunus-urges-unity-to-counter-indian-aggression/articleshow/115978879.cms>.

2 Utpal Kumar, "A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing': Why We Don't Care Enough for Minorities in Bangladesh – and Pakistan," *Firstpost*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/a-quiet-case-of-ethnic-cleansing-why-we-dont-care-enough-for-minorities-in-bangladesh-and-pakistan-13802439.html>.

3 "Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus Urges Unity to Counter 'Indian Aggression,'" December 4, 2024.

4 "India-Bangladesh Relations Sour as Tensions Rise Over Attacks on Hindu Minority," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/05/india-bangladesh-relations-sour-as-tensions-rise-over-attacks-on-hindu-minority>.

5 "Visit Bangladesh to See the Reality, Govt Urges Indian Journos," *The Business Standard*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/visit-bangladesh-see-reality-govt-urges-indian-journos-1009301>.

6 "BJP Declares Agitation at India-Bangladesh Border Against Alleged Attacks," *Hindustan Times*, December 1, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/bjp-declares-agitation-at-india-bangladesh-border-against-alleged-attacks-101733068470740.html>.

rhetoric to attract hardline voters. Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee urged the Modi Government to seek deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Bangladesh to protect minorities.⁷

The unabated media campaign, used by the political parties to enrage common Indian citizens, resulted in an attack on the Bangladesh Consulate in the Indian city of Agartala in police presence which sent further wrong message to the government and people of Bangladesh.⁸ The phenomenon may also spiral into communal tensions against Muslims in India especially in states like West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and Jharkhand.

Distrust in India over Mass Movement

The ongoing row between the two countries, involving public sentiments at both sides, also indicates a vast gap in understanding of the newly-emerged realities in Bangladesh. In India, the mass movement that overthrew the previous regime was viewed with enormous suspicion and attempts were made to unearth some 'foreign conspiracy' or external plot behind Sheikh Hasina's ouster. In the early days following the fall of the Hasina government, almost every Indian newspaper and TV channel somehow referred to the involvement of a 'foreign conspiracy' to overthrow an India-friendly government in Dhaka, or to bring radical Islamist factions at the helm.⁹ The slanted public discourse on prominent social media platforms further reinforced this narrative. Media coverage implied that the people in Bangladesh were incapable of determining their own future and that it was the U.S., China, or Pakistan that told them what to do. Demonizing a popular movement enjoying unprecedented public support has widened the gulf between India and Bangladesh at both government and public levels.

Public Anger over India's Protection of Sheikh Hasina

While Bangladeshis were already furious over New Delhi's unqualified support for Sheikh Hasina over the past 15 years, her final decision to cross the border into India seeking refuge further deepened the sense among the masses that India preferred a particular political party, rather a personality, over common Bengalis. Beyond just offering her a safe haven, the Indian media, political

⁷ "Mamata Banerjee Calls for UN Peacekeeping in Bangladesh, Seeks PM Modi's Intervention," *The Times of India*, December 2, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/mamata-banerjee-calls-for-un-peacekeeping-in-bangladesh-seeks-pm-modis-intervention/articleshow/115895084.cms>.

⁸ "Bangladesh Seeks Action Against Protesters Who Breached Its Mission in India's Northeast," *Reuters*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-seeks-action-against-protesters-who-breached-its-mission-indias-2024-12-02/>.

⁹ Faisal Mahmud and Saqib Sarker, "'Islamophobic, Alarmist': How Some India Outlets Covered Bangladesh Crisis," *Al Jazeera*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/8/islamophobic-alarmist-how-some-india-outlets-covered-bangladesh-crisis>.

parties, and the general public largely joined hands with her in maligning the mass movement and the subsequent political developments in Dhaka.

After maintaining silence for over 3 months, the ousted leader has started political commentary from India as she recently accused Chief Advisor Professor Yunus of being involved in a ‘genocide’ against minorities.¹⁰ Despite officials in New Delhi maintaining distance from her comments, Sheikh Hasina’s political activism from the Indian soil may lead to further turbulence in bilateral ties.¹¹ The official demand from Dhaka to extradite the former prime minister may test New Delhi’s diplomatic nerves and its repetitive claims to support a democratic, stable, peaceful, progressive, and inclusive Bangladesh.¹²

Conclusion

It is understandable that suddenly losing a seasoned ally next door was not easy for New Delhi to digest. However, India’s cold response to Dhaka’s calls for a fresh start at bilateral level on equitable and respectable terms; its continued backing for Sheikh Hasina; and persistent anti-Dhaka campaign on Indian media illustrate India’s continued negative view of the changed environment in its neighborhood. India’s Bangladesh policy does not seem to come out of the shock it suffered on August 5, and is driven by a reactive approach rather than a constructive forward-looking one. Given the heavy odds, rebuilding trust and bringing the seriously derailed relationship back on track would be nothing short of a Herculean task. A clear message from New Delhi accepting changed realities, reaffirming respect for Bangladesh’s sovereignty, and showing willingness to positively engage with the new administration in Dhaka may help heal some of the wounds which Bangladeshis believe the 15 years of Sheikh Hasina’s oppressive rule with India’s fully backing inflicted upon the Bangladeshi people, politics, and society.

¹⁰ “Sheikh Hasina Accuses Muhammad Yunus of Perpetrating ‘genocide’ Against Bangladesh Minorities in First Pub,” *The Economic Times*, December 4, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/sheikh-hasina-accuses-muhammad-yunus-of-perpetrating-genocide-against-bangladesh-minorities-in-first-public-address/articleshow/115980421.cms?from=mdr>.

¹¹ Suhasini Haidar, Sobhana K. Nair, Kallol Bhattacharjee, “India Does Not Endorse Hasina’s Statements: Vikram Misri,” *The Hindu*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-does-not-endorse-hasinas-statements-vikram-misri/article68974541.ece>.

¹² “Foreign Secretary’s Visit to Bangladesh,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38733/Foreign_Secretarys_Visit_to_Bangladesh.