



A Report
on
Round Table Consultation
on
India – Bangladesh Relation: The Way Forward

Global India Foundation

*“India should not overemphasize history and Bangladesh should not forget geography
and both the countries should develop vested interest in each other’s prosperity”*

Prof. Omprakash Mishra, 2011.

A Round Table Consultation on ***India-Bangladesh Relation: The Way Forward*** was held on 16th August, 2011 by Global India Foundation and Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, University of Calcutta at Jadavpur University. The objective of the Consultation was to renew the necessary emphasis on strengthening India – Bangladesh bilateral relations and move towards a more favourable engagement between the two neighbours.

Dr. Sreeradha Datta of IDSA, New Delhi and Director-Designate, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) was the lead discussant. Prof. Jayanta K Ray, Former Centenary Professor of International Relations, University of Calcutta, Amb. Krishnan Srinivasan, Former Foreign Secretary, GoI, Dr. Prabir Dey of Kalyani University and Mr. Manas Ghosh of The Statesman were amongst the panelists. Prof. Omprakash Mishra, Member Secretary of Global India Foundation and Professor of International Relations, Jadavpur University Chaired the Consultation. Prof. Sanjukta Bhattacharya, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University made the opening remarks, setting the tone for the ensuing deliberations. Dr. Shantanu Chakraborti, Coordinator, Academic Committee, Institute for Foreign Policy Studies delivered the vote of thanks on behalf of the organizers.



From left to right: Prof. Sanjukta Bhattacharya, Dr. Sreeradha Datta, Prof. Omprakash Mishra

The Consultation took place at the backdrop of the forthcoming visit of the Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh.

India and Bangladesh have for the first time since 1975 seized a historic opportunity to build a sustained and stable relationship, the propelling force being Sheikh Hasina's Awami League led government at the helm of affairs. This provided a fertile ground for the panelists to debate and discuss a host of issues and ideas which could help foster increased cooperation between the two states.

The discussion for the day began with the issue of regime compatibility being a critical factor in India -Bangladesh relations. Dr. Sreeradha Dutta laid emphasis on the fact that improved relations between the two countries would help them transcend regime compatibility; a point echoed by Prof. Omprakash Mishra as well.

Migration, water-sharing, border demarcation, minorities, trade and transit were amongst the important issues deliberated upon in the Consultation. Also the significance of North-east India in the bilateral relations between the two states was underlined by most panelists given the increasing consciousness on both sides about the fact that growth in trade and connectivity through the Northeast of India would be in the best interest of both the states. Though illegal migration and disputes related to water sharing have plagued the bilateral relation between the two states for the longest time, the panelists believed that recent trends vis-à-vis migration, water sharing and border demarcation are encouraging. For instance Dr. Dutta and Prof. Jayanta Ray agreed that the agreement on Teesta and the subsequent joint survey resolutions arrived at by both sides are positive steps towards resolving outstanding issues. In this regard Dr. Dutta also mentioned the talks on framework agreement for the demarcation of the remaining 6.5 kms of disputed land border between India and Bangladesh.

Amb. Krishnan Srinivasan brought in the West Bengal factor in India-Bangladesh relations and stated that West Bengal's relation with Bangladesh has direct consequence on the bilateral relations of India and Bangladesh.

Dr. Prabir Dey spoke about collaborative research programmes on non-conventional security issues such as environmental degradation and biodiversity and poverty alleviation programmes to foster closer ties between the two states.

Further the panelists discussed some of the problems that could impede the prospects of a sustained relationship between the two countries. The principal problem identified by the panelists was the absence of a proactive stance on part of India towards improving relations. The speakers were unanimous in stating that India has the greater share of responsibility in improving relations. Prof. Mishra aptly stated that India in order to be a global power needs to be a global player and in order to assume a leadership role in the region it should facilitate better socio-politico-economic ties with the neighbours including Bangladesh. Dr. Sreeradha Dutta identified several critical areas where India seems to have failed to keep its past commitments and stressed on the need to deliver on some of them; most significant amongst them being the promise of exporting more power to Bangladesh and ensuring more frequent and regular visits by top level Indian officials including the Prime Minister (Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's scheduled visit in September is the first visit by a Prime Minister to Bangladesh in more than a decade). Dr. Dutta also stated that on the economic front India needs to significantly reduce tariff and quotas for Bangladeshi exports.

On the other hand Prof. Jayanta Ray brought to the table critical problems like expulsion of criminals from one state indicted by the other, difficulties in translating consensus to action, corruption at the official end in the border areas adversely effecting business and stressed on the urgent need to address these issues.

Amb. Krishnan Srinivasan too pressed for India's good relations with Bangladesh. Bangladesh being one of the largest Muslim nations has in his opinion immense geopolitical significance to India and conducive bilateral relations between these two states can have a positive impact on the whole region. It would therefore be in India's interest to develop closer relations with Bangladesh. Having said that Amb. Srinivasan also pointed towards the large number of pending matters which are not being settled by India and often poor leadership, ineffectual and incompetent bureaucracy in India prove to be obstacles in developing amicable relations with its neighbour.

In Mr. Manas Ghosh's opinion the domestic situation in Bangladesh and the rising opposition against the Awami League can strain the country's relations with India. He stated that although Sheikh Hasina had the support of the top echelons of power, the mid-level officers were lending active support to the opposition. He therefore suggested that Sheikh Hasina's leadership requires

popular support and India should play a part in fostering it by helping Bangladesh in areas like power generation and other infrastructural developments, which would lend greater stability to the incumbent government.

The Consultation was summed up by Prof. Omprakash Mishra with the statement that “India should not overemphasize history and Bangladesh should not forget geography and both the countries should develop vested interest in each other’s prosperity.”