

# India - Bangladesh: Bilateral Relations

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## I. Introduction

In 2024, India and Bangladesh marked 53 years of diplomatic relations, a partnership that began during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. During this critical period, India played a pivotal role in supporting Bangladesh's fight for independence from Pakistan. This event marked the start of a lasting friendship and cooperation between the two nations. India was the first country to recognise Bangladesh as an independent state.

The two countries are combined by several things: a common history and shared lineage, linguistic and cultural bonds, and an ardor for music, literature, and the arts. This only goes to show the extent of their geopolitical and geostrategic importance. Bangladesh's position is once again relevant to India's neighborhood policy by default, since it gains this leverage. This geopolitical proximity has made Bangladesh an important partner for India's Act East Policy. Thus, Bangladesh continues to prioritize the "India factor" in a number of aspects of its foreign relations, owing to its significance for Bangladeshi decision makers.

## II. Evolution Of India-Bangladesh Relations

India-Bangladesh relations have spanned several decades, with political ups and downs, economic development, and strategic consideration.

### Phase One: Liberation and Early Ties 1971-75

India became the first country to recognize the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and shortly thereafter, in 1972, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed. The phase ended with the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

### Phase Two: Military Rule and Strained Relations 1975-1990

This was followed by military rule and increased involvement by the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China, marked by suspicion and tense relations with India.

### Third Phase: Democratic Transition and Economic Engagement 1991-2009

This phase witnessed multi-party democracy initiating the change for improved economic relations. The sharing of the Ganga River water in 1996 by the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League coalition exhibited some positives despite periodic tensions.

### Fourth Phase: Deepening Partnerships 2009 onwards

The electoral victories of the Awami League in 2009, 2014, and 2019 deepened India-Bangladesh relations. The partnership got deeper in economic and strategic areas, also including the backing from Bangladesh for a permanent seat of India at the UN Security Council.

The rich tapestry of bilateralism that has been borne out in relations between India and Bangladesh is underpinned by firm political, economic, trade, and cultural relations. Their cooperation has covered many sectors during the past four decades and is based on a firm institutional foundation. Shared geography has certainly played a huge role in bonding, especially the 54 rivers in flow between them, which have necessitated schemes like the Ganges Water Treaty. The biodiversity asset of Sundarbans is conserved jointly by both nations. In this regard, the Joint River Commission, established in 1972, had a very critical role in managing and sharing water resources. Giant steps were undertaken at the political level, such as the Ganges Water Treaty in 1996 and the Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, which strengthened mutual trust.

Economically, Bangladesh is now India's largest trading partner in South Asia, with two-way trade well over \$14.2 billion. Other initiatives, like CEPA, are in hand to take this economic relationship to even greater depths. Restoration of damaged railway lines and the Maitree Express train service improved connectivity, while security cooperation has been focused on combating terrorism and cross-border crime.

The India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, inaugurated in 2023, epitomizes their cooperation in the field of energy security. It would provide a sustainable and cost-effective mode of transportation for high-speed diesel from India to Bangladesh.

Socio-cultural relations have also deepened recently with the aid of cultural exchange programmes and Border Haats set up since 2012. It has fostered people-to-people contact that builds trust and improves bilateral relations. It was followed up with a strong Covid-19 partnership between India and Bangladesh through a massive deal for the supply of vaccines from Serum Institute of India to Beximco Pharma. Finally, a visit by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India brought out the possibility of strengthening relations further with discussion on security, trade, connectivity, climate change, space technology, and cyber security.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges persist. Management of the 4,096-kilometer shared border remains contentious due to illegal immigration, smuggling, and human trafficking. Illegal immigration into northeast India has had demographic changes and social tension in areas like Assam and has provoked India to seek stricter measures. Sharing waters from their 54 common rivers is another huge challenge.

The Joint River Commission has allowed a few agreements—its many unfinished tasks include the Ganga Water Agreement and the Feni Water Agreement Treaty—but much more remains to be done, especially vis-à-vis the highly contentious Teesta River.

The killings and problems related to smuggling at the border raise the tension further. Steps to improve connectivity, like the Maitree Express and the Bandhan Express, are often made hostage to bigger political issues. Growing economic cooperation faces challenges in its infrastructure, mismatched to the smooth movement of goods.

Another layer of complexity that can be added is the "India Out" campaign by Bangladesh, getting full momentum after the January 2024 election. Spearheaded by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the campaign could further spread unrest in Bangladesh's economy and diminish demand for Indian goods. The BNP has its biases toward China and Pakistan; therefore, geopolitically, it may alter regional security dynamics against India's interests. Such challenges can be addressed only through continuous diplomatic negotiations, enhanced security cooperation, and infrastructure development.

### **III. Conclusion**

The relationship between India and Bangladesh is strong both in political-security and socio-economic terms, realizing that mutual cooperation is a precondition for growth. Both governments, in the last two decades, moved within the framework of cooperation and celebrated 50 years of relations between them in 2021. Shared values like liberal democracy and secularism bring it close to socio-cultural nationalism, and Bangladesh will also become the largest trading partner of India in South Asia. Their partnership, based on the Bangladesh Liberation War, has actually spawned a series of projects on connectivity and regional cooperative initiatives.

However, growing ties between Bangladesh and China, esp. over matters concerning the investment in infrastructural investments, as also its relations with Pakistan, are a matter of concern. Both countries need to balance such dynamics carefully for positive bilateral relations. Improved academic and media cooperation, exchange programs, and dispute resolution, especially with respect to sharing of river waters, are called for. Accelerated steps are toward increasing bilateral trade and decreasing informal trade, health cooperation, controlling smuggling across the borders, and augmenting people-to-people contact through Border Haats. Track-II diplomacy can be an influential alternate channel to cement relations. Recently, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar termed India-Bangladesh relations as "a model relationship" in the subcontinent and lauded their strong historical linkage forged fifty years back.