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Evolving India-Bangladesh Relations

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This article is based on “**Good neighbours: On India-Bangladesh ties**” which was published in The Hindu on 31/03/2021. It talks about the new trends in India-Bangladesh ties.

Recently, the Prime Minister of India visited Bangladesh to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war of liberation and the centenary year of **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**.

Historically, India's has played a critical role in the creation of Bangladesh. India's political, diplomatic, military and humanitarian support during Bangladesh's Liberation War played an important role towards Bangladesh's independence.

This is the first foreign visit since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic of the Indian Prime Minister and it conveys that India attaches **great importance to the relationship with its eastern neighbour**.

Further, the recent events highlight a deeper understanding on both sides of the India-Bangladesh relationship. However, there are few challenges that need to be resolved for a win-win relationship.

New Trends in India-Bangladesh Ties

In the last decade, India-Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation, and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and defence. This can be reflected in the following events:

- **Military Cooperation:** The Bangladesh government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has **uprooted anti-India insurgency elements** from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful.
 - This has allowed India to make a massive redeployment of military resources to its more contentious borders elsewhere.
 - Further, Bangladesh handed over many of India's "most wanted" criminals.
 - India has also accepted an **international tribunal verdict** in favour of Bangladesh that resolved a **40-year-old maritime dispute** and built confidence as well.
- **Land Boundary Agreement:** Bangladesh and India have achieved the rare feat of solving their border issues peacefully by ratifying the historic **Land Boundary Agreement in 2015**.

In that agreement, enclaves were swapped allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh.
- **Trade Relations:** Bangladesh today is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in FY 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion.

Also, India has offered duty free access to multiple Bangladeshi products.
- **Development Sector:** On the development front, cooperation has deepened, with India extending three lines of credit to Bangladesh in recent years amounting to \$8 billion for the construction of roads, railways, bridges, and ports.
- **Improved Connectivity:** Connectivity between the two countries has greatly improved.
 - A direct bus service between Kolkata and Agartala runs a route distance of 500 km, as compared to the 1,650 km if it ran through the Chicken's Neck to remain within India.
 - Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram (Chittagong) seaports carried by road, rail, and water ways to Agartala.
- **News Areas of Engagement:** Bangladeshis make up a large portion of tourists in India, outnumbering all tourists arriving from western Europe in 2017, with one in every five tourists being a Bangladeshi.

Bangladesh accounts for more than **35% of India's international medical patients** and contributes more than 50% of India's revenue from medical tourism.

Challenges in India-Bangladesh Ties

- **Teesta River Dispute:** Despite the remarkable progress, the unresolved Teesta water sharing issue looms large.
- **Illegal Migration:** The problem of Bangladeshi civilians being killed at the border has dented relations. The year 2020 saw the highest number of border shootings by the Border Security Force.

These shootings occur as many Bangladeshi people try to illegally migrate into India.

- **NRC & CAA:** Indian government's proposal to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC) across the whole of India and impetus for the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), reflects poorly on India-Bangladesh relations.
- **China Factor:** Despite its 'Neighbourhood First Policy', India has been losing its influence in the region to China.
 - Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, once considered traditional Indian allies, are increasingly tilting towards China due to the Asian giant's massive trade, infrastructural and defence investments in these countries.
 - China, in lieu of its cheque-book diplomacy, is well-entrenched in South Asia, including Bangladesh, with which it enjoys significant economic and defence relations.

Way Forward

- **India's Learning From Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is the region's fastest growing economy, with social indicators that other countries, including India, can learn.

This is the vital link with which India can realise the full potential of either the economic or strategic underpinnings of its Act East policy.
- **Water Sharing:** While all countries desire to be recognised as equal, they also want bigger countries to take more responsibility for protecting this equality. This, India must "play a pioneering role in India-Bangladesh relations."

Therefore, as the larger country, the onus is on India to be generous enough to let the water flow and resolve the dispute over Teesta water and six other rivers.
- **Balancing Trade:** Trade could be more balanced if non-tariff barriers from the Indian side could be removed.

Conclusion

As Bangladesh celebrates its 50 years of independence, India continues to be one of its most important neighbours and strategic partners. To make the recent gains irreversible, both countries need to continue working on the three Cs — cooperation, collaboration, and consolidation.

Drishti Mains Question

The recent events highlight a deeper understanding on both sides of the India-Bangladesh relationship. Analyse.
