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# Bangladesh Ties with India's North-Eastern States: Challenges of Connectivity



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## Introduction

Relations at all human levels — within, between, and among nations — are currently faced with multiple challenges; the most testing in onward journey of civilizations is to cope with the challenges of the age of universal connectivity.<sup>1</sup> Connectivity is a multifaceted concept, which brings along a new set of challenges. It conveys the state of being connected, interconnected, or connecting parts; implicitly it may also indicate disconnect in relations. It has been in wide-ranging use as a generic term for analytical and/or research purposes in fields like accounting, mathematical graphs, and telecommunications. Of late, its use in information technology is well-known. It also faces challenges of multiple orders, such as: security, communications, culture, matters of life and living, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Connectivity, as a theoretical construct, entails a systematic symmetric formulation to minimize the challenges of asymmetric ordering of relations in adjacent or neighbouring environments. The theory is subject to variational principles (a geometric notion implying general methods to find functions, minimizing or maximizing the functional value of quantities),<sup>3</sup> but as conceptualized for social science analysis, is directed towards meeting specific problems by choosing appropriate values or needs for general solutions or advancing adjacent relations between and among sub-regional entities. This paper applies the theory to explore the extent of developing connectivities between Bangladesh and the adjacent Indian north-eastern states (NES) to identify the needs for general solutions of the up-and-coming challenges. The paper also suggests measures on how to advance the neighbourly relations between and among regional and sub-regional entities. Thus, the basic question that it strives to address is: How a construct, as advanced above, may be relevant to ordering relations between Bangladesh and the neighbouring NES in terms of connectivity?

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The aforementioned framework of connectivities is used in the paper to analyse connecting and disconnecting elements of relations between Bangladesh and the neighbouring NES. Such connectivities are manifested in geographic, ecological, ethnic, and historical continuities as well as cultural ties of all sorts, despite disconnecting elements that surfaced both during the colonial times and post-colonial partition of India. The relational asymmetries resulting out of colonial and post-colonial experiences have disrupted adjacent neighbourliness and impeded the relational concord that existed between the two sides. The spontaneity of Indian support to Bengalis fleeing from the then East Pakistan to the neighbouring states of India during the Bangladesh Liberation War, however, resonated once again into their commonalities or symmetrical connection. The more recent bilateral accords, including exchange of enclaves and re-opening parts of past connectivities, serve as cases in point on how to overcome the past pattern of asymmetric barriers and help create a psychological milieu for reincarnation of connectivities between the two sides. Yet numerous challenges of connectivity stay on, arising from hierarchical fear, co-existential situations, mutual antipathy, and variation of perception. These can be overcome with sustained loyalties to symmetrical bonding of relations, balancing of mutual interests, and nurturing of ties that will draw them still closer together.

### **Conceptualizing connectivity: Analytical framework**

It is imperative, first of all, to offer a fuller appraisal of the concept of connectivity, keeping in view the contextual aspects. The current age of connectivity is connecting humans, ecosystems, and societies across the globe. Connectivity links habitats in space and time. It is a key process that facilitates many life-histories, and functions of myriad species in a variety of contexts over a wide range of scales. Perhaps its most obvious application is to the multifaceted linkages among the diverse surroundings comprising habitats and ecosystems. Connectivity thus looks like a pervasive and multifaceted process affecting and enabling the living beings in structuring biological populations, communities, and assemblages, and in energizing the biological processes that support them.<sup>4</sup>

Connectivity has become a global ‘buzzword.’ It found its more recent expression with innovations in information technology. Nowadays, it has swept into everybody’s finger tips, private lounges, and public offices, affecting the whole spectrum of human relations. Individuals and businesses, capitals and cities, towns and villages, communities and societies, and states and non-state actors across the global community are experiencing connectivity greater in magnitude than ever before. All national and international players are resorting to connectivity for marketing their respective ideas and policies, or enhancing their objective strategies. These emerging connectivities cut across terrain and sub-terrain, sea and subsea, and air and outer space to captivate human mind.

Notionally, connectivity entails capacity-building for interconnection of communication platforms, systems, and applications. It also puts across the art or act of joining ideas, terms, and issues together in order for them to be in synchronizing bonds with each other. It creates network points and enabling

environments between and among the partakers to make and maintain connections towards augmenting and fastening relationships. Operationally it points to measures for concatenated adjacency, that is, linking together the number of ways in which points and/or surrounding units are connected in an order of symmetrical harmony to each other, or as is meant in Microsoft terms 'to combine' or 'join together' whereby a function allows two or more strings jointed together.<sup>5</sup>

Connectivity has its classical theoretical roots, which include topological and graph-theoretic notions; but more recently the theory of connectivity has been applied to construct a systematic or perhaps symmetrical formulation of boundary element methods with a view to provide for, or overcome, problems of connecting solutions in adjacent surroundings or neighbourhood environments. The theory is thus conceptualized in terms of its social science analytical purposes,<sup>6</sup> that is, to apply the suggested boundary element or border line following the methodological approaches of the natural/physical sciences, to construct solutions suited to address specific relational problems. This paper applies the concept to the state-based boundary values of general solutions to entities such as known in sub-regions like Bangladesh and the NES, which could be applied to other relevant socio-political entities as well.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of an inclusive connectivity condition has to keep in view the 'variational principles' in the interest of ordering the inter-state relations in non-hierarchical fashion, to overcome the challenges arising from asymmetric structure of connectivity. In the wider South Asian contexts, the key may be to minimize the challenges arising from restrictive diffraction problems or relational wave barriers that are likely to crop up from the higher layer of wave or relational structure. As in natural sciences, the solution in such a scenario would be to lessen the challenges through superlenses or focusing on super-resolution techniques that operate beyond the diffraction limit.<sup>8</sup> The variational principles more generally are thus applicable in South Asian contexts. The problem of connecting solutions defined in different scientific fields is basic to finite element formulations, as is done through finite element analysis (FEA) and product optimization in many branches of science, technology, and engineering for product improvement, design, and performance. In social science context of inter-state and/or intra-state relations, however, an application of potential theory to suit a general class of policy or boundary integral equations on a prioritized basis can be quite challenging,<sup>9</sup> because such matters stake higher levels of sovereign policy concerns, or bring in the wider contexts of regional and international relations. Formally symmetric operators occur in many branches of science, technology, and engineering. Applications of potential theory are required to be so prioritized not to touch upon the wave propagation, elasticity, and a general class of boundary integral equations,<sup>10</sup> that is, stake higher levels of sovereign concerns, or bring in the wider contexts of regional and international relations.

Thus connectivity as is conceptualized above may sound a bit abstract or elusive; yet it is highly subject to fixation of focus. One has to keep in view

the decision-making apparatus in India hindering connectivities in the smaller environment, such as between Bangladesh and its north-eastern states that arise from the asymmetric policy operators in the superstructure of wider contexts of South Asian relations. This, in essence, requires the parties (Bangladesh and the NES in this case) seeking connectivities not to look for readymade solutions, or associate them in simple equations or blame-game that may cause feelings of distrust, misgivings, and trust deficit with the result of impeding complete connectivity conditions in the sub-region. In a systemic context, when applied or referred to in physical or natural sciences to matters such as functioning of the physical body, connectivity can be seen as brain-oriented. It means that the functioning of the physical body is focused on or is connected to the brain; otherwise both may become dysfunctional or disconnected. As used in mathematics, connectivity refers to various properties meaning, in some sense, pieces tied together or connected. When each piece is functionally linked, each is usually termed as a component: connected component of a system or subsystem like organic system or brain subsystem.<sup>11</sup> In the objective context of Bangladesh-NES connectivities the key challenge seems to arise from New Delhi, the asymmetric policy operator. Therefore, the point in this case is to lessen the weight of this key challenge. It would naturally seem to be through superlenses of statesmanship, such as, display of largesse, coupled with a focus on super-resolution techniques or application of the art of management that can help facilitate or expedite the process of connectivity.

The objective approach to the use of connectivity in social science research, proposed in the current paper for analyzing relations between and among political entities requires, first, an appraisal of the empirical nature of an ever-increasing connectivity across the international system; second, a deeper understanding of both the historical and emerging nature of relationships in the subsystem of Bangladesh and the NES. An effort will then be made to situate the focus of policy decisions or current decision-making in the sub-region involving Bangladesh and the NES. To be more specific, for identifying the sub-regional relations between Bangladesh and the NES, the contextual terms of their mutual relations need to be apprised in the wider context of Bangladesh-India connectivities, keeping in view whether Bangladesh-NES have become or are becoming connected components of a functional system of connectivity with a shift of decision making gravity.

## **Developing connectivities worldwide**

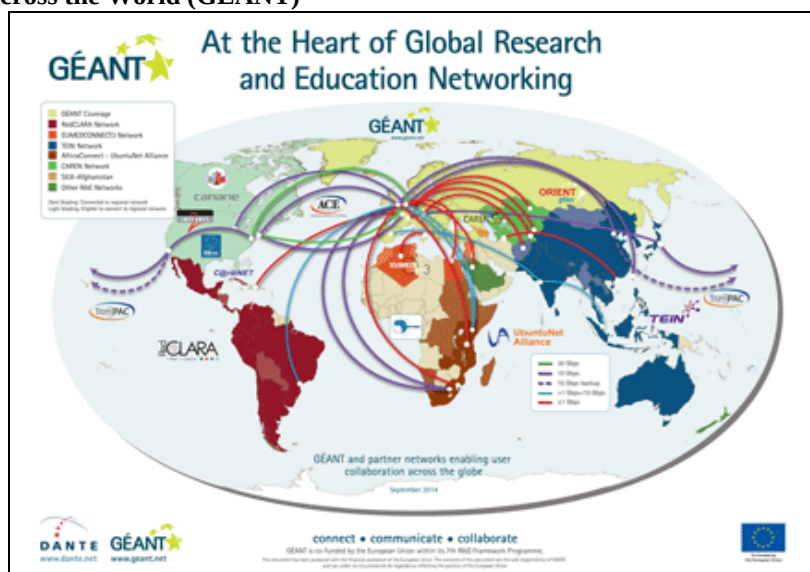
Connectivity, as stated earlier, has its currency internationally; it has been gaining ground and has attained momentum and speed worldwide. In many instances connectivity has been shaping into 'national urban hierarchies' and building even further to transform the world into a 'global village.' There is also the developing 'world city connectivity.' Many of the known cities worldwide are now inter-connected; perhaps EU cities are generally more connected into the world city network than their corresponding Asian and US cities or urban metropolises.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, over the last few decades regions and sub-regions of the world are being connected into blocs and there are also developing inter-bloc connectivities such as between Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU), the EU and the United States, the EU and Africa, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and many more ongoing bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral connectivities the world over. Many of these connectivities focus on trade liberalization, business innovation, investment promotion, technology transfer, conservation of environment, overcoming the ecological hazards, climate change, and so on.

Another developing futuristic area of connectivity, as commercially projected in European context, is focused on dedicated efforts towards creation of research and educational communities, ensuring defined and predictable speeds and quality of service delivery in the areas of education, research, and learning. Emphasis is placed on greater speeds, timely delivery, and very high levels of resilience, which would enable researchers, teachers, and learners to benefit fully from advanced data-sharing techniques and collaboration tools. The motto is better collaboration and integration within and between geographically distributed research and education communities. Networks are to be dedicated to meet the needs of the academic and research communities, and no charges would be payable for usage once an institution is connected. A key to the move is to reshape trading landscape and help change trading-business connectivity, that is, promoting regulations towards electronic trading and enabling clients to adopt new ways to do business and trade.<sup>13</sup>

A movement has also been underway to set up global research and educational connectivities in which 40 European countries are expected to connect to each other for research and education purposes as a community, adding further 65 countries outside Europe in regions as diverse as North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, North Africa and the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Asia-Pacific region. The focus is on technological tie-ups, networks, and bandwidths with better collaboration and integration within and between geographically distributed research and education communities. The objective is to ensure reliable, high-bandwidth connectivity for research and education communities, with defined and predictable speeds and quality of service.<sup>14</sup> See Figure 1 below for the Model of Global Research and Education Networking.

**Figure 1**  
**Global Connectivity Map: Connecting Research & Education Communities Across the World (GÉANT)<sup>15</sup>**



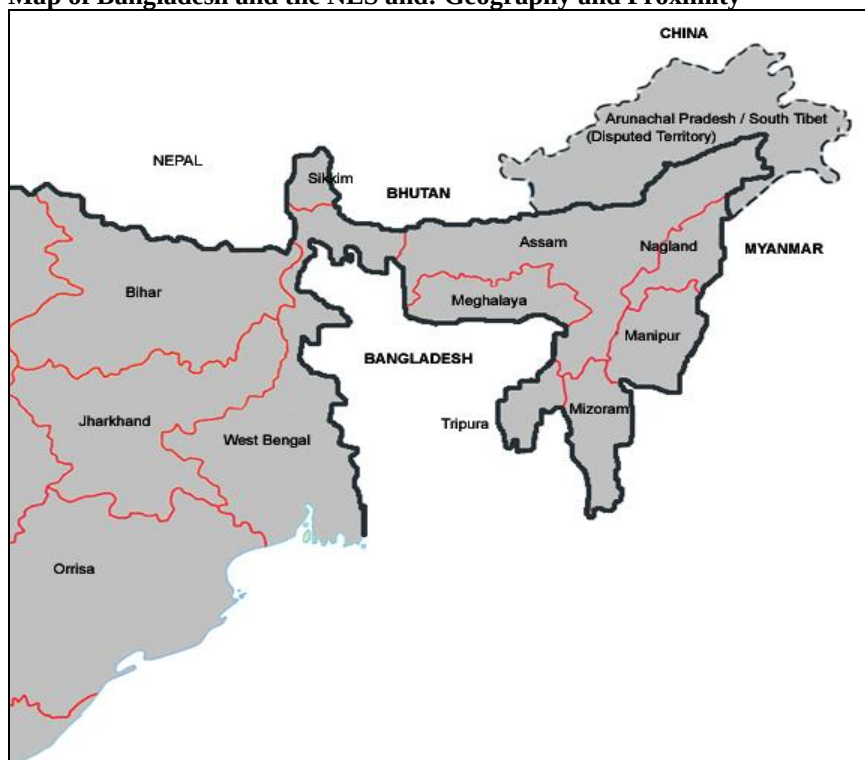
## Bangladesh and the NES connectivity contexts

The NES may be viewed as a sub-region or region (used interchangeably) within the Indian federal union of 29 states. It consists of the contiguous ‘Seven Sister States’ — Arunachal Pradesh,\*\* Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, plus the Himalayan state of Sikkim (see Figure 2 below). Location of these territories suggests a typical nature of their visual isolation from the heartland of India (see Figure 2). Indeed, the NES is the eastern-most region of India, connected to the Indian mainland via the narrow Siliguri Corridor (‘chicken neck,’ with a width of 20 to 40 kilometres or 13 to 25 miles) squeezed between independent nations of Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. China’s Tibet region is located further to the northeast. Besides proximity, Bangladesh and the NES are bound by the same ecosystem: both are covered by the mighty Brahmaputra-Barak river systems and their tributaries; both are located at the confluence of Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese, and Indian bio-geographical realms; and both have a largely humid sub-tropical climate with hot, humid summers, severe monsoons, and mild winters, except for Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim which have a montane climate with cold snowy winters, and mild summers. This subregion has some of the subcontinent’s last remaining rainforests, which support diverse flora and fauna and several crop species.<sup>16</sup> Generally in India’s rapidly growing economy, the

\*\*Arunachal Pradesh is actually under Indian control, but claimed by China as its territory (South Tibet).

NES is considered as a backward territory. It is seen as one of the most challenging regions of India to govern. Strategically, however, it is an important region of India sharing more than 4,500 kilometres (2,800 miles) of international border (about 90 per cent of its entire border area) with China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the south-west, and Bhutan to the north-west.<sup>17</sup>

### Map of Bangladesh and the NES and: Geography and Proximity



### Historical connectivities between Bangladesh and NES/India

The connectivities between Bangladesh and the adjacent NES are inextricably linked to the historical relations with neighbouring India, which are rooted in their physiographic proximity and contiguity, historic and linguistic ties, common civilization and culture, as well as geopolitics, geophysics, and geo-economy. Both also have a common passion for art, music, and literature. These commonalities and historical connectivities were blurred later during and after the exit of the British *Raj*, which led to the division of the subcontinent into independent states of India and Pakistan. However, both Bangladesh and India undeniably carry a bond of blood as both worked jointly and sacrificed incalculable lives during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Indeed the story of the 1971 exodus of the Bengali refugees to the adjacent Indian territories, their

reception, shared struggle, and eventual return — the largest repatriation operation after the Second World War — is a telling one. The historical tale of the Liberation War of Bangladesh forms part of a wider narrative that brings to life a shadowy chapter of history, division of the subcontinent, and then, dismemberment of Pakistan, and the birth of Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup>

The common Bangladesh-India historical and cultural connectivities also reflected their common dedication to certain ideals and a cultural-poetic bonding, as Nazrul's revolutionary hymns and Tagore's romantic lyrics had driven the struggling Bengali *Mukti Bahini* in their liberation uprisings. Their common and somewhat euphoric dedication to common ideals is also reflected in their choice of Tagore's poems as their respective national anthems, a distinctive rarity in world history that shows their common cultural belonging. Currently both Bangladesh and India belong to common entities such as: the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Commonwealth. The historical-cultural bonds, particularly, between Bangladesh and the Bengali-speaking East Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura, are naturally noticeable as they exhibit commonalities in their cuisine and eating habits, dress and manners, life and living style etc.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, whenever the subject of connectivity between Bangladesh and the NES is taken up for consideration, the issue of connectivities across Bangladesh borders in the north, east, and west feature importantly.

### **Manifestation of disconnecting elements**

Despite the shared legacies of history, culture, and a common heritage, the relationships between Bangladesh and India carry colonial legacies of asymmetric order, as their commonalities were brutally interrupted due to the nature of colonial governance and post-colonial division of contiguous geophysical bounds of British India. The relations between India and Pakistan, states that were created following the exit of the British *Raj*, led to wide-ranging discontinuities and discord in mutual relations due to the earlier seeds of conflict and diverging legacies the colonial regime had left behind. The birth of Bangladesh after more than two decades of internal discord through a brutal War of Liberation in 1971, in which India itself was seen as an ally of the Bengalis, had raised euphoric emotions; yet both Bangladeshi and Indian leaderships were later haunted by the legacies and mindsets of the past. Some hangover issues of the colonial era or post-colonial perceptual divide, and some new issues emerging under new-fangled contexts of politics vitiated mutual relations almost into a frosty state.

While for long both sides routinely projected their mutual relations as friendly neighbours, perceptual gap did develop largely due to mutual trust deficit. The facets of power asymmetry existing between them and the past hangovers resurfaced with time, which detracted both sides and overturned



development of harmony, constraining mutual policies for a long time. The issues in contention include the following:

1. India's inability or apparent unwillingness to implement the old bilateral treaties (Firoz Khan Noon-Jawaharlal Nehru, 1947, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman-Indira Gandhi, 1974) on mutual transfer of enclaves/territories in adverse possessions to Bangladesh;
2. A failure on the part of India to have prior consultations with Bangladesh and ensure its water and eco-security on a variety of issues, such as, the building of Farakka Barrage and other dams, including a hydroelectric dam over Tipaimukh;
3. Contentious claims of both states over coastal islands and failure to demarcate respective maritime zones;
4. India's persistence with the planned Link Canal to divert water from common rivers in the interest of the Upper Riparian India, to the detriment of lower riparian Bangladesh;
5. Alleged support to insurgencies by both sides to rebellious elements which stymied mutual harmony;
6. A continuing trade imbalance (grossly unfavourable to Bangladesh) arising from lack of congenial policy facilitation and/or imposition of tariff/non-tariff trade barriers;
7. Alleged illegal migration from Bangladesh to India;
8. 'Shoot to kill' policy of the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) along the borders resulting in deaths of Bangladeshi civilians;
9. Following from all above, a developing psychological barrier and trust deficit in relations between the two neighbouring countries;
10. Illegal arms and drug trafficking affecting health/human security of people on both sides; and
11. Illegal human trafficking endangering lives of women and children across the borders.
- 12.

Beyond the foregoing bilateral contentious issues, there have been disconnecting geophysical challenges for the NES, comprising a vast area of 270,000 square kilometres almost snapped from the Indian mainland since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The disconnects facing the NES are remarkable, and its leadership has voiced its connecting needs through Bangladesh in the following areas: <sup>20</sup>

- Transit and trans-shipment facilities including road, rail, and waterways connectivity through Bangladesh to the landlocked NES;

- Multi-modal transportation of goods through Bangladesh with Ashuganj as the port of call, including a related infrastructure boost;
- Access to waterways for communication through Bangladesh; and
- Access to Bangladesh seaports for meeting their export/import needs.

## Renewed connectivities between Bangladesh and the NES

A measured change in the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India has been taking place since the mid-1990s. However, the mutual ties have been on an upswing following Awami League's return to power in 2009. The Indian side, in consideration of its strategic interests, also made an effort to reciprocate. Thus the last six years saw a major change in their relationship, enabling both sides to enhance their bilateral connectivities, particularly in meeting the challenging needs of the NES. A reduction in trade barriers, increased cooperation on regional security, and a concrete vision for the development of Bangladesh as a critical linkage for South Asia to the broader continent have all improved the atmospherics for an improved bilateral partnership.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the prospects for further connectivities in future appear immense. A mutual pledge to this end has the potential to turn the entire region as an economic growth zone, with cultural harmony and better security.

While the process of improved bilateral connectivities started in the mid-1990s, Narendra Modi's two-day maiden visit to Dhaka (2-4 June 2015) prompted both sides to be very vocal on connectivity: both sides have pledged to increase multilevel connectivities in wide-ranging areas. These include implementation of historical accords on land boundary, rail and road connectivity, economic engagement, expanded security cooperation, and greater people-to-people contacts. All these are meant to connect Bangladesh to the NES and wider regions, including East Asia and Southeast Asia. The accords on connectivities include the following:

1. **Reconnecting History:** The past impasse over border line was broken by operationalization of the 1974 pact, the land boundary agreement (LBA), paving the way for expeditious exchange of the 161 enclaves and lands under adverse possessions between the two countries, with due protection of the rights of all citizens and extension of facilities to the residents of the enclaves.
2. **Road Connectivity:** Both sides agreed to expand the existing road connectivities between Dhaka and Kolkata (operational since June 1999) as well as the Dhaka-Agartala bus services (operational since September 2003). On 6 June 2015 both sides jointly inaugurated the Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati and Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus services and agreed to introduce the second *Maitree* Express between Khulna and Kolkata. As they flagged-off the bus service between Kolkata and Agartala via Dhaka and the Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus service, both

also agreed to consider introducing new bus services linking Khulna-Kolkata and Jessore-Kolkata route.

3. **Rail Connectivity:** In addition to the existing Dhaka-Kolkata train services, both sides agreed to bolster the ongoing cooperation in the railways sector, and revive the old railway connectivity that was snapped in 1965, including the Akhaura-Agartala railway link.<sup>22</sup>
4. **Trade and Trans-shipment Connectivity:** Bangladesh agreed to let the NES use its Chittagong and Mongla ports for goods traffic to the NES, which would include new trade routes between Bangladesh and India's Mizoram and Tripura states.<sup>23</sup>
5. **Coastal Shipping Connectivity:** As per the signed 'Coastal Shipping Agreement,' Bangladesh agreed to facilitate sailing of small vessels from India to various ports in Bangladesh, thus opening up newer avenues of cooperation in the areas of bilateral and regional trade and connectivity.
6. **Power and Energy Sector Connectivity:** Both sides agreed to "further enhance cooperation" in the energy sector, identified as a priority area of "growing cooperation," particularly in renewable energy and civil nuclear energy, especially training for technical personnel. The two sides also decided to initiate an annual bilateral energy dialogue involving Secretary Petroleum of India and Secretary Power Division of Bangladesh with a view to undertake comprehensive energy sector cooperation including in areas of coal, natural gas, liquefied natural gas (LNG), supply of petroleum products in the sub-region, renewable energy, and oil and gas pipelines etc.<sup>24</sup>
7. **Border *haats* (markets):** Border *haats* were inaugurated at Kamalasagar in the state of Tripura and new land ports were set up;
8. **Connectivity in Security Matters:** As Bangladesh already cracked down on NES insurgent groups operating out of its territory and facilitated their handover to Indian authorities, both sides signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in the following areas:
  - Sharing of information on security related issues, reaffirming their "unequivocal and uncompromising position against extremism and terrorism in all forms and manifestations;"
  - Prevention of smuggling of fake currency notes, cooperation between coast guards, and prevention of human trafficking;
  - Prevention of cross-border criminal activities, irregular movement, incidents of violence, and tragic loss of lives;
  - Finalization of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for allowing usage of Indian border roads for construction and maintenance of border outposts of Border Guard Bangladesh as well as use of Indian medical facilities in difficult areas in the border area by Bangladeshi personnel, who are deployed in vicinity;

- Reiteration of bringing down the number of deaths at the border to zero and issuance of directives to the concerned authorities and border guarding forces to work to that effect.<sup>25</sup>

### Challenges to connectivity: Threat potentials

Bangladesh-India joint bilateral declaration set forth the vision of connectivity in a document titled '*Notun Projonmo — Nayi Disha*' (New Generation, New Direction). A major shift has conceivably occurred in the overall bilateral relations since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Dhaka visit (2-4 June 2015), as he spoke of "emotional attachment with Bangladesh," yet he was candid about the need for "a detailed post-mortem" on India-Bangladesh ties. When stressing that "India and Bangladesh were not just '*pass pass*' but '*saath saath*' (not mere neighbours but together)," or that with his visit "the *yatra* (in bilateral ties) had just begun," the Indian prime minister apparently seemed committed to meet the challenges facing the bilateral togetherness.

The outstanding challenges that have the potential to constrain mutual relations are as follows:

1. **The eco-security concerns:** Seal and operationalize the accords required for preservation of the ecosystem, including natural flow of water on Barak, Teesta, and Feni Rivers, and Link Canal as planned by India, which many suspect to be placed on the backburner.<sup>26</sup>
2. **Development of the Ganges Barrage:** A joint development of the Ganges Barrage on the River Padma in Bangladesh, as Bangladesh proposed, which India agreed to examine.<sup>27</sup>
3. **Bilateral Trade:** Balancing of bilateral trade is still grossly tilted towards India, which remains a major irritant in bilateral relations. Psychological barrier or trust deficit that still prevails, as often Bangladesh (with major Chinese investment in its infrastructure at present) is suspected to be inching toward Beijing. Although perceived in New Delhi as its adversary, China is partnering with India in forums such as BCIM and Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB).<sup>28</sup>
4. **Cost-Benefit Issues:** Making cross-border connectivity may make commercial sense for Bangladesh for its long-term interest, but it has to be perceptibly measurable or publicly marketable in terms of cost-benefit.<sup>29</sup>
5. **Third Party Association:** India wishes to involve a number of Indian companies in setting up of ports in Bangladesh, whereas Bangladesh might want to explore alternative feasible or financially viable options.
6. **Mutual Investment Facilities:** Efforts to spur Indian investment in Bangladesh and the desire of Bangladeshi

- entrepreneurs to get direct access to invest in the NES and fully benefit from the NES market.<sup>30</sup>
7. **External Market Links:** Acting on reciprocity and mutuality, while Bangladesh would serve as an important conduit for India's Act East Policy (for accessing the Southeast Asian markets), Bangladesh is equally entitled to seek market access to Southeast Asian and Chinese markets via India.<sup>31</sup>
  8. **Social Development:** Aspirations of the growing middle class on either side to reap the dividends of better connectivity and relationship need to be taken into account.<sup>32</sup>
  9. **Infrastructure Development:** Financial infrastructure, transport network, and service facilities are currently insufficient to meet the rapidly expanding joint facility needs. Expansion of further land routes through road-train connectivities, especially linking eastern and northern Bangladesh (a key missing link is between Sylhet and Shillong) and adding air connectivity between Bangladesh and the NES is critically important for connecting the hilly terrain of NES with steep roads and multiple hairpin bends.

The numerous challenges, mentioned above, are both substantial and weighty in nature; hence they require serious policy reflection and effort. No doubt, the mutual signing of the agreements to materialize the vision of connectivity between the two prime ministers represents a commitment on the part of both the countries to reverse the earlier misperceived course of history of bilateral relations and open a new chapter of connectivities. Both the top dignitaries did appear sincere to implement the bilateral accords they signed, and both seemed keen to develop and widen the connectivities between the two neighbours. The development could advance the mutual interests and open up newer avenues of cooperation in the areas of bilateral and regional trade and connectivity. Yet all these accords need to be sincerely implemented across their borders and within their respective territories, which require commitment and dedication from their respective officials and an unwavering devotion to the vision by all people concerned of both the countries, who are likely to benefit from them.

This means that the motto of connectivities has to be taken from the top-level policymaking to the people-to-people level: to the likely beneficiaries, whose enduring interest must be served and whose sustained support would be needed for its fuller implementation. It is good indeed that both sides agreed on some of the modalities on how to carry the accords forward, such as the need for dredging of the Bangladesh-India inland water protocol on routes to utilize for their improved services. A critical need of the hour for both the countries, however, is to make major joint efforts to improve infrastructure along their border and within Bangladesh itself, to ensure that an enhanced connectivity gains momentum for conserving the ecosystem. Without it, the connectivities contemplated might become irrelevant or counter-productive, as the two

countries could be drawn into another round of mutual blame game, as happened in the case of many of the previous accords and understandings, whether on land boundary, Farakka water flow, Teesta and Feni Rivers, bilateral trade balance, or border security.

The challenges to connectivities identified above are indeed real, *not* hypothetical, and should be appropriately met with due consideration to their impacts upon people's perceptions and their ramifications on the ecosystem on either side of Bangladesh-India/NES boundary. For all the recent mutual mapping of connectivities to happen in a sustained manner, the theoretical underpinnings of connectivity have to be kept in view for concretizing the empirical vision. India is a major world power, its power position and global ranking in comparison with Bangladesh is asymmetric; but the theory of connectivity prerequisites a symmetric ordering of the functional links for their effectiveness. This is the way connectivity works whether in information networks or in mathematical graphs. The same mode of symmetric order has to be applicable in cross-boundary or adjacent neighbourhood connectivity between the adjacent territories like Bangladesh and the NES, the latter controlled by New Delhi, the centre of gravity regulating their boundary relationship. For India, it might not be easy to make its way for facilitating a symmetric order of relations between Bangladesh and the NES, given its asymmetric power ranking vis-à-vis Bangladesh. It is not impossible, however, should New India place a higher priority on the empirical vision of connectivity needs of the NES, enabling it to harmonize its requirements with Bangladesh, which has its own aspirations or mutuality of needs to pursue with the former.

To meet such empirical prerogatives, *first*, India has to exhibit an ability to get out of the past black-box image of the neighbouring nations. It has to explore innovative modes of engagement, looking at the relationships beyond simply a bilateral perspective, or even through a SAARC lens. For instance, apart from building stronger educational links, one area needing urgent attention is the visa regime, which needs to be relaxed not just for the children or for the 65-plus elderly; even Bangladeshi academics face hassles when attending conferences in India. Indeed, Indian visa issues obstruct interaction between members of civil society and the business community.<sup>33</sup>

*Second*, the role of the NES in Bangladesh-India ties needs to be recast from post-colonial past. It is time that Bangladesh-NES relations are built not only on strong economic basis, but also to ensure greater cultural and educational connectivities. Apart from more border *haats* — something the adjacent border-states have already called for — the two sides should explore the possibility of multilevel connectivities such as sectoral (urban, rural, educational, cultural) bonding to enable promotion of more people-to-people interaction and multifaceted connectivities. Both India and Bangladesh have so much in common that no other two neighbours have. They represent one of the most important relationships in South Asia and, for India, a vital element in New Delhi's strategic 'Act East Policy.'<sup>34</sup> An enhanced level of connectivities between the two sides would not only be mutually advantageous but would also promote wider Bangladesh-India connectivities.

*Third*, while talking of Bangladesh-NES and Bangladesh-India connectivities, it is equally urgent to keep in view the still wider scenarios. With respect to Intra-regional trade, the South Asian countries are among the least economically integrated regions in the world, currently contributing lower than 5% of their total trade, despite the showcasing of a regional organization over the last three decades. They have much to gain from expanding regional cross-border connectivities encompassing infrastructure, communication, transport, trade, investment, energy, ecology, and environment.<sup>35</sup> A successful pursuit of connectivity in the eastern sub-region of South Asia is bound to motivate and hearten other key stakeholders to work towards harmonization of their connectivity needs with India.

*Fourth*, within and beyond South Asia there are critical concerns about ecosystem where wider regional relations feature and have ramifications on Bangladesh-India mutual connectivities such as the preservation of natural habitat and conservation of the ecosystem. The two countries need to enable common rivers to nurture relationships, not become a source of discord, to rephrase what Narendra Modi has said. Like Tipaimukh and similar other Indian dams, an emerging test-case is China's efforts for accessing energy and water that may endanger life and living in the entire neighbourhood.<sup>36</sup> Such a case of endangered ecosystem makes it pertinent for both Bangladesh and India to coalesce their joint efforts to bring some sense upon their northern colossus. Such a context also makes it imperative to keep in view how players in the wider Asian region inclusive of India, China, and other South Asian countries can best cooperate on preserving natural ecosystem connectivity without any ramifications on bilateral and mutual relations in their forward journey.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to Bangladesh-NES connectivity, two issues need to be addressed on a priority basis. First is trade facilitation and capacity-building. For enhancing regional trade connectivity — inclusive of meeting the pressing needs of the NES for access through Bangladesh — a major challenge for Bangladesh is trade facilitation through effective service facility or capacity-building of its existing ports for shipping load and cargo-handling. It is well known that the nearest port to the NES is Chittagong, which suffers from incapacities of various sorts, including coastal shallowness, causing cargo-congestions due to which it is unable to cope with Bangladesh's own trading needs let alone cater to those of the NES. In the interest of meeting pressing trans-shipment needs of the NES, however, some options for a deep sea port at a nearer location must be kept in perspective, as Bangladesh's prime minister has repeatedly indicated.

Related to the subject of trade connectivity is also the opt-repeated issue of trade imbalance. Consistent with the even development of mutual connectivities, Bangladesh and India need to have a fairer and unhampered trade deal. This long-standing problem is likely to create a major trust deficit. To overcome such a discrepancy in bilateral business connectivity, India ought to operationalize its commitment to safeguarding the fairer trade balancing needs of Bangladesh. Both the countries must synchronize facilitating infrastructures and supportive service networks for enhanced connectivities which would involve huge resource allocation and technological input.

## Conclusions

The theory of connectivity by its very nature and content implies horizontal, rather than vertical relationship. It conveys a connecting framework of relationships based on symmetric bonding, rather than asymmetric ordering. For both the academia and decision-makers, it is critical to offer reflections on how relationships or connectivities can be promoted on the basis of mutual respect and understanding instead of being vertically imposed. In other words, how a natural ecosystem can be conserved and enhanced? It hardly needs emphasizing that much of the woes in contemporary international, regional, or sub-regional relations arise from attempted asymmetric intrusions or vertical ordering of relations by an imposition of the wish of the powerful upon the ones who do not hold proportional power or equilibrium of authorities to counteract them.<sup>38</sup> Palestine, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria are all cases in point.

In light of the foregoing backdrop let us first touch on the nature of relations between the role-players and determine the framework of their decision-making. The NES are not sovereign entities like Bangladesh. Therefore, in meeting the challenges of connectivities of the NES, Bangladesh has to cope with a broad spectrum of challenges of perceptual divide existing in the overall Bangladesh-India relations. It has not been an easy voyage for a country like Bangladesh. Despite being a homogenous entity by and large, it went through a gruesome liberation war and has been experiencing vicissitudes of a tortuous course of internal development for over four-and-a-half decades of its existence. It continues to confront a multitude of issues internally in consolidating democracy and pursuing a steady course of development, while externally it remains under strain in situations where it may not have a direct hand. In this connection, it is pertinent to keep in perspective the nature of Bangladesh-India relations, which in essence are of asymmetric order. Such an order of relations between the two countries has consequently led to asymmetrical perception or perceptual divide in the process of sorting out mutually advantageous decisions impeding policymaking on either side. In this overall conceptual backdrop one can observe the variational shift that occurred in policy in New Delhi over the last five years, enabling Dhaka to respond positively towards meeting some of the key challenges standing in the way of a smooth progress in Bangladesh-NES cross-border connectivities.

Nevertheless, in these policy fluctuations one cannot but keep in view the constraints of multi-party Indian democracy, the way it functions and hinders mutual connectivities. Political decision-making on balance represents a mixture of idealism and realism, but the key issue is policy delivery, while beating the constraints imposed by power asymmetry. With this backdrop, credit must go to the superlenses of leadership traits shown by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who reversed his earlier articulated stance on Bangladesh, but later exhibited a political dynamism in using a delivery technique that his predecessors had failed to employ: the delivery technique he displayed in getting a rare unanimity on the LBA in Indian Parliament, an issue that had stifled Bangladesh-India ties into a moribund state for so long.<sup>39</sup> That very act of redesigning India's asymmetric power position brought into a singular display



the superlenses of statesmanship, which was fittingly reciprocated in a spirit of symmetrical warmth and harmony by his Bangladesh counterpart, and both acted in earnest towards meeting some of the crucial challenges in bilateral connectivities.

Yet, the process of bilateral harmonizing is yet unfinished and the mutual connectivities need to be taken further along promptly in keeping with the spirit of symmetrical congruence in cementing bilateral connective relations. Otherwise the trust deficit is likely to widen, impeding a smooth evolution of relations with the NES as well as with India. Consistent with the critical requirements of connectivity is the conservation of the sub-regional/regional ecosystem that may have serious ramifications for Bangladesh. These include desisting from any project that may unbalance or have disturbing input into the flow of water, with disquieting effects on eco-order. The instances of Link Canal, Tipaimukh Dam or withdrawal of water from the Barak or Feni River — all come under this category.

Some observations are due on the mileage policymakers wish to gain from negative politics and its repulsive ramifications on mutual connectivities. Quite often politicians resort to acts or rhetoric for personal gains or for gamble of internal power politics, often indicative of ideological bias, but their public utterances or expressions also prop up ill-feelings or serve as upshots in foreign relations. Some examples may help clarify. When Narendra Modi spoke during his visit to Dhaka (2-4 June 2015) of his particular attachment with Bangladesh projecting the two neighbours in '*sathe, sathe*' for building communion with full range of connectivities, it bode quite well for harmonization of bilateral and inter-communal relations, and enhanced mutual connectivities. On the other hand, however, Modi is often also perceived with the rising culture of communal bigotry and intolerance in India more than any other top-rank Indian leader. Even in the course of electioneering in the neighbouring Assam, he sounded stirring the Hindu minorities from the neighbouring countries, including those from Bangladesh (whose number is already dwindling) to migrate to India — presumably a 'homeland for the Hindus' — and get Indian citizenship under the BJP government.<sup>40</sup> In Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, like her charismatic father — the nation's Founding Father — has an impeccable record of articulating and advancing inter-communal concord; yet that did not deflect a senior cabinet minister, a close relative of the prime minister, and some ruling party MPs from seeking material gains from minority property-owners by grabbing their lands, drawing major media headlines.<sup>41</sup> Instances like these can barely add credence to whatever the leaderships of the two countries officially say in favour of truly ushering in '*sathe, sathe*' for creating the psychological milieu required for enduring bond of connectivities between the two close neighbours.

Nonetheless, the current momentum towards rebuilding connectivities must not be permitted to be stymied; both sides must dispel all phobias, and the vision of moving on to wider connectivities must not lapse by any disconcerting currents of politics on either side. India, a major trading nation and a technology giant, is steadily emerging as one of the top regional as well as global players. It

has to take giant steps to reach out to its neighbours like Bangladesh, and show its largesse to consolidate relations in its vital immediate neighbourhood to take it along in its search for a secure international role. Bangladesh, in its turn, should see itself as a 'bridge of common prosperity' in a win-win situation and ought to make sustained endeavours in its adherence to the mutually advantageous connectivities and work in close harmony with the adjacent Indian states.

However, the milieu in the regional and subregional environments makes it imperative for the region's public opinion mobilizers such as civil society, academics, media, and researchers to play a role for furtherance of connectivities, and help overcome some of the socio-geopolinomic malaise.<sup>42</sup> The academia must act as agents for social change, as is being marketed in Europe. Their use of 'soft power diplomacy' — so much articulated these days as a source of retracting the customary mindsets, pulling in 'heart-ware,' and bringing about a change in the existing perceptual divide — could help improve awareness of the policymakers and that of the man-on-the-street on both sides about the developing connectivities.<sup>43</sup> Narendra Modi, credited with the use of superlenses in cozying up to Bangladesh in a charming style, also carries the stigma of 'a divisive manipulator.'<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the intelligentsia must remain vigilant, and make strident efforts to carry forward the dream of deeper connectivities and vision of harmonization in the subregion and beyond. The modalities as enshrined in connectivities are already set in the global age. The litterateurs and scholars must contribute their share through research and writings, classrooms and lecture theatres, social media contacts and reporting, and public articulation and expressions to create a forward-looking future for all the people in the sub-region and the region as a whole. They could also provide positive inputs for multilevel connectivity working with multilateral institutions, think-tanks, the private sector, and others throughout the region to address the existing challenges such as: inadequate infrastructure, cost-sharing issues, insecurity concerns, and regulatory barriers.

Bangladesh, the NES, and India as a whole, have enormous potential for social progress and development, but they also suffer from severe crisis of governance. This is evident in a multiplicity of indices, including their poor ranking in development performance, competitiveness, perception of corruption, continuing poverty, and lack of social progress. Both Bangladesh and India have large underbellies of neglect, polarized people, divisive politics, and a mounting spectre of social dissonance and intolerance. All these lend easily to acts of provocation, violence, and terror, which continue to engulf the region and vitiate relationships at all levels.<sup>45</sup>

The enlightened civil society must connect in tie-ups and offer progressive ideas for steady socioeconomic changes needed. As for the politicians and policymakers on both sides, they must see the challenges in positive light, look backward and forward before anything they say or do to ensure that their utterances or decisions in no way handicap constructive evolution of sub-regional and wider regional connectivities linking Bangladesh and the NES. Both the academia and the policymakers may combine efforts to

cross-connect, enhancing fraternal communion or building networks of sororities, for instance, ‘sister’ cities, charities, campuses etc. to promote connectivities between and among centres of education and research. All this would facilitate exchange of students and faculties between institutions of learning, epitomize the true role models, share knowledge, and exchange experiences to serve as catalysts for augmenting mutually connected fraternal relations.

Connectivity across borders provides the means to an end; it is the vehicle for deeper engagement of adjacent neighbourliness. Both Bangladesh-NES/India as adjoining neighbours do have the prospect to move on in a win-win situation towards seamless connectivities that extend from land to space. Both being bound by the threads of history, kinship, language, and cultural and mystical ties must join in as fellow travellers on the road to development. Connectivities by road, rail, river, coast, sea, transmission lines, and digital links have now unveiled some of the pathways to this progressive future; but the fuller potentials have to be taken in so that the connectivities in Bangladesh-NES relations could serve as a replicable model for reinventing the adjacent connectivities of India’s northwest with Pakistan.

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