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Sheikh Hasina's Visit to West Bengal: Much Ado about Nothing

During her two-day visit to the Indian State of West Bengal in late May 2018, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, discussed several issues with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. However, little headway was made on the Rohingya issue. Also, the contentious issue of the sharing of Teesta river waters between India and Bangladesh remained unresolved. Similarly, the consequences of the publication of the final list of the updated National Register of Citizenship did not find its way onto the agenda during the visit.

Amit Ranjan¹

On 25 and 26 May 2018, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, visited the Indian State of West Bengal to attend the 49th convocation ceremony of Visva Bharti University in Santiniketan near Kolkata. She was there to also receive an honorary Doctor of Literature degree conferred upon her by Kazi Nazrul University. After attending the convocation ceremony, Hasina and India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, jointly unveiled a

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plaque of the Bangladesh Bhavan² (Bangladesh House) in Santiniketan. Later, the two leaders held a half an hour-long one-on-one meeting in which they discussed several issues. Bangladesh's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Shariar Alam, reported that the meeting discussed several bilateral issues, particularly those relating to security and politics of the region.³

The Rohingya Issue

While at Visva Bharti University, Hasina stated that, “[T]here are 11 lakh [1.1 million] Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. We have given them shelter due to humanitarian consideration; we want them to go back to their land....We appeal to all to keep up pressure on the government of Myanmar to take them back.”⁴

The Rohingya crisis has domestic ramifications for the Hasina government. There are groups such as the Jamat-e-Islami whose indoctrination activities in the refugee camps have already radicalised a section of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh. The Rohingya militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, also has its base in the refugee camps of the Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Radicalism among an increasing number of the Rohingya refugees adds to Bangladesh's domestic problems, as it suffers from militancy. Hence, Hasina called on the international actors, including India, to address the Rohingya crisis.

Conversely, Modi made no mention of the Rohingya crisis during his address at the Bangladesh Bhavan inauguration ceremony. He may have chosen to evade the issue on the account of India's cordial ties with the present Myanmar government. At the same time, he

² In some print media and websites, it is spelled as Bhaban or Bhavana. For the construction of the Bhavan, Visva Bharti allocated 11,112 square metres of land on its campus. Funded by the Bangladesh government, the Bangladesh Bhavan cost about ₹25 crore (\$4.95 million). See ‘Bound Together by Poetry’, Syed Muazzem Ali, *The Indian Express*, 25 May 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bound-together-by-poetry-india-bangladesh-sheikh-hasina-narendra-modi-rabindranath-tagore-5189965/>. Accessed on 26 May 2018; and “PM Modi, Sheikh Hasina to Inaugurate Bangladesh Bhavan in Bengal's Santiniketan”, *NDTV*, 25 May 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-sheikh-hasina-to-inaugurate-bangladesh-bhavan-in-bengals-santiniketan-1857341>. Accessed on 27 May 2018.

³ “PM Narendra Modi, Sheikh Hasina hold talks at Santiniketan”, *The Times of India*, 25 May 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-narendra-modi-sheikh-hasina-hold-talks-at-santiniketan/articleshow/64319378.cms>. Accessed on 26 May 2018.

⁴ “Rohingya Repatriation: Hasina calls for int'l support”, *The Daily Star*, 26 May 2018. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/help-repatriate-rohingyas-1581802>. Accessed on 26 May 2018.

did not want to say anything that may upset Hasina. In the past, India's position on the Rohingya issue had created misunderstandings with Bangladesh.

Soon after the start of the current Rohingya crisis in August 2017, Modi visited to Myanmar. During the visit from 5 to 7 September 2017, India and Myanmar came out with a joint statement in which "India condemned the recent [24 August 2017] terrorist attacks in northern Rakhine state, wherein several members of the Myanmar security forces lost their lives. Both sides agreed that terrorism violates human rights and there should, therefore, be no glorification of terrorists as martyrs....The two sides shared the view that the situation in Rakhine state had a developmental as well as a security dimension."⁵ This joint statement and the other official statements issued by the Indian government on the crisis were not welcomed by Bangladesh. In New Delhi, for instance, Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India, Syed Muzeem Ali, after a meeting with the then-Foreign Secretary of India, S Jaishankar, said that, "I hope that India can issue another statement updating their position on this issue."⁶

Subsequently, the Indian government sent the first tranche of humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh in September 2017. Codenamed Operation *Insaniyat* (Humanitarianism), the relief consisted of rice, pulses, sugar, salt and cooking oil, among others.⁷ The second tranche was sent on 9 May 2018 and it consisted of milk powder, dried fish, baby food, raincoats and gum boots.⁸

⁵ "India-Myanmar Joint Statement Issued on the occasion of state visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar (5-7 September 2017)". http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28924/IndiaMyanmar_Joint_Statement_issued_on_the_occasion_of_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_Myanmar_September_57_2017. Accessed on 10 September 2017.

⁶ "Exclusive: Public Anger Brews in Bangladesh over India's Stance on Rohingya Crisis", *The Wire*, Devirupa Mitra, 10 September 2017. <https://thewire.in/176013/bangladesh-rohingya-crisis-myanmar-india/>. Accessed on 20 September 2017.

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Operation Insaniyat - Humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh on account of influx of refugees". http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28944/Operation_Insaniyat_Humanitarian_assistance_to_Bangladesh_on_account_of_influx_of_refugees. Accessed on 31 May 2018.

⁸ "India Sends Second Relief Consignment for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh" *The Wire*, 9 May 2018. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/india-sends-second-relief-consignment-for-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh>. Accessed on 31 May 2018.

The Teesta Water Issue

The Teesta is a transboundary river between India and Bangladesh. It is 414 kilometres long and originates in the Indian State of Sikkim. Under the 2011 Interim Agreement, India would receive 42.5 per cent and Bangladesh 37.5 per cent of water during the lean season (December to May). The Indian central government accepted the Interim Agreement. However, the West Bengal government is not agreeable to it.

At the Bangladesh Bhavan inauguration ceremony, Hasina made an indirect reference to the long-term Teesta issue. She said that “We [India and Bangladesh] have sorted out many bilateral issues. There are still some pending ones but I don’t want to spoil the beautiful occasion by referring to them. We want to settle all issues in a friendly ambience”.⁹

Earlier, speaking at the convocation, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, said that, “Huge water flowed in the past and will also flow in future, but I believe that the relations between the two countries will improve further”.¹⁰ Following the meeting with Hasina on 26 May 2018, when asked by journalists if there was any talk on the Teesta water sharing, Mamata parried the question.¹¹ Modi also did not utter the ‘T’(eesta) word because Mamata needs to make the final decision on the issue. The availability of water in the Teesta river puts constraints on Mamata on agreeing to share water with Bangladesh. In recent years, the water volume in the Teesta river reached below the 100 cubic metres per second level during the peak summer time in the Indian subcontinent, that is, in April and May.¹²

During the general elections in Bangladesh scheduled for the winter of 2018, the Teesta river water sharing is likely to be an important electoral issue in the catchment areas of the river in the country. For opposition political parties such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the non-conclusion of the Teesta river water sharing agreement symbolises Hasina government’s failure to deal with India.

⁹ “Want to settle all issues in a friendly ambience: Hasina”, Shiv Sahay Singh & Subhojit Bagchi, *The Hindu*, 26 May 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/want-to-settle-all-issues-in-a-friendly-ambience-hasina/article23994739.ece?homepage=true>. Accessed on 26 May 2018.

¹⁰ “Rohingya Repatriation: Hasina calls for int’l support”, *The Daily Star*, op cit.

¹¹ “Mamata Hasina meet a courtesy call”, *United News of India*, 26 May 2018. <http://www.uniindia.com/mamata-hasina-meet-a-courtesy-call/states/news/1242802.html>. Accessed on 27 May 2018.

¹² “Teesta has one-sixteenth of water needed”, *thethirdpole.net*, 14 April 2017. <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/2017/04/14/teesta-has-one-sixteenth-of-water-needed/>. Accessed on 17 April 2017.

Assistance to Bangladesh

The United Nations recently declared that Bangladesh is eligible to graduate out of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) group to a lower-middle developing country.¹³ The graduation reflects the great strides that the country has made in recent times on economic as well as social and human development indicators.

In his speech at the inauguration ceremony, Modi highlighted Bangladesh's development. He stated that, "[T]he progress made by Bangladesh in the area of [the] social sector, particularly in improving the lives of people, is something we can take inspiration from."¹⁴ He promised that India would provide all support to Bangladesh in its effort to become a developed country by 2041.¹⁵ He pointed to India's US\$8 billion (\$10.7 billion) Line of Credit to Bangladesh to support Dhaka's development initiatives.¹⁶ Modi also promised to increase electricity supply to Bangladesh from 600 megawatt to about 1,100 megawatt by the end of 2018.¹⁷

India's support for Bangladesh and to the other South Asian neighbours is primarily the consequence of growing Chinese imprint in the region. China is making serious headway in infrastructure projects in South Asia.¹⁸ India can ill afford to sit idle and not respond to the Chinese overtures in the region.

National Register of Citizens

Although several important bilateral issues were discussed during Hasina's visit to West Bengal, one pertinent issue that did not find any space in her agenda was the consequences of

¹³ See 'Bangladesh's Graduation and Economic Realignment within South Asia', Amitendu Palit, *ISAS Briefs* No. 576, 23 May 2018. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ISAS-Briefs-No.-576.pdf>. Accessed on 26 May 2018.

¹⁴ "Want to settle all issues in a friendly ambience: Hasina", Shiv Sahay Singh & Subhojit Bagchi, *The Hindu*, 26 May 2018, op cit.

¹⁵ "Rohingya Repatriation: Hasina calls for int'l support", *The Daily Star*, 26 May 2018, op cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Committee on External Affairs (2017-18) Sixteenth Lok Sabha, Ministry of External Affairs, Demand for Grants (2018-19) Twenty First Report, *Lok Sabha Secretariat*. [http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/External %20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_21.pdf](http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/External%20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_21.pdf). Accessed on 22 March 2018, p. 63.

publishing the final list of the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC).¹⁹ This is an important bilateral issue between the two countries, one which has been in existence since Bangladesh's birth.

The update of the NRC is based on the provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.²⁰ Persons who are able to produce any one of the legal documents such as their passport, land document or any other document which contains their name or that of an ancestor would be enlisted in the updated NRC. The cut-off date for the issue of any such documents was midnight on 24 March 1971.²¹ The objective of the update was to identify and deport "illegal immigrants"²² living in India. Most of these immigrants are from Bangladesh, and are living in Assam and other parts of India.²³ However, the Bangladesh government denies this. To find a way, in its 2014 judgement on the issue, the Indian Supreme Court directed the Union government to "enter into necessary discussion with the Government of Bangladesh to streamline the procedure of deportation" of "illegal immigrants".²⁴ However, at least in the public sphere, the Indian government has yet to discuss this issue with the Bangladesh government.

¹⁹ In India, the first National Register of Citizens was prepared on the basis of information given by the citizens during the 1951 census.

²⁰ Government of Assam, Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam, 'What is NRC'. http://www.nrcassam.nic.in/wha_nrc.html. Accessed on 28 May 2018.

²¹ The list of admissible documents are divided into two sections. For details, see Government of Assam, Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam, 'What are the admissible documents?' <http://www.nrcassam.nic.in/admin-documents.html>. Accessed on 28 May 2018.

²² On the question of immigrants and migration in India's northeast states, see Gait, Edward (1926). *A History of Assam*; Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & CO, Guha, Amalendu (1977), *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947* New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research & Nag, Sajal (1990) *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North -East India* New Delhi: Manohar

²³ There is no accurate data available with the Indian government on the number of Bangladeshi immigrants living in India.

²⁴ Government of Assam, Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam, 'Writ Petition (Civil) NO. 562 of 2012, Writ Petition (Civil) NO. 274 of 2009 & Writ Petition NO. 876 of 2014'. Government of Assam, Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam. <http://www.nrcassam.nic.in/images/pdf/01.pdf>. Accessed on 28 May 2018, p 67.

The NRC is expected to publish its final list by the end of 2018.²⁵ The concern is that, should the list not consist of a large number of the immigrant, it would create a humanitarian crisis as the people not included in the list would have nowhere to go. In order to deal this foreseeable crisis in the Indian states bordering Bangladesh and on the India-Bangladesh borderland,²⁶ it is necessary for both governments to address the issue of the NRC.

Furthermore, the publication of the list and its implementation or even procrastination could possibly trigger communal violence in the northeast India, mainly in Assam. The different communal groups have already expressed either their support or reservations against the list.²⁷ In Assam, the NRC update finds support from the All Assam Students Union, Assam Public Works and Asam Sanmilita Mahasangha. On the other hand, groups such as the All Assam Minority Students Union and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind have expressed the fear that such an exercise is mainly targetted against the Muslim population in Assam.²⁸

Conclusion

Although Hasina was on primarily on a cultural visit to West Bengal, she took the opportunity to raise, directly or indirectly, several bilateral political and security-related matters with Modi and Mamata, including the Rohingya crisis and the Teesta river water-sharing issue. However, just as she did not push these issues aggressively, the response from Modi and Mamata was generally diplomatic or muted. Both sides chose not to focus too much on these contentious issues, as well as the NRC, during the visit, possibly to prevent them from becoming elections issues in their respective countries. Hasina is likely to contest

²⁵ At midnight on 31 December 2017, the first draft of the report was published. It included the names of 1.9 crore (19 million), out of 3.29 crore (32.9 million) population of Assam, and declared them as legal citizens of India. "Assam publishes first draft of NRC with 1.9 crore names", *The Times of India*, 1 January 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-publishes-first-draft-of-nrc-with-1-9-crore-names/articleshow/62322518.cms>. Accessed on 19 May 2018.

²⁶ Here, the author has used borderland as a space where two nations or societies border each other. On the issue of India-Bangladesh borderland and the relationships the societies have with each other, see Schendel, Willem van (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press.

²⁷ "Assam on Edge ahead of updated citizen register", Samudra Gupta Kashyap, *The Indian Express*, 27 October 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/assam-on-edge-ahead-of-updated-citizen-register-4908409/>. Accessed on 25 May 2018.

²⁸ Ibid.

the polls before the end of this year while the general elections in India are due in the first half of next year.

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