

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

12 September 2022





# INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

## India-Bangladesh ties, a model for bilateral cooperation

The contributions of the Sheikh Hasina government to nurturing the special 'bonding' need to be acknowledged



RAJIV BHATIA

The state visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina, to India (September 5-8) has amply showcased the high stakes of both polities in their bilateral ties, imbued with regional significance. Delhi and Dhaka are fully conscious that they must get this vital equation right, constantly strengthening and deepening their cooperation and countering the challenges they face. Only then can this relationship be convincingly projected as a major success for their foreign policies. Even before reaching New Delhi, Ms. Hasina underlined the importance of the special "bonding" between the two nations, where one helped in the liberation of the other, and where both have worked together closely, especially since Ms. Hasina came to power again in 2009.

### Dhaka's expectations

In one of her most candid interviews given just prior to her visit, Ms. Hasina vividly recalled how India had helped her all the way when she faced the greatest personal **tragedy of her life**: the assassination of her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and a number of other members of her family. It was a national catastrophe. The shelter, security and support extended by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and subsequent governments shaped Ms. Hasina's worldview and her perception of India. As Prime Minister, she reciprocated the gestures adequately by taking **firm action against anti-Indian**

**insurgent groups soon after assuming power**. Since then, the two governments have successfully resolved several old problems such as the exchange of enclaves and the conclusion of long-pending land and maritime boundary agreements. But other challenges remain.

Four specific issues seem to **trouble the Bangladeshi side**. First, the continued presence of 1.1 million Rohingyas who fled from Myanmar in 2017 has created enormous pressure on the economy and social harmony. Ms. Hasina has said India is a big country that should "accommodate" them. Further, she wants stronger support from India to facilitate their early return to Myanmar. Second, the absence of agreement on sharing of the Teesta's waters, pending since 2011 due to West Bengal's refusal to relent, and the broader issue of joint management of 54 common rivers, have been constant grievances. Third, India's sensitivity to growing cooperation between Dhaka and Beijing ruffles the authorities in Bangladesh. Ms. Hasina has stressed the point that if there were differences between India and China, she did not wish to "put her nose to it".

Four, she has conceded that despite her government's secular policy, "incidents" against the Hindu minority have occurred, but her government has acted against miscreants. At the same time, she has expressed concern about the safety of minorities in India, pointing out that "it is not only (in) Bangladesh, even in India also sometimes minorities suffered".

The context above helps to evaluate the outcome of Ms. Hasina's latest India visit. She last visited India in 2019. She played host to the Prime Minister and the President of India, when they visited Bangla-



desh in March and December 2021, respectively. The visits marked triple epochal celebrations: the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of Nation; the golden jubilee of Independence; and 50 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh. These visits were utilised to reach new agreements and add further content and momentum to the relationship. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar tweeted, "The warmth and frequency of our leadership level contacts is a testimony to our close neighbourly partnership." This process has continued unhindered. The latest visit resulted in seven agreements designed to increase cooperation in the diverse domains of water sharing, railways, science and technology, space, media and capacity building.

### Specific outcomes

Indian officials identified several specific outcomes of Ms. Hasina's discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. First, there was the agreement "to continue close security cooperation" over counter-terrorism, border crimes, and border management. Second, the two sides recommitted themselves to enhancing their development partnership which is already quite extensive and multi-faceted. Third, they agreed "to build resilient supply chains" between the two countries and "across the re-

gion". A significant decision was to launch the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022 and to conclude negotiations by the time Bangladesh graduates from least developed country status in 2026. Finally, the leaders favoured expanding connectivity through more rail, road, inland waterways, and coastal shipping linkages. They agreed to build on the impressive successes achieved in the past decade in this sphere.

Economic relations have been developing excellently. Bilateral trade has touched a high watermark of \$18 billion. Logistics for power trade between Bangladesh and its neighbours – India, Nepal and Bhutan – have been put in place. India will assist Bangladesh by sharing its rich experience of innovation through startups.

About the issues flagged by Ms. Hasina, has there been progress? On the displaced people from the Rakhine state (the word 'Rohingya' was not used in deference to Myanmar's sensitivity), India expressed appreciation for Bangladesh's "generosity" in sheltering them, made an assurance of more material assistance, and reiterated its previous position to support their "safe, sustainable and expeditious return". India is unable to do more. As expected, there was no resolution of the Teesta question, but in a significant forward movement, the two governments agreed on the sharing of the waters of the Kushiyara, the common border river. They also agreed to exchange data on other rivers, set up their priorities and begin formulating the framework for "the interim water sharing arrangements".

The thrust of the discussion on China-related issues, if it took place at all, is not known. When

pressed by the media, India's Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra observed that the strategic priorities, interests, and concerns have all been "factored in our cooperative matrix of engagement", stressing that this bilateral relationship stands "on its own merits". The question of the safety of minorities did not find a place in the joint statement, but Dhaka routinely reiterates its commitment to protecting the Hindus in Bangladesh.

### Sobering ground realities

In India, there are continuing worries about the cumulative and adverse impact of COVID-19 and the Ukraine war on Bangladesh's economy. The country faces escalating protests on the streets that have been triggered by a sharp rise in fuel prices, an erosion of foreign currency reserves, and a deepening financial crisis. Besides, the rising influence of fundamentalist forces, extremism, and radicalisation poses a serious danger to political stability. Thus, the contours of combined challenges before the Sheikh Hasina government as it faces parliamentary elections in 2023 become clear.

It is for Bangladesh citizens to elect their next government, but they should know that the contribution of Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League government to building a strong relationship with their largest neighbour is enormous and widely appreciated in India. Their leaders have jointly crafted and nurtured "a role model for bilateral and regional cooperation". It deserves to be protected and strengthened, whatever the future may hold.

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## TOPIC: HEALTH

# ‘Adopt a TB patient’ drive finds *mitras*

Scheme introduced to engage the community in India’s fight at **eliminating tuberculosis by 2025**

**BINDU SHAJAN PERAPPADAN**  
NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry’s “adopt a TB-patient” (*Ni-kshay Mitra*) initiative – probably the only one-of-its-kind in the world – announced on Friday had 1,78,443 TB patients and 1,667 *Ni-kshay Mitras* (donors) enrolling till Sunday evening.

The programme was brought in to fill the critical “community” element into India’s fight towards eliminating TB by 2025 under the Pradhan Mantri TB-Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan.

“Though the efforts of the government are yielding significant results, the community and the institutions in society could play a critical role in filling the gaps and addressing the social determinants, thereby contributing to the national goal,” a Health Ministry official said.

The official said that for the effective engagement of the community for eradicating TB in India, the Ministry was implementing community support for TB patients –

the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyaan.

The donors include cooperative societies, corporates, elected representatives, individuals, institutions, non-governmental organisations, political parties and partners willing to adopt the health facilities (for individual donor) and urban wards, blocks, districts and States for accelerating the response against TB to complement the government’s efforts, as per the district-specific requirements in coordination with the district administration.

### Additional support

According to the Ministry, the State and the district administration would support the donors in prioritising the districts and in providing guidance on the critical gap analysis and district-specific needs.

The support provided to the patient under this initiative is in addition to the free diagnostics, free drugs and the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana provided by the National TB Elimination Programme



India has the world’s highest tuberculosis burden with nearly four lakh people dying from it every year. ■ NISSAR AHMAD

(NTEP) to all the patients notified from both the public and the private sector.

The Ministry said that donors would provide additional support to all the on-treatment TB patients who had given consent for support, in the selected health facilities, blocks, urban wards, districts and States. “Only individual donors can choose the patients from a given health facility.

Others have to choose the

entire geographical unit (blocks, urban wards, districts and States),” noted a Health Ministry official.

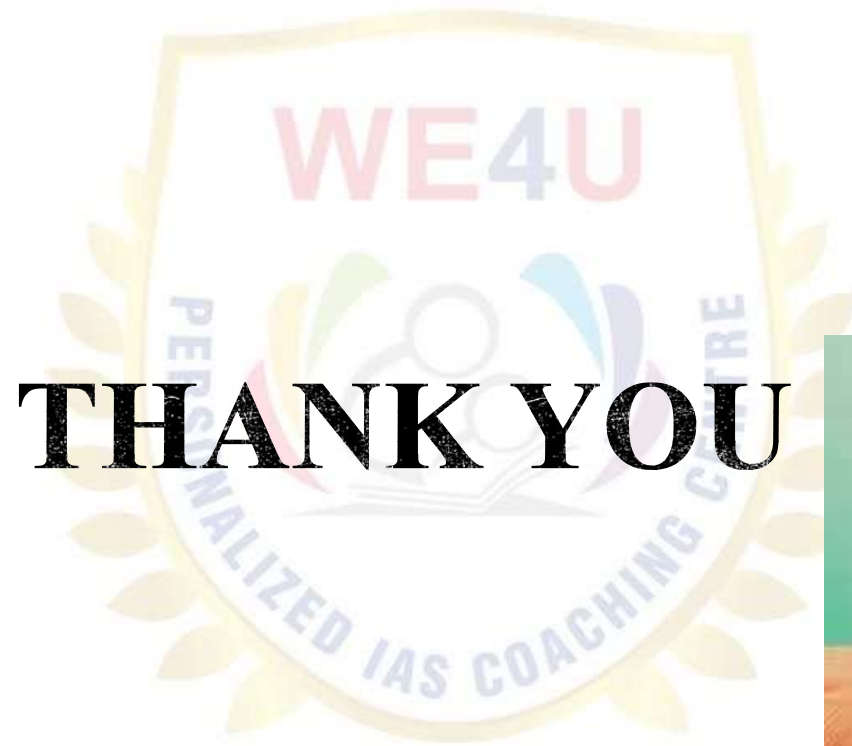
He added that the type of additional assistance that may be provided by the donors to on-treatment TB patients who had given consent for support shall include nutritional support, additional investigations, vocational support and additional nutritional supplements.

The minimum period of

commitment for providing the support to the TB patient will be one year. The Ministry said that the initiative would increase the active involvement of society in the fight against tuberculosis.

“This activity aims at increasing awareness among the public regarding tuberculosis and the involvement of the community in supporting the treatment cascade shall also help in the reduction of the stigma. Ultimately, improved nutrition for TB patient shall result in better treatment outcomes,” the Ministry explained in its guidance document.

India has the world’s highest tuberculosis (TB) burden, with 26 lakh people contracting the disease and approximately four lakh people dying from it every year. The economic burden of TB in terms of the loss of lives, income and workdays is also substantial. TB usually affects the most economically productive age group of society resulting in a significant loss of working days.



**THANK YOU**

