


**THE TIMES OF INDIA**
*Date:30-03-21*

## Heart of Asia

***India gets a seat in Afghan peace process. It must reach out to moderate Taliban factions***

**TOI Editorial**

With foreign minister S Jaishankar attending the Heart of Asia meeting on Afghanistan, a new sense of urgency has imbued New Delhi's Afghan policy. The primary reason for this is the Joe Biden administration finally revealing its intentions on Afghanistan this month. First, in a letter to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, US secretary of state Anthony Blinken proposed a transitional peace government for Afghanistan followed by national elections and a UN-led conference of India, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and the US to discuss a unified approach on Afghanistan. Second, a draft peace agreement from Washington proposes that the said transitional Afghan government include Taliban while setting out guiding principles for a new Afghan constitution.

What this means is that after years of sitting on the margins, India has now been formally included in the Afghan peace process as a crucial regional player. This only makes sense given India's substantial development projects in Afghanistan and the goodwill New Delhi enjoys among Afghans. But it's also clear that the future of Afghanistan will certainly include Taliban in some shape and form. Which is why India should reach out to those moderate sections of the Islamist group that are willing to work with it.

In fact, such an outreach will also help Taliban in mainstreaming themselves. Interestingly, this comes at a time when the Pakistani army has been making peace overtures to India, having come under pressure from the political opposition in that country. Therefore, this is New Delhi's chance to seriously contribute towards peace in Afghanistan, protect its legitimate interests there and neutralise Pakistan's strategy of using Afghanistan as strategic depth against India. A secure and peaceful Afghanistan is crucial to rolling back the terror factories Pakistan has cultivated over the decades. It's now or never.

**THE ECONOMIC TIMES**
*Date:30-03-21*

## Govt should bear cost of interest waiver

**ET Editorial**

When the Supreme Court ordered that borrowers who had availed themselves of a moratorium on servicing their loans during the pandemic should not be asked to pay interest on the unpaid interest, it did not specify who should bear the cost. Now, the government reportedly says the banks should bear the cost. This is unreasonable. The government is best placed to bear that burden.

The financial system depends on debts being honoured, and compounding of interest is a routine practice of banking: interest for the overdue period is treated as a fresh loan on which interest is charged. After all, the banks cannot skip interest payments to their depositors, nor shed its cost of operations. The rationale for the SC's verdict is that borrowers' failure to service their loans stems not from delinquency or inefficiency but from a pandemic that forced an economic shutdown. Clearly, the cost of the waiver has to be borne by society at large. The government, on behalf of society, should shoulder the burden, not banks.

Reportedly, ICRA estimates the compounded interest for six months of moratorium across all lenders at ₹13,500-14,000 crore. If the cost were to be transferred to banks (read: a bulk of it would be transferred to public sector banks), it would have to be borne by shareholders, principally, the government, in any case, in the form of lower returns or fresh capital infusion. Depositors could also possibly be offered lower rates of interest on fresh deposits, although this could turn business away to banks that have not lent much to industry and have healthier books. Rather than bear the cost indirectly and have a weaker set of public sector banks, the government is better off bearing the cost directly and leave the banks no worse off.


*Date:30-03-21*

## Neighbourly Touch

***PM's Dhaka visit conveyed right signals. Delhi must ensure movement on Teesta pact, a win-win for both sides.***

### Editorial



The March 26-27 visit to Dhaka by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his first trip abroad since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, has conveyed that India attaches great importance to the relationship with its eastern neighbour. Bangladesh is the region's fastest growing economy, with social indicators that other countries, including India, can learn from, and a vital link without which Delhi cannot realise the full potential of either the economic or strategic underpinnings of its Look East policy. India was instrumental in the birth of Bangladesh, but ties between the two countries, though at their historic best over the last 12 years under Sheikh Hasina, remain complicated. Most recently, the ruling BJP regime's political rhetoric at home, including its use of the "illegal immigrant" trope, and unsavoury references to Bangladesh in the public conversation on the Citizenship Amendment Act, had spread frost on the ties and threatened to strengthen the hands of Islamist groups opposed to PM Hasina, who see her as too close to Delhi. PM Modi's visit, to participate in the 50th anniversary commemoration of

trope, and unsavoury references to Bangladesh in the public conversation on the Citizenship Amendment Act, had spread frost on the ties and threatened to strengthen the hands of Islamist groups opposed to PM Hasina, who see her as too close to Delhi. PM Modi's visit, to participate in the 50th anniversary commemoration of

Bangladesh's independence day and the 100th birth anniversary celebrations of Mujibur Rehman, the father of Bangladesh, coincides with the West Bengal elections, and could not escape a whiff of the sulphurous poll campaign. That 10 people were killed in protests in Bangladesh against the visit, led by an extremist Islamist group called Hefazat-e-Islam, is shocking. The responsibility for not allowing this to negate the achievements of the visit lies in both capitals.

A joint statement has listed several outcomes from the visit, from connectivity and “people-oriented” border management to anti-COVID-19 vaccines and nuclear energy. But for Bangladesh, the outcome that matters most remains elusive — the finalisation of the agreement to share the waters of the Teesta river, a draft of which was drawn up by both governments in 2011. India’s inability to deliver on this promise is a fallout of the differences between the Centre and West Bengal on the issue. Irrespective of the outcome of the elections in that state, however, it is necessary that Delhi does whatever it takes towards arriving at a pact that can be a win-win for both sides. This will convey to Bangladesh, where India is vying with China for influence, that Delhi can take difficult decisions to help out a neighbour.

PM Modi drew a vision of a shared future for India and Bangladesh through the “power of democracy”, and utilisation of opportunities of trade, commerce and connectivity to “progress together” and stay united against the challenge posed by terrorism. There were references to “fraternal ties” based on equality, trust and understanding that “transcend a strategic partnership”. But while all countries desire to be recognised as equal, they also want bigger countries to take more responsibility for protecting this equality. This is probably what PM Hasina meant when she said that, as the biggest country in South Asia, India must “play a pioneering role”. Delhi must hold up its end of the pact with Dhaka.

*Date:30-03-21*

## An active engagement

***PM Modi's visit indicates that the two neighbours have evolved and are keen to discuss and remove obstacles as they appear.***

**Deb Mukharji, [ India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh from 1995-2000 ]**

At the invitation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh from March 26 to 27 to participate in the 50th-anniversary celebrations of the independence of Bangladesh and mukti juddho, the War of Liberation. He was originally scheduled to attend the beginning of the year-long celebrations in March 2020, which had to be deferred due to the COVID pandemic. This was also the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the preceding days, prime ministers and presidents of Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka came to Dhaka to convey their good wishes to Bangladesh. Congratulatory messages were received from many, including Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, Boris Johnson, Yoshihide Suga and Imran Khan. Curiously, Xi Jinping did not figure.

During his visit, PM Modi visited Tungipara to pay his respects at the mazar of Sheikh Mujib, a gesture which was appreciated, particularly as he is the first Indian prime minister to do so. PM Hasina and her sister Rehana were at Tungipara to greet the Indian prime minister. PM Modi also visited two Hindu temples in the countryside. This was seen as connected to the ongoing elections in West Bengal.

Even though the visit was to participate in the anniversary celebrations, it acquired the contours of an official visit with talks at the delegation-level and a joint statement. While the joint statement does not have the visionary aspect of some in the past, this could well be interpreted positively. A “bread and butter” joint statement should indicate that the two countries have evolved and are actively engaged and keen to discuss and remove obstacles as they appear.

In this context, it has to be noted with regret that issues related to water resources remain unattended. Besides the major issue of the Teesta, the joint statement finds no mention of the lack of movement by one side or the other with regard to Feni, Kushiyara, etc. Water-related issues are rarely, if ever, resolved by ministries of water resources. Clearly, there has been an absence of political direction or involvement of the foreign ministries. Unfortunately, these apparently minor issues have a habit of flaring up and affecting bilateral relations. The Indian prime minister’s comment that India is committed to a reasonable solution to the sharing of all river waters bypasses the essential need for the development of water resources, which, in turn, requires multi-state collaboration. An instance of inexcusable laxity would seem to be in not yet even commencing the technical survey of the Ganges barrage, which is supposed to maximise the benefits of the Farakka Agreement to Bangladesh. Political will besides, there also needs to be accountability at the official and technical levels for surveys not moving from one joint statement to the next.

One very positive reflection in the discussions, hopefully indicative of the road travelled, is Bangladesh’s suggestion of India providing additional road connectivity to Nepal and rail to Bhutan. This should be provided without reservations by India, keeping at bay the ever-suspicious security agencies. Bangladesh has also expressed an interest in being involved in road links between India and Myanmar and Thailand. Until not too long ago, Dhaka had been wary of such connectivities. It is important that, on India’s part, things progress rapidly. Bangladesh has sought a detailed proposal from India on its request to be provided connectivity between Guwahati and Chittagong, as also transit between Mahendraganj in Meghalaya to Hili in West Bengal. One of the lingering effects of the division of an interdependent landmass into mutually suspicious national entities has been the lack of development in all the areas concerned. A moment may have arrived when in some form, the promise of SAARC or BBIN may reach fulfilment. Free connectivity could change the lives of people in the most significant ways.

A recent World Bank study has projected exponential growth in trade with a consequent effect on GDP for both India and Bangladesh if there is free trade and liberal connectivity. In this context, it is heartening to note that there have been positive discussions between the two countries in arriving at a CEP. As far as I can recall, the offer of an FTA, on lines similar to India’s FTA with Sri Lanka, had been made to Dhaka many years ago at either official or track II level but had not found acceptance. Meanwhile, export figures from Bangladesh reveal that following India’s offer of duty-free access to a number of items, exports have increased substantially.

PM Hasina’s offer of the airports of Chittagong, Sylhet and Saidpur in northern Bangladesh to neighbouring areas in India is extremely significant with a host of positive consequences for the region. It would be up to India to ensure that the offer is followed up by both countries in terms of the necessary infrastructure being put in place.

One might recall that during Sheikh Hasina’s visit in October 2019, her statements had clearly, if politely, indicated her dismay at some political developments in India. Possibly as a reaction to Indian statements connected to the CAA, some ministerial visits from Bangladesh had been cancelled. These concerns have not gone away, and have been reflected in the demonstrations against the Indian prime minister’s current visit, leading to several deaths. While some reassurances have presumably been conveyed to Dhaka, it would remain important to remember that our internal politics, statements and, indeed, treatment of minorities, would influence our neighbours at many levels and, consequently, our relations with them.

Date:30-03-21

# Bridge to Dhaka

## *PM Modi's Bangladesh visit affirms his 'neighbourhood first' policy*

**Anil Baluni, [ BJP Rajya Sabha MP and head of the party's media cell ]**

On May 26, 2014, when Narendra Modi took oath as the country's 14th prime minister, a cursory glance at the guest list could have given away his foreign policy ambitions. Besides various heads of states, political parties and groups, the list included leaders from the SAARC countries, making it pretty clear that the Modi government's main foreign policy focus is "neighbourhood first".

PM Modi has constantly reached out to India's neighbours such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal to join in India's journey towards economic empowerment whether with respect to generating electricity or constructing a port or inking a boundary pact. The core themes behind his push towards India having cordial relations with its neighbours are the issues of regional peace, security and development. PM Modi's message to India's neighbours is clear: India is committed to promoting regional peace and economic integration of the region.

While Pakistan and China failed to understand the noble intentions of this neighbourhood outreach, the other neighbours have been echoing Modi's vision of making SAARC a strong and cohesive regional block. The PM's deftness in dealing with the country's neighbours has surprised top foreign policy experts.

Another guiding theme behind the Narendra Modi government's push towards the "neighbourhood first" policy is that India wants to come across to its neighbours as a country that is growing both economically and strategically and is ready to share the fruits of its growth with its neighbours because it knows that a prosperous neighbourhood means a prosperous region. This, in turn, will check the growth of inequality and poverty in the Asian region.

PM Modi's first foreign visit after the COVID-19 pandemic to Bangladesh is, therefore, a reiteration of his government's focus on the neighbourhood. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave the leaders of the subcontinent a worldview based on the principle of equitable distribution of wealth and resources as well as development at the grassroots. This theme is close to Modi's heart as well.

The neighbours came together to ink the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015. Rahman dreamed of a united Bay of Bengal, which more than four decades after his martyrdom has been made possible by his daughter, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

As Bangladesh celebrates two momentous events — 50 years of its independence, and the centenary of Bangabandhu — PM Modi's visit to Dhaka, that concluded last week, assumes great significance. The visit is not just an acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by the people in both countries to gain freedom, but also a commitment to advance the visionary worldview of Bangabandhu. It is an endeavour to realise his dreams for the subcontinent.

Analysing the relationship between the two countries in the light of the boundary accord and the spirit of cooperation and collaboration clearly highlights that India's attitude towards Bangladesh does not stop at respect and friendship for its eastern neighbour, but also touches on other crucial aspects such as better connectivity, energy, cross-border trade, health and education. Bangladesh was among the first countries to receive Indian COVID-19 vaccines under the "Vaccine Maitri" mission.

Connectivity is the core principle of PM Modi's outreach to Bangladesh. It will energise people-to-people contact. India restored four out of the six pre-1965 cross-border rail links with Bangladesh and the remaining two shall be completed soon. The development of three other rail links is also on the anvil.

The two countries are planning to double air connectivity to 120 flights a week, which has, unfortunately, been delayed due to the complications arising out of the pandemic. India and Bangladesh are also working on shared waterways for promoting trade and transport, which has seen India assisting in the dredging and deepening of over 450 km of riverways in Bangladesh.

The countries are also cooperating in the power and energy sectors. India is focusing on enhancing investments and creating capacity as well as infrastructure for strengthening sub-regional cooperation in power and energy connectivity. Such an effort will also help in optimum utilisation of resources in the two nations and boost trade and travel. The agreements in the oil and gas sector, road transport, medical and education, port development, space programme, artificial intelligence, civil nuclear cooperation are going to add new dimensions to the Indo-Bangla ties.

PM Modi's efforts are focused on encouraging and facilitating travel between the neighbours which will not only boost business and commerce, but will also have a spillover effect on education, medical treatment and tourism. The active collaboration and cooperation between India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan under the BBIN Group is yet another initiative of PM Modi in boosting regional cooperation. Cross-border connectivity and economic linkages will play a crucial role as the world, along with India and Bangladesh, comes together to chart out a roadmap to deal with the death and devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.


*Date:30-03-21*

## Time to make the water switch

*Technological solutions to make rice and sugarcane cultivators use water more sustainably can work if there are right incentives, and agri-input pricing is on the right track.*

**Ashok Gulati and Ritika Juneja [ Gulati is Infosys Chair Professor for Agriculture and Juneja is a Consultant at ICRIER ]**



On World Water day (March 22) Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the “Catch the Rain” campaign under the government’s flagship programme, Jal Shakti Abhiyan. He emphasised the importance of using every penny spent under MGNREGA to conserve water. This is a laudable objective. But what is the state of our water resources? How can we ensure that everyone has access to safe drinking water, while industry and agriculture also get sufficient supplies to produce enough to meet the country’s demands? These issues demand close attention.

As per the Central Water Commission’s reassessment of water availability using space inputs (2019), India receives a mean annual precipitation of about 3,880 billion cubic meters (BCM) but utilises only 699 BCM

(18 percent) of this; the rest is lost to evaporation and other factors. The demand for water is likely to be 843 BCM in 2025 and 1,180 BCM by 2050. So, the targets are not beyond our reach, if we remain focused and follow an appropriate strategy that not only “catches more rain” but also ensures better demand management of this precious resource.

As per the UN’s report on Sustainable Development Goal-6 (SDG-6) on “Clean water and sanitation for all by 2030”, India achieved only 56.6 per cent of the target by 2019. This indicates that we need move much faster in order to meet this SDG goal. Further, as per the Niti Aayog’s Composite Water Management Index (2019), 75 per cent households in India do not have access to drinking water on their premises and India ranks 120th amongst 122 countries in the water quality index. India is identified as a water stressed country with its per capita water availability declining from 5,178 cubic metre (m<sup>3</sup>)/year in 1951 to 1,544 m<sup>3</sup> in 2011 — this is likely to go down further to 1,140 cubic metre by 2050.

How does one move forward? Agriculture uses about 78 per cent of fresh water resources. And as the country develops, the share of drinking water, industry, and other uses is likely to rise. Unless one learns to give effect to the credo of “per drop more crop” in agriculture, the challenge can be daunting. We need a paradigm shift in our thinking and a strategy to not just increase land productivity measured as tonnes per hectare (t/ha), but also maximise applied irrigation productivity measured as kilograms, or Rs, per cubic metre of water (kg/m<sup>3</sup>).

So far, with decades of large public and private investments in irrigation, only about half of India’s gross cropped area (198 million hectares) is irrigated. Groundwater contributes about 64 per cent, canals 23 per cent, tanks 2 per cent and other sources 11 per cent to irrigation. This results primarily from the skewed incentive policy of free or highly subsidised power, particularly in the country’s north-west, the site of the erstwhile Green Revolution. Over exploitation of groundwater has made this region amongst the three highest water risk hotspots, the others being north eastern China and south western USA (California). Overall, about 1,592 blocks in 256 districts in India are either critical or overexploited.

When it comes to the issue of using water more wisely in agriculture, two crops — rice and sugarcane — deserve special attention. As per a NABARD-ICRIER study on Water Productivity Mapping, these crops alone consume almost 60 per cent of India’s irrigation water. Figure 1 shows applied irrigation water productivity against land productivity for rice and sugarcane in important growing states. It is interesting to note that while Punjab scores high on land productivity of rice, it is at the bottom with respect to applied irrigation water productivity. Similarly, in the case of sugarcane, irrigation water productivity in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka,

Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu is only 1/3rd of that in Bihar and UP (Figure 2). There is, thus, a need to realign cropping patterns based on per unit of applied irrigation water productivity.

There are technologies to produce the same output of these two crops with almost half the irrigation water. Jain Irrigation, for instance, has set up drip irrigation pilots for paddy in Karnal (Haryana) and Tamil Nadu and for sugarcane in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The results of these pilots indicate while it takes 3,065 litres of water to produce 1 kg of paddy grain (yield level 7.75 t/ha) under traditional flood irrigation, under drip, it can be reduced to just 842 litres. The benefit cost ratio of drip with fertigation in case of sugarcane in Karnataka is observed to be 2.64. An extension to this is the “Family Drip System” innovated by the largest drip irrigation company in the world, the Israel-based — Netafim. The company has also launched its largest demonstration project in Asia at Ramthal, Karnataka. Technologies like Direct Seeded Rice (DSR) and System of Rice Intensification (SRI) can also save 25-30 per cent of water compared to traditional flood irrigation. Unfortunately, however, technological solutions cannot make much headway unless pricing policies of agri-inputs are put on the right track and farmers are incentivised for saving water.

The Punjab government, along with the World Bank and J-PAL, has started some pilots with an innovative policy of “Paani Bachao Paise Kamao” to encourage rational use of water among farmers. Under the initiative, meters are installed on farmers’ pumps, and if they save water/power compared to what they have been using (taken as entitlements) they get paid for those savings — this is credited directly into their bank accounts.

Overall, it seems it is time to switch from the highly subsidised price policy of water/power (and even fertilisers) to direct income support on a per hectare basis, and investment policies that help with newer technologies and innovations. Water and power need to be priced as per their economic value or at least to recover significant part of their costs to ensure sustainable agriculture.

**Date:30-03-21**

## Diversity and inclusivity

*IIM Bangalore's policies offer key insights into providing equitable opportunities to all*

**Rishikesha T. Krishnan, [ The author is the Director of IIM Bangalore ]**

India has a diverse population. Unfortunately, certain social structures have prevented thousands of individuals from realising their potential, and the country from benefiting from their skills and talent. The government has tried to remedy this situation through constitutional and statutory provisions for reservation quotas, but as organisations the world over have realised, such efforts to enhance equity and diversity need to be matched by a steely resolve to facilitate genuine inclusion.

The experience at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) with respect to students with disability is instructive in this regard. The institute admitted students with disabilities even before the Persons with

Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 was introduced. But it soon realised that there is much more to inclusivity.

In a push towards greater inclusivity, in 2009, with generous support from Mphasis, IIMB set up a dedicated Office of Disability Services to act as a nodal support point for students with disability, in an effort to study the individual needs of each student and provide the required accommodations proactively.

### **Modified approach**

Inclusivity also means rethinking the conventional notions of fairness in examinations. Giving a student with serious visual impairment an examination paper based on graphs is an unfair evaluation of her understanding of the fundamental concepts an institute may wish to impart. To that extent, sensitisation workshops with faculty (now a regular feature) have changed the approach to the entire evaluation process.

The IIMB's efforts have been recognised by the prestigious NCPEDP-Mphasis Universal Design Award for pioneering work in promoting accessibility and universal design and ensuring a life of equality and dignity for students with disabilities.

But apart from just disability, the institute is committed to all forms of diversity and inclusivity — IIM Bangalore has a good record in both complying with government-mandated admission quotas for SC, ST, and OBC candidates to the flagship two-year postgraduate programme in management leading to an MBA degree, and in facilitating the placement of all graduates in good roles.

### **Other dimensions**

Today, IIMB is applying the same integrated approach that it followed for students with disability to other dimensions of diversity. One such challenge — the recruitment of faculty within certain categories — was identified in recent reports of The Hindu. To this effect, the institute is balancing the addressal of two laws — the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Teachers' Cadre) Act 2019 and the Indian Institutes of Management Act, 2017. The latter recognises IIMs as Institutions of National Importance which must aspire for global standards.

While the institute has been successful in hiring four excellent faculty members from the SC and ST categories over the last year, there is a serious shortage of qualified candidates from reserved categories in certain areas and disciplines, which impedes hiring efforts. While an obvious step is to focus on the admission of high-potential students from reserved categories to doctoral programmes, alumni discussions reveal that doctoral studies are often not the first preference for students of merit from these communities. Their priority is to rapidly ascend the ladder of economic stability, for which a reliable pathway is the MBA degree.

Given this insight, IIMB launched the N.S. Ramaswamy Pre-doctoral Programme in 2019. This internally-funded academic and mentoring initiative selects around 10 candidates from under-privileged categories every year and helps them prepare for admission to doctoral studies.

As a globally-ranked institution committed to excellence in management and entrepreneurship, IIMB continues to strive for a multi-dimensional and integrated approach to diversity and inclusion.