

Diplomatic Nite - Bridging the Gap

[CONTENTS](#)
[PRINT VERSION](#)
[SPECIAL REPORTS](#)
[SUPPLEMENTS](#)
[OUR PATRONS](#)
[MEDIA](#)
[SCRAPBOOK](#)

[Home](#) / [January 2015](#)

A Long Way to Go

FOCUS

Ali Riaz insists that the decision of the Narendra Modi government to implement the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh is a step in the right direction. It was long overdue, but there is still a long way to go

"We live in a cage" said the woman; "look around, you will understand", echoed the man standing next to her. A few children were running about, but seemed to know well where the unmarked boundary was located. The conversation took place more than 15 years ago, precisely on March 11, 1999 as recorded in an old note book of mine. I was standing on the edge of a small landholding in Benapole Union of Jessore district; it is called Tero Ghar (13 households). This was on the border between Bangladesh and India, and I was still on the Bangladesh side of the border. Here the river Ichamati divides the two countries, but a small village shaped like a triangle located inside the Bangladesh border is a part of India. The place was, in fact, smaller than any typical village; it comprised only 2.25 acres of land. I was told that there were only 10 households living in that community, but the name derived from its curious history – when it became an enclave, there were 13 households. At the time of the conversation, I was a broadcast journalist of the BBC Bengali Service in London and was travelling in the border areas between Bangladesh and India, and India and Pakistan, while making a series of radio documentaries on the lives of people living on the margin. For the inhabitants of Tero Ghar, everything was on the other side of the river, from daily shopping to children's school to seeing a doctor; the only means to go anywhere was a boat ride. Inhabitants didn't know when this small land became an enclave, but recalled that their forefathers lived in the same place and it was then also an enclave.

LBA Raises Hopes

Anyone who knows about Indo-Bangladesh borders is aware that Tero Ghar is not an exceptional landscape. It is one of the 162 enclaves that are located on the 'other side' of the border – for Bangladesh 111 of such enclaves are within India, and for India 51 enclaves are located inside Bangladesh. The agonies of the inhabitants have been recorded by the media and history, and implications of these anomalies have been probed by social scientists for decades, yet nothing has changed. One of my journalist friends, whom I asked recently about this small enclave, retorted what new things have I been expecting; "nothing has changed, except now there are eight households." The inhabitants of Tero Ghar may now be hoping that their life within a cage will come to an end soon.

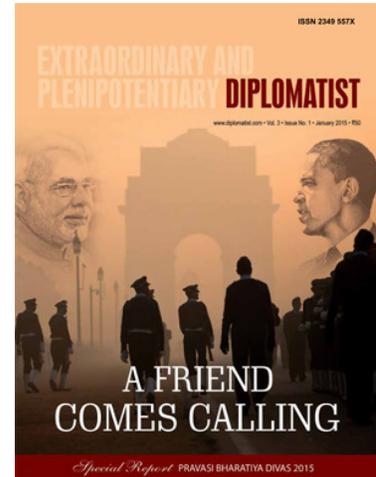
The expectations of the inhabitants of these enclaves were raised when a Land Border Agreement (LBA) was signed between two nations – Bangladesh and India – on May 16, 1974 declaring that these lands will be merged with adjoining areas and the people will be given a choice to stay or leave. But, little did the-then Prime Ministers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi know that the deal they signed would gather dust for the following 40 years. The hopes of thousands of citizens of both the countries that the incongruence between their citizenship and their place of residence would come to an end through the deal faded over time.

Criticism against India

The deal was quickly ratified by the Bangladesh parliament; but despite changes in the government in India, it has never seen the light of the day. The protocol signed between Prime Ministers Dr Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina in 2011 addressed the issue of demarcation of borders and adverse possession. The UPA II government's rush in 2013 to ratify the deal was destined to fail, because the BJP, the TMC and the AGP were up in arms against the deal on the one hand, while it was presented with little time in hand on the other. As for Bangladesh, while no political parties ever called for cancellation of the treaty, some did portray the unwillingness of the Indian government to ratify the LBA as an example of India's unjust attitude towards Bangladesh. Not only is India unwilling to meet reasonable demands of Bangladesh, it doesn't honour a deal it agreed, many said. This was one of the many grievances Bangladeshis frequently levelled against India.

Strong, Proactive Steps

The recent step towards ratifying the treaty, which reflects a U-turn by the BJP, apparently sends a different message. The



DEFINITION

Diplomat

Diplomacy

Diplomatist

- Diplomatist Magazine was launched in October of 1996, covers diplomatic and current affairs, including reports on economic and trade, pertaining to relations between India and other countries.

DIRECTORIES

Diplomatic Directories: [Foreign Missions in India](#)

Diplomatic Directories: [Indian Missions in Abroad](#)

DIGITAL PLATFORM

Digital Platform: [Read on Digital Partners](#)

ARCHIVES

[Diplomatist Archives](#)

BJP, one will recall previously, opposed the land swap arguing that it compromised national security. It is not too difficult to understand that the decision to go ahead with the implementation of the LBA is primarily intended to improve the relationship with Bangladesh. We can safely assume that BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, understand that the failure to sign the Teesta water sharing deal during Dr Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011 had deepened suspicions about India's goodwill. India's role in Bangladesh's controversial January 2014 elections not only surprised Western nations, but also a section of unhappy Bangladeshis. This gesture also sends the message that the policy towards Bangladesh, particularly to support the current regime, is not a UPA government policy, but Indian foreign policy. But it is not only about Bangladesh; it is also part of the BJP government's policy to woo neighbours in a bid to check China's growing influence in the region.

Although it is almost certain that the LBA will be ratified, the implementation of all aspects will take some time. The details are yet to be worked out by the Indo-Bangla Enclave Exchange Coordination Committee on the one hand, and between the states and the central government, on the other. There are two arguments being made by the Indian government in support of ratifying the LBA: that it will stop 'infiltration' from Bangladesh, and that it will contribute to the development of the northeast through cooperation with Bangladesh.

Issue of Migration: As Contentious as Ever

To convince the people in Assam, particularly the AGP, Narendra Modi clearly stated, "I will take steps so that Bangladeshis who infiltrate into Assam and trouble you, are pushed out." Such rhetoric may help win some support in Assam, but it also sends a message to Bangladeshis that they have been labelled as bogeymen. Besides, the migration issue cannot be viewed only from a security perspective. Securitisation of the migration issue ignoring the historical aspect has the potential to increase tension in some of the border-states. This is particularly true for Assam, which has a history of violence against alleged migrants. One must consider its ability to exacerbate the situation for the Muslim population in these states, contribute to domestic security concerns and foment more discontent across the border in the long run. It has been noted in the Bangladeshi press that Modi assured people that he would fulfil every promise he had made in New Delhi before the formation of the BJP-led government and that deportation of illegal migrants from Bangladesh was one of the pre-poll promises of the BJP. This is not to deny the issue of migration from Bangladesh, but will the implementation of the LBA be used as justification for harsher actions on the borders leading to further incidents of violence against Bangladeshis, an issue which irks Bangladeshis. Therefore, while the implementation of the agreement on paper should be helpful in addressing the migration issue, the way it is being framed has the potential to backfire.

Beyond LBA Implementation

The economic potential of Indo-Bangladeshi cooperation cannot be overstated. Growth in Bangladesh is bound to benefit India, and economic development in northeast India will help Bangladesh immensely. The deal will mark a step towards such cooperation, and bring the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) comprising India's northeast, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan back to the discussion table. However, to hope that the implementation of the LBA is sufficient in this regard is misplaced. Close cooperation is required to address other unresolved issues such as the Teesta water sharing deal, the river linking project, and Tipaimukh dam, to name a few. Issues such as transit, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation must be included in a comprehensive framework. In doing so, Indian policy makers cannot forget Bangladesh's domestic political dynamics. The apparent calm in the past year shouldn't be misjudged as the end of political uncertainty; instead it is incumbent on Indian policymakers to take a longer view. In this context, the decision to implement the LBA is a step in the right direction; it was long overdue, but there is a long way to go.

[Go to Content Page](#)

AUTHOR



Ali Riaz is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. He recently served as a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at Washington, D.C. Professor Riaz's recent publication is entitled [Islam and Identity Politics among British-Bangladeshis: A Leap of Faith \(2013\)](#).

Diplomatist Magazine was launched in October of 1996 as the signature magazine of L.B. Associates (Pvt) Ltd, a contract publishing house based in Noida, a satellite town of New Delhi, India, the National Capital.

SEARCH

Search

Search

[Home](#) [Contents](#) [Print Version](#) [Special Reports](#) [Supplements](#) [Our Patrons](#) [Media](#) [Scrapbook](#) [Contact us](#)