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**India's Neighbourhood First Policy in the**  
**Backdrop of CAA-NRC: Effect on**  
**India-Bangladesh ties in a Globalizing World**

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## **Abstract**

*The proposed study explores the current relationship between Bangladesh and India under the aegis of India's Neighborhood First Strategy in the contemporary context centring on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)-2019. The key point of the analysis is that the proposed domestic policy and changes in citizenship Bill can have unintended consequences for Bangladesh-India relationship in the future. The paper also touches upon the effect of the policy on India's relation with other neighbouring countries. As C. Raja Mohan once said "without enduring primacy in one's neighbourhood, no nation can become a credible power on the global stage."; the same can apply to India's state in the current scenario. Hence, India needs to be cautious of the direct bearing of its domestic policy on its international policies specifically "The Neighbourhood First Policy".*

**Keywords:** *Neighbourhood First Policy, Citizenship, NRC-CAA, India-Bangladesh relations.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The Indian subcontinent remains fundamentally divided, with unusually low integration levels, marked by a history of political divisions, economic disparities, and geostrategic divergences. After coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi prioritized intra- and inter-regional connectivity to foster its economic and security interest in the region. After years of disconnectivity, this re-connectivity drive came in the form of the Modi Government's India Neighbourhood First Policy.

*"A nation's destiny is linked to its neighbourhood. That is why my government has placed the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with her neighbours."*

- Narendra Modi's address at the general debate of the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly (S, 2020). Due to collective history and civilization, India's soft power is extreme in South Asian countries, and they are now called its 'Civilizational Neighbours'. In 2014, all the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) were invited to the swearing-in ceremony by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He also invited all Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) leaders to the second swearing-in ceremony. Recent developments in India's domestic policy can have unintended consequences for India's relationship with its neighbouring countries. They can jeopardise the nation's dream to emerge as a regional hegemon in South Asia.

On 04 December 2019, the Union Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), which lays down significant amendments and procedures for acquiring Indian Citizenship. The act attempts to allow Indian Citizenship to members of six religious communities: Hindus, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian who have migrated from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, due to persecution or fear of persecution in the home country. At the same time, the Citizenship Amendment Act when read with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) created widespread protests all over the country, especially in Assam. Both of them have led to two significant problems that can affect India's relations with its neighbours. Firstly, it has selectively excluded the Muslim community from its purview, which has tormented its image as a democratic and secular country.

Secondly, the amendment unintentionally institutionalised these countries' role as religious aggressors by expressly identifying Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as origins of "persecuted minorities." This is not a solid foundation for maintaining good ties and goes against the much advocated "Neighbourhood First" agenda of Prime Minister Modi.

## **2.0 The Golden Era of India- Bangladesh Relations**

India has always tried to assert a 'big brother attitude' towards Bangladesh as asymmetric bilateralism has developed between the two countries. After the Awami League came to power in Bangladesh in 2009, the relations between the two countries have improved decisively. In the last six years, the relations between India and Bangladesh have experienced a significant upswing. In addition to introducing a range of networking and infrastructure programs, both parties have stepped up trade and economic engagement. The trade between both countries continues to grow, and India has become Bangladesh's second-largest importer. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the High Commissioner of India, referred to current India-Bangladesh relations to be in the golden era of bilateral relations in a speech delivered at the National Defence College and Armed Forces War College, Bangladesh in 2017 (IANS, 2016).

As seen in past instances, domestic politics impact a country's foreign relations and vice-versa. The initiation of Cabinet Amendment Act-National Register of Citizens (CAA-NRC) holds the potential to act as a yellow signal to warn us against the future red signal that holds the

potential to fraught India-Bangladesh relations and lead to the establishment of a reign of mistrust and fragmentation. The migration and influx of refugees has remained a persistent issue between both countries since Bangladesh's Liberation Struggle in 1971 and earlier. In 1971 alone, 10 million refugees took shelter in India. Out of this, approximately 0.3 million alone settled in Assam (Sufian,2020). This has fuelled demographic politics and ethnographic conflicts between the indigenous population and the Bengali-speaking migrants, termed 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants.' Bangladesh and Northeast India are essential for each other in terms of a shared history, culture, socio-economic values, and other factors. Hence, disruption and instability on either side are supposed to transfer considerable tremors on the other side.

### **3.0 The Repercussion of CAA-NRC on India and Bangladesh**

1. Anti-Indian Sentiment in Bangladesh: While the Indian government has assured that the acts will not impact Bangladesh, the ground realities depict a different picture. In an article by Scroll, Bangladesh Foreign Minister, AK Abdul Momen, has regarded both the acts as India's 'internal issues' (Scroll, 2020). However, alongside, he has expressed apprehensions regarding uncertainty in implementing the acts that can affect the neighbouring countries. In a recent succession, Bangladesh Ministers cancelled three visits to India. There are concerns that the sidelining of the Muslim population can unleash an exodus of Bengali-speaking people from Assam and Muslims trying to avoid India's persecution. Bangladesh is not ready for such a move as it is still dealing with the Rohingya Refugee Crisis. Similar past experiences under 'Operation Pushback'<sup>1</sup> have reaffirmed these fears in the Bangladeshi population.

The Bangladesh government has tried to cover the impacts of CAA-NRC to maintain stable diplomatic relations in India, but this can be hard to sustain given the internal conflict sprouting in Bangladesh itself. Recently, Bangladesh had to cancel the celebration of the 'Mujib Centennial' in remembrance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman<sup>2</sup> due to the spread of the coronavirus. Many dignitaries from around the world were invited, along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which sparked massive scale protests and

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<sup>1</sup> Deployed by Indian government in 1992 during the ' Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) regime where 132 people were deported from Delhi and forcefully pushed in Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup> The leader of the nationalist movement which established independent Bangladesh in 1971.

demonstrations by students, civil societies, and left-wing political parties demanding the withdrawal of Modi's invitation (Ullah akash et al., 2020).

2. India's Connectivity Dream: For Northeast India, Bangladesh's geographical position has considerable significance for its easy connectivity. Bangladesh is of great significance to the Northeast Indian states for transport and trans-shipment facilities in terms of road, rail, waterways connectivity and time and cost-effectiveness.

India has begun exporting coal to Bangladesh as part of these initiatives, using the Sonahat land terminal, located between the Kurigram district of Bangladesh and the Dhubri district of Assam. Amidst other contentious issues, the Sonahat (Bangladesh) and Mancachar (Assam) border *haats* lead to bilateral trade. There will soon be a direct flight from Dhaka to Guwahati. Assam also plans to use the port of Chittagong to satisfy its geo-economic needs and rationality. However, these opportunities can come under strain due to prospects of strain in India-Bangladesh Relations.

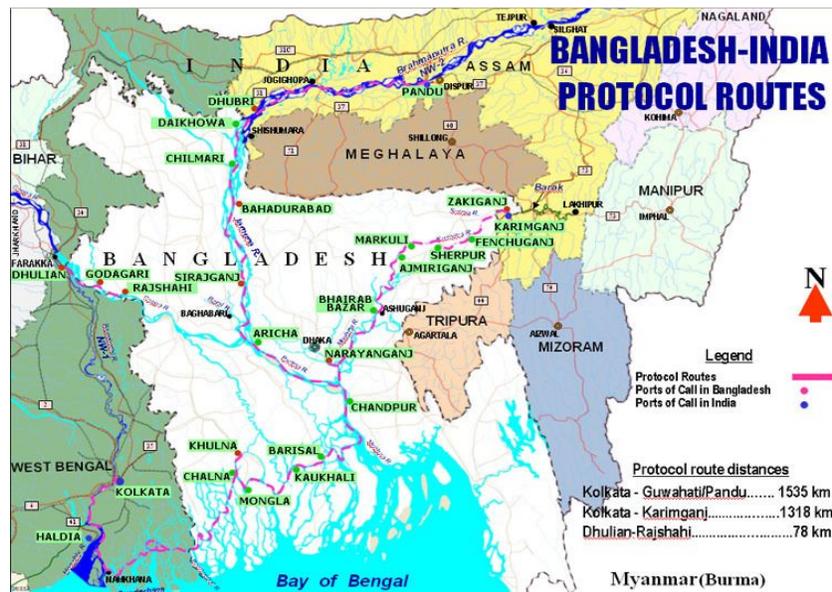


Figure 1: Bangladesh-India Important Trade & Connectivity Routes (Ahmad, 2020)

3. Domestic Instability: Over 90 per cent of Bangladeshis are Muslims. There are eight per cent Hindus and Buddhists, Christians, and others who make up the rest (Harrison Akins, 2020). Bangladesh adopted Islam as the state religion in 1988. However, the present Sheikh Hasina's government has strengthened its secular credentials by working to meet

the vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of a secular state where everybody has equal rights. Whenever it needs to play the Hindu card during the polls, the BJP flogs Bangladeshi migrants' problems. The illegal migrants were labelled as 'termites' by Home Minister Amit Shah. While the Awami League government has been cautious in its remarks considering the relatively smooth ties with India, the general public of Bangladesh is furious.

India has provided an opportunity to the Bangladesh National Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, and other militant Islamic groups to play the NRC-CAA card against the Awami League Government. The Sheikh Hasina's Government has also been dubbed as an 'Indian Stooze' acting in favour of India more than its own country (Guha, 2020).

4. India's Degrading Image: Despite all these repercussions, India is still firm in prioritising the agenda to control the Assamese political geography using 'anti-Bangladeshi migrants' and sidelining Muslims from the purview of the CAA. Though it has tried to justify this stand as a Humanitarian act to provide shelter to persecuted communities, it has failed to justify the grounds of excluding Muslims from its purview and considering minorities from Sri Lanka and Nepal, for instance.

Meenakshi Ganguly, director of South Asia of Human Rights Watch, remarked, "The Indian government's claim that the citizenship law aims to protect religious minorities rings hollow by excluding Ahmadiyah from Pakistan and Rohingyas from Myanmar." This rather anti-secular move can cost India's image as a democratic and secular nation with values of 'unity in diversity.' "*India's Soul has been jaundiced and what we see now is the retrogression of a nation which once exemplified 'unity in diversity' to an exclusively Hindu state where only one religion will prevail*", The Daily Star newspaper remarked on the country's present condition (Joshi, 2019).

5. Growing ties with China: The ethnocratic geopolitics will make the evolving ties between Bangladesh and China more robust in terms of geoeconomics, diplomacy, security, and geo-strategy, foreshadowing the socio-cultural, historical, and geopolitical affinity of the Bangladesh-India ties. Much to India's apprehension, China will assert its influence on Bangladesh as it did with other neighbouring nations by handing over specific lucrative

infrastructure and connectivity projects. China, on the other hand, has testified these fears to be true. It has already partnered with Bangladesh to build the largest smart city and township in Dhaka named 'Purbachal' and a mega river project to direct the Meghna river to the settlement (Patranobis, 2020). In June, China allowed 97 per cent of Bangladesh's export to enter its territory under the duty-free, quota-free program. China and Bangladesh have deepened their security relations too. Under the 2002 Defence Cooperation Agreement, Beijing provided Dhaka with a range of military arms from Chinese tanks, frigates, warships, and fighter jets.

"When China is there, Pakistan can never be far behind" a source informed the print. Pakistan has contacted its Bangladesh counterpart for the first time and showed significant interest in improving ties with it as they share 'common history and culture' (Basu, 2020). This poses a significant challenge for India as all its neighbours will have turned against it.

#### **4.0 Effect on India's Relation with other countries**

The CAA-NRC does not only put India-Bangladesh relations at stake but has the potential to affect the nation's relationship with other regional actors and beyond. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not been successful in justifying the CAA-NRC and India's move has created displeasure in Afghanistan; the first diplomatic setback came with the Afghan ambassador condemning India for relegating them as religious aggressors and persecutors (Balakrishnan, 2019). He specially mentioned Kabul's treatment of the Sikh community and the reservations made for them in the parliament.

On top of that, Sri Lanka also voiced its concerns against the implementation of CAA-NRC across India and have condemned India for ill-treatment of minority communities (Srinivasan, 2020). The experience of discriminatory citizenship law in the form of the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 explicitly excluded Sri Lankan Tamils of South Indian origin to acquire Citizenship in Sri Lanka. They are deeply concerned about the thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils who took refuge in India during the Civil war in Sri Lanka.

Nepal is a Hindu-majority country, but India is home to many Gurkha's who have their origins in Nepal. Over 1 lakh Gurkhas were omitted from Assam's NRC list. Any of the tensions seen in bilateral relations can be aggravated by such exclusions, particularly after the unofficial blockade of 2015-2016.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

As C. Raja Mohan once said that "without enduring primacy in one's neighbourhood, no nation can become a credible power on the global stage." The same can apply to India's state in the current scenario.

Behuria, Pattanaik, and Gupta explained in their article in 2012 that India focuses more on managing relations with its neighbours rather than giving them direction with a long term objective in mind. The same is true for CAA-NRC, which not only impacts the domestic politics and stability of the nation but carries an 'anti-neighbour' rhetoric, which the government is finding hard to hide. As already seen, India is losing ground in the region as far as CAA-NRC is concerned. India needs to consider the issue to preserve the peaceful relation with Bangladesh in the current scenario.

There is an urgent need for the government to revitalize its image as a facilitator of economic and development opportunities rather than a threat. It should improve its delivery, deficit the persistent gap between promise and delivery and speed up the projects pending in the area. For instance, the power projects with Adani and Reliance groups with Bangladesh are at nascent stages, other projects like The Akhaura-Agartala rail link, inland waterway dredging India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline are all moving with abysmally low speed. This can lead to a significant setback for India as it gives neighbouring countries a chance to move towards the second major power in the region- China.

On the other hand, China leaves no stone unturned to exploit the chance of coming closer to India's neighbour, making it more vulnerable to economic and security threats. China has taken over the port of Hambantota for 99 years after India refused to grant a loan to Sri Lanka to construct the same. China has also tried to assert its influence in Nepal by granting assistance to lay down Nepal's second airport-Pokhara. Chinese President, Xi Jinping, recently remarked,

"...stands ready to work with his Bangladeshi counterpart, Abdul Hamid, to align the two countries' strategies better and jointly promote the construction of the Belt and Road, to take the China-Bangladesh strategic partnership of cooperation to new heights." Bangladesh has regarded China as the most valued partner in the time of COVID-19 as well (Patranobis, 2020). Veena Sikri, former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh. "India should work harder now, especially in a post-COVID scenario, keeping in mind that Beijing's pressure will only increase."

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