

The Evolving Diplomatic Dance Between India and Bangladesh: Bridges or Barriers?

Surya Prakash Agrahari¹

¹Guest Faculty, Department of Political Science, Maharaja Suhel Dev University, Azamgarh

Received: 15 May 2025 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 May 2025, Published: 31 May 2025

Abstract

India and Bangladesh, sharing a 4,096-kilometer border, have historically maintained a multifaceted relationship characterized by cooperation and contention. The relationship between India and Bangladesh, like that of any South Asian neighbors, is deeply connected with civilization, culture, social and economic aspects. Bangladesh not only shares the legacy of the struggle for independence and liberation with India, but both also experience each other's deep emotions with a brotherly bond. This partnership is reflected in the multifaceted activities at various levels of their relationship. High-level exchanges, visits, and meetings regularly take place, along with extensive person-to-person interactions on a broad scale. This research paper examines the evolution of their diplomatic ties, recent developments, including the cancellation of defense contracts, trade restrictions, and unresolved water disputes, to assess whether these nations are building bridges of collaboration or erecting barriers of discord. The primary aim of this research paper is to examine contemporary India-Bangladesh relations, which are significantly influenced by the foreign policy strategies of both nations. While the relationship between India and Bangladesh often exemplifies a strong and cooperative bond between neighboring countries, it is not without its areas of friction. This study seeks to explore the complexities of this bilateral relationship, the areas of ongoing conflict, and the various dimensions of cooperation that define their interactions.

Keywords:- India-Bangladesh Relation, Trade, Water Treaty, Bilateral Relations, Diplomacy

Introduction

The emergence of Bangladesh as a nation in December 1971 was the result of Pakistan's defeat in the India-Pakistan war. This war marked the culmination of the Bangladeshi uprising against Pakistan's brutal and oppressive rule. After thirteen days of conflict, on December 16, 1971, Pakistan acknowledged its defeat and surrendered, leading to the rise of Bangladesh from what was formerly East Pakistan. For the people of Bangladesh, this signified the end of terror, brutality and suffering and the birth of an independent national identity. For India, it represented a victory for democratic socialism and secularism. In 2022, India and Bangladesh marked 51 years of diplomatic ties, which were initiated in December 1971 when India recognized the newly independent People's Republic of Bangladesh. Owing to its strategic geographical position, Bangladesh holds significant importance not only for India but also for other global powers. India shares its longest international border with Bangladesh, spanning across five Indian states: West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The bilateral relationship between the two nations carries substantial weight in political, economic, strategic and socio-cultural domains.

This partnership directly impacts millions across both countries and influences the broader South Asian region. From a geopolitical and strategic standpoint, Bangladesh is a key player in India's neighborhood policy. In reality, the bilateral relations between these two states have often been bitter, tension mounting, challenging and overwhelmed by allegations and counter-allegations.¹ The popular perception regarding Indo-Bangladesh relations is that they gain renewed momentum when the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the Indian National Congress (INC) are in power, owing to a longstanding historic friendship between the two

parties. It was Indira Gandhi of the INC who extended support and solidarity to a globally isolated Bangladesh during and after the Liberation War. In contrast, when the Awami League and the Bharatiya Janata Party are in power simultaneously, relations between India and Bangladesh tend to become strained, as reflected in their respective foreign policies. Unfortunately, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party forms the government, Dhaka's ties with Islamabad often strengthen significantly, overshadowing its relationship with New Delhi. As a result, when Narendra Modi, backed by the BJP, assumed office in 2014, many people in Bangladesh feared that Delhi-Dhaka relations might not experience deepening ties due to the BJP's ideological inclination toward Hindu nationalism.

However, defying these concerns, the relationship between India and Bangladesh gained fresh momentum and reached new heights during Modi's tenure as Prime Minister.

Land Border Agreement (LBA)-

The border shared between India and Bangladesh spans approximately 4,096 kilometers, making it one of the most complex in the world. Disputes covered roughly 6.1 kilometers of this boundary. In an effort to resolve long-standing issues, a Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was signed on May 16, 1974, by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangladesh swiftly ratified the agreement, but India's ratification faced hurdles due to the requirement of a constitutional amendment.

Progress stalled until January 2010, when Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India, prompting renewed commitment to resolving border disputes in line with the 1974 agreement. A protocol to the LBA was signed in September 2011 during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh. However, political opposition in India particularly from West Bengal's Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee and Assam's Asom Gana Parishad—prevented its ratification. Banerjee was initially against the agreement as West Bengal would have to cede around 17,000 acres while receiving only 7,000 acres in return. Nevertheless, she later supported the enclave exchange.²

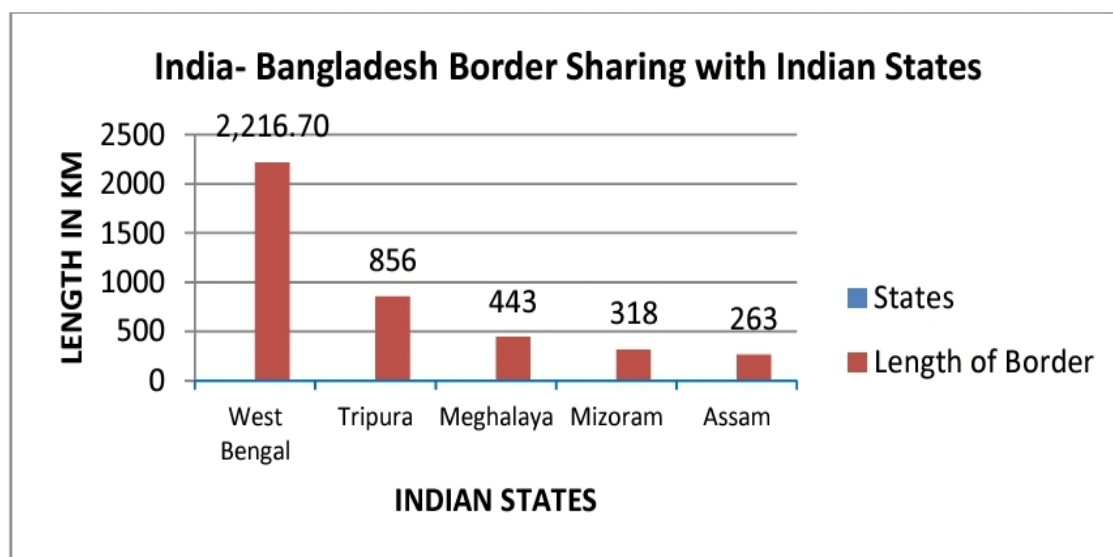


Fig. 1.1- India-Bangladesh border sharing with Indian States

Source:- World CIA Facebook 2010

In 1974, the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh signed the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) to exchange territorial enclaves and streamline the shared border. A revised version of the agreement was

mutually adopted on 7 May 2015, following a constitutional amendment passed by the Indian Parliament. Under this agreement, officially ratified on 6 June 2015, India received 51 Bangladeshi enclaves spanning 7,110 acres (2,880 hectares) within its territory, while Bangladesh took control of 111 Indian enclaves totaling 17,160 acres (6,940 hectares) situated within its borders. The exchange of enclaves between India and Bangladesh was executed during the night of July 31, 2015, with the relocation of residents expected to be completed by November 30, 2015. Under the terms of the Land Boundary Agreement, India ceded approximately 40 square kilometers (10,000 acres) of territory to Bangladesh.³ Notably, counter-enclaves such as Dahagram–Angarpota were not exchanged under this agreement, which effectively implemented the original Indira-Mujib pact of 1974. Residents of these enclaves were given the option to remain in place or relocate to the country of their choice. The implementation of the LBA marked a significant advancement in India-Bangladesh relations. It was hailed as a foundational step toward enhancing diplomatic ties, trade, security, and border management, including cooperation in counter-terrorism and crime prevention. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described the ratification as a "new milestone" in bilateral relations.

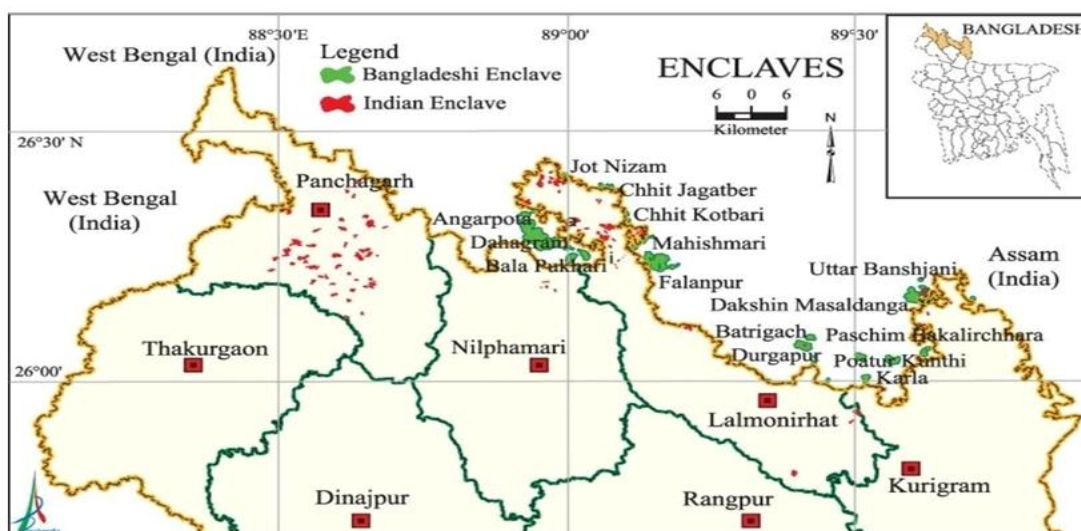


Fig. 1.2- Enclaves between India and Bangladesh

Source:- <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Enclaves>

Water Diplomacy-

Bangladesh places significant emphasis on engaging with India over the management of their 54 transboundary rivers, with particular attention often directed away from the three major river systems the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. The combined catchment area of the GBM basin spans approximately 7.5 million square kilometers, of which Bangladesh comprises about 7%, Bhutan 3%, India 63%, Nepal 9% and Tibet (China) 19%. Among these, the Ganges River has historically been the most contentious in bilateral relations. This river basin is also one of the most densely populated in the world, supporting nearly 600 million people roughly one-tenth of the global population.⁴ Despite sharing 54 transboundary rivers, **India and Bangladesh currently have only one functional water-sharing agreement the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty**. However, tensions have escalated significantly in recent years, particularly over the unresolved **Teesta River water-sharing dispute**, which has remained unsettled for more than 18 years. The situation has worsened due to **India's unilateral actions**, including proposed dam constructions and water diversion efforts that have provoked concern in Bangladesh. While India's growing population certainly places additional

demand on its water resources, **Bangladesh's right to equitable water access must not be overlooked.** Although Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government made sincere efforts to find a resolution, progress was stalled due to **opposition from West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.** This has reinforced public sentiment in Bangladesh that the country is being unfairly denied its rightful share of Teesta waters. Furthermore, India's delayed but contentious plan to construct the **Tipaimukh Dam** has only deepened mistrust. Unless India adopts a cooperative and inclusive approach soon, **water disputes could become a central and irreparable point of conflict** in bilateral relations.

Basin	Area		Countries included	Area of country in basin	As %of the total area of the basin
	Km ²	% of South Asia			
Ganga	1087300	5.2	India	860000	79
			Bangladesh	46300	4
Brahmaputra	543400	2.7	India	195000	56
			Bangladesh	39100	7
Meghna	82000	0.4	India	47000	57
			Bangladesh	35000	43
Total	1712700	8.3		1102000	64
				12400	7

Fig. 1.3- Areas of Common River between countries

Source:- Joint Water Commission report 2000

Rohingya Exodus-

The Rohingya crisis, while not a primary source of contention, has contributed to some strain in India-Bangladesh relations. Following a military crackdown triggered by militant attacks that left a dozen Myanmar security personnel dead, over 800,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh since August 2017.⁵ The Indian government, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, prioritizes regional security, yet Bangladesh anticipated that Modi would take a more active role in condemning the alleged persecution of the Rohingya Muslim community. Such a stance, Dhaka believed, would facilitate future efforts for repatriation.

Contrary to expectations, during his September 5, 2017 visit to Yangon, Modi focused solely on the dangers of extremist violence and refrained from addressing the broader humanitarian implications of the crisis. This silence, alongside India's announcement that it may deport around 40,000 Rohingya refugees citing national security threats, has slightly tarnished its image both regionally and internationally.⁶ In a surprising turn, China assumed a more proactive diplomatic posture by presenting a three-step framework for the Rohingya repatriation process, a move that the international community had anticipated from India.⁷

India's reluctance to criticize Myanmar may stem from strategic interests, as Myanmar offers India a crucial link to Southeast Asia. Key infrastructure projects, such as the development of the Sittwe port and enhanced connectivity with northeastern India, highlight India's strategic calculations.⁸ Nevertheless, Bangladesh remains essential for India's broader connectivity ambitions and India's muted response to the refugee

situation has unsettled policymakers in Dhaka. Moving forward, India is expected to take a more constructive and humanitarian approach to the crisis, steering clear of narrow geopolitical maneuvering.

China Factor-

Bangladesh has often described China as an “all-weather friend,” while Beijing reciprocally considers Dhaka a “good neighbour and a reliable partner.” The evolving nature of China-Bangladesh relations, spanning economic, strategic, developmental, and defense sectors, has prompted growing apprehension in New Delhi. Historically minimal, the bilateral trade between China and Bangladesh just US\$ 3.6 million in 1975 has surged to US\$ 18.33 billion by 2019. Presently, around 200 major Chinese firms and an equal number of small and medium sized enterprises are actively operating in Bangladesh, reflecting deepening commercial engagement. Notably, China overtook the United States in 2019 as the largest source of foreign direct investment in Bangladesh, contributing US\$ 1.6 billion that year. The Bangladeshi government anticipates up to US\$ 50 billion in Chinese investment over the next decade and a half. Trade volume disparities underscore China's dominant position; in 2019, China-Bangladesh trade reached US\$ 28 billion, nearly triple the US\$ 10 billion recorded between India and Bangladesh.⁹

Additionally, China-Bangladesh defense cooperation has expanded significantly, further unsettling Indian strategic circles. China's increasing influence among India's neighboring countries including Nepal, Sri Lanka, and now Bangladesh has heightened India's regional security concerns. Consequently, India's apprehensions have adversely affected the trajectory of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations, complicating New Delhi's diplomacy in South Asia.

Domestic Politics-

Domestic political dynamics significantly influence the relationship between India and Bangladesh. It is often suggested that a nation's foreign policy mirrors its internal political landscape, a notion clearly evident in how both countries engage with one another. The emergence of religious extremism poses a serious threat not only to South Asia as a whole but also to the bilateral ties between the two nations. Furthermore, differing ideological stances of Bangladesh's major political parties the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party toward India affect their diplomatic interactions. The proposed Teesta Water Sharing Agreement remained unsigned due to objections from West Bengal's Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee. Additionally, India's implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has strained relations between the two countries.¹⁰

Trade Diplomacy-

Bangladesh stands as India's largest trading partner within the subcontinent, while India ranks as Bangladesh's second-largest export destination, making up 12% of its total exports. In the fiscal year 2023–24, bilateral trade between the two nations reached a value of US\$12.90 billion. Exports to Bangladesh during 2023-24 stood at US\$ 11.06 billion and US\$ 6.21 billion during April 2024 to October 2024. Imports from Bangladesh during April-October FY25 stood at US\$ 1.16 billion.¹¹ India played a vital role in Bangladesh's war of independence, expecting that Dhaka would, in return, allow access to its rivers and roads and permit the use of Chittagong Port for the landlocked Northeastern states. However, Bangladesh showed little willingness to make such concessions for transit. India seeks to utilize convenient transport routes through Bangladesh to facilitate trade with Bangladesh and nearby countries, but Bangladesh has declined to allow the use of its routes for this purpose.¹² In a significant development reflecting deteriorating bilateral ties, India has recently imposed trade restrictions targeting Bangladesh's critical garment export sector. The move, formalized

through a notification by India's Directorate General of Foreign Trade, specifically curtails the entry of Bangladeshi readymade garments and other goods into India's northeastern states. India's decision affects over \$770 million worth of imports, roughly about 42% of all goods shipped from Bangladesh. Ready-made garments alone made up \$660 million last year. Those will now only be allowed through Kolkata and Nhava Sheva ports, effectively shutting land routes via the Northeast.¹³ Analysts interpret this policy decision as a retaliatory signal to the Bangladeshi interim leadership under Mohammed Yunus, whose recent overtures to China have caused concern in New Delhi. During his March 2025 visit to Beijing, Yunus controversially described India's northeast as "landlocked" and proposed greater Chinese connectivity through Bangladeshi territory to the region a stance viewed by India as undermining its territorial and strategic sensitivities.

While India's unease over deepening Bangladesh-China ties is rooted in long-standing geopolitical concerns, the efficacy of trade restrictions as a strategic countermeasure remains debatable. Bangladesh's economy is heavily reliant on its apparel exports, and this decision could disproportionately affect its manufacturing sector without yielding commensurate strategic leverage for India. Complicating matters further, Bangladesh is currently navigating domestic political instability. The interim government, installed after widespread protests against the former Awami League administration, has accused India of covertly backing the previous regime led by Sheikh Hasina. This perception has fueled Dhaka's recalibration of foreign policy, including renewed engagement with Pakistan and the controversial banning of the Awami League, which contradicts earlier promises made to the international community regarding democratic inclusivity. Given these developments, strategic analysts argue that New Delhi's priority should shift toward building constructive ties with a broader spectrum of political actors in Bangladesh, especially as the country heads towards elections, the timing of which remains uncertain. Without such diplomatic recalibration, India risks alienating a key neighbor at a critical juncture.

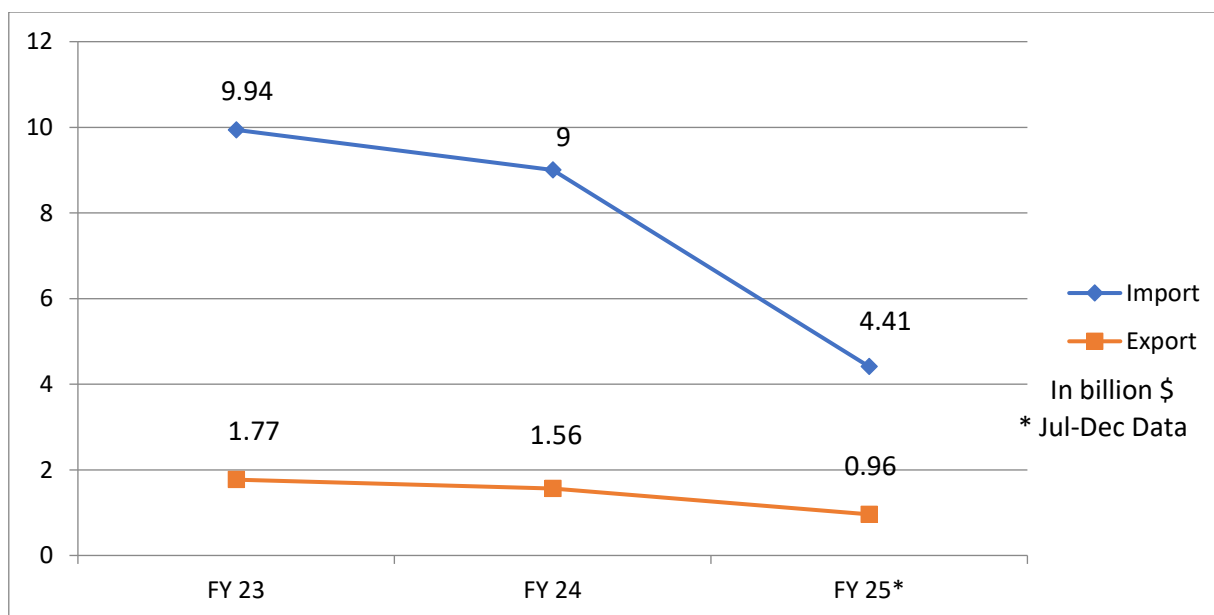


Fig. 1.4- Bangladesh trade with India
Source:- BB & Export Promotion Bureau

Conclusion- Over the past two decades, India and Bangladesh have acknowledged the importance of mutual cooperation for their development, particularly within the framework of political-security and socioeconomic challenges. In response, both nations have actively pursued a collaborative agenda. In 2021, they celebrated

50 years of diplomatic ties, with Bangladesh emerging as India's largest trading partner in South Asia. The countries share key democratic values, including liberal democracy, secularism, and inclusive nationalism. Their relationship has evolved from being allies in the liberation war, through phases of detachment, to becoming strong cooperative partners today. Together, they have initiated a range of connectivity and joint development projects, laying the groundwork for greater regional integration in eastern South Asia.

This partnership has enabled both nations to address common issues and concerns, highlighting the need to further strengthen cooperation while resolving lingering challenges. Despite this positive trajectory, questions remain especially concerning how closely Bangladesh may align itself with China. China's increasing investments and improving ties with Bangladesh, coupled with Dhaka's recent diplomatic overtures to Pakistan, could exert pressure on Bangladesh to adopt stances counter to India's interests. Nonetheless, India holds substantial influence in the region and can counterbalance China's growing presence.

To ensure a stable and progressive relationship, it is essential for both political leaderships to remain proactive. Civil society should also contribute positively to strengthening ties. Academic, media, and cultural exchanges must be deepened through joint programs involving students, scholars, and professionals. Contentious issues like the sharing of river waters should be resolved through peaceful negotiations. To enhance economic cooperation, efforts must be made to curb informal trade and expand formal bilateral trade.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the urgency for enhanced collaboration in the health sector. Joint efforts should continue in managing public health crises and preventing cross-border smuggling. Strengthening interpersonal connections between the citizens of both nations is critical, with initiatives such as Border Haats and cultural exchanges playing a key role. Track-II diplomacy, involving non-governmental dialogue and civil society engagement, offers a valuable platform to support official efforts in India-Bangladesh relations.

References-

1. Kashem, M. A. & Islam, M. S. (2016). Narendra Modi's Bangladesh Policy and India–Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses. *India Quarterly*, 72(3), pp- 250–267.
2. *The Indian Express* (2015, May 6). Editorial: "LBA is, above all, a primary instrument of consolidating India's ties with Bangladesh."
3. Uddin, Kamal Ahmad (2008) Bangladesh and its neighbours, Asiatic society of Bangladesh, Bangladesh, pp- 55-56.
4. Star, Joyce (1991) water wars, *Foreign Policy*, no. 82, Spring, pp- 17-30.
5. *The Guardian*. (2017, November 23). Myanmar signs pact with Bangladesh over Rohingya repatriation. Retrieved 8 December 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/23/myanmar-signs-pact-with-bangladesh-over-rohingya-repatriation>
6. *Hindustan Times*. (2017b, September 24). New plea in SC seeks deportation of illegal Rohingya migrants from India. Retrieved 8 December 2017; <http://www.hindustantimes.com/indianews/new-plea-in-sc-seeks-deportation-of-illegal-rohingya-migrants-from-india/storyLQfnZYolCZYyutQMxMLctN.html>
7. Lee, Y. (2017, November 20). China draws three-stage path for Myanmar, Bangladesh to resolve Rohingya crisis. *Reuters*, Retrieved 8 December 2017; <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmarrohingya/china-draws-three-stage-path-formyanmar-bangladesh-to-resolve-rohingya-crisisidUKKBN1DK0AK>

8. Upadhyay, S. (2017, December 7). The future of India's do-nothing policy toward the Rohingya. *The Diplomat*, Retrieved 8 December 2017; <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/the-future-ofindias-do-nothing-policy-toward-the-rohingya/>.
9. Rather, Zahoor Ahmad and Deepika Gupta. 2014. "India-Bangladesh Bilateral Trade: Problems and Prospects." *International Affairs and Global Strategy* 22(1):42-48.
10. Sufian, Abu. 2020. "Geopolitics of the NRC-CAA in Assam: Impact on Bangladesh–India Relations." *Asian Ethnicity*, pp- 1-31.
11. <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-bangladesh-trade>
12. Sobhan, Farooq (2008) 'India- Bangladesh Relations: Past, Present and Future', *ORF Discourse*, vol.3 issue no.3 May., pp- 4-6.
13. <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/india-bangladesh-trade-route-curbs-economic-impact-explained-2727389-2025-05-20>