CHAPTER V

BANGLADESH AND SMALL SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES
Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives the small countries of South Asian region, face common challenges internally as well as externally. They are geographically inseparable, culturally co-joined, economically and strategically inter-dependent and complementary. Like Bangladesh, these countries too subscribe to the NAM, to the UN Charter, to the idea of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace and South Asia as a Nuclear Free Zone. They whole heartedly, supported the formation of SAARC, mooted by Bangladesh in 1980s. This can be substantiated by analysing foreign policy followed by Bangladesh towards these countries at bilateral, regional and global levels.

**Bangladesh and Nepal: An Exemplary Coexistence**

The relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal is best amongst the South Asian small neighbours. Both of them have borders with India on their three sides. Bangladesh is separated from Nepal just by a seventeen mile strip of the Indian territory. This geographical proximity with Bangladesh is important for Nepal because of the fact that Nepal is a landlocked country and India alone provides sea-route to it. Bangladesh can provide an alternative sea route to Nepal. They have mutually maintained close relations and help each other in politico-economic, and strategic fields. Nepal’s attitude towards the freedom struggle of Bangladesh has also played a crucial role in shaping the nature of relationship between the two countries.

**New Roads of Development: Economic and Political**

The government of Nepal more or less remained detached in its pronouncements during the initial stages of the Bangladesh’s struggle,
which underwent a change later due to its own economic interest and its concern for the new state.

Nepal like other countries of the South region did not want a change in the subcontinent for a number of reasons. First, it believed that the break-up of Pakistan would change the existing power balance in the region. Secondly, Nepal had maintained friendly relations with Pakistan particularly after 1960, and did not want to disturb this, by supporting the Bangladesh movement. Thirdly, Nepal would have felt that the freedom struggle of Bangladesh could also encourage democratic elements in its own Kingdom which had been demanding liberalization of the political system. Therefore, King Mahendra, while addressing the eighteenth session of the National Panchayat during the first week of July 1971, asserted that "the problem of East Pakistan should be peacefully settled in a manner acceptable to all concerned." The then Nepalese Prime Minister, K.N. Bista, also said, "the problem of East Bengal has to be solved by the people and the Government concerned." The caution adopted by King Mahendra and Prime Minster Bista was that the logical upheaval in Bangladesh was an "internal affair of Pakistan."

2 Times of India, 19 September, 1971.
Inspite of Nepal's indifferent attitude towards the Bangladesh freedom struggle, it gave an indirect support to it. The Nepalese government donated Rs.25,000 to the United Nations for the refugee relief fund call. This contribution was regarded by observers as a token of sympathy for the people of Bangladesh. The Nepalese Foreign Minister stressed on the need for creating a situation for the return of refugees to their home land. The Nepal Council of World and Asian Affairs, a non-official body, also condemned policies of Pakistan Government towards the people of East Pakistan and also appealed to Pakistan Government for release of Sheikh Mujib immediately on humanitarian grounds.

During the final stages of Bangladesh's movement a change was observed in Nepal's attitude. Certain factors can be taken to be responsible for this change. First, when it was learnt that about 130 Nepali and 15 East Bengali families had crossed over to Bhadarpur district in south-eastern Nepal in July and August 1971, which the government foresaw as an increase in its internal problems. Secondly, evacuation of large number of Nepalis to India from East Pakistan was disliked by the Nepal government. Thirdly, Nepal believed that the emergence of Bangladesh as nation was in its own interest, particularly for the furtherance of its economic interests. Fourthly, there was a marked improvement in Indo-Nepal relations after the conclusion of 1971 Trade and Transit Treaty. These indeed played an

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7 Times of India, 25 August 1971.
8 B.C. Upreti, n.1, p.185.
important role in changing Nepal’s attitude towards the Bangladesh issue.

On 16 January 1972, Sardar Bhim Bahadur Pandey, the then Nepalese High Commissioner to India, formally conveyed the message, in a letter to H.R. Chaudury, Chief of the Bangladesh Mission in New Delhi, that his Government had decided to recognise Bangladesh.¹⁰ Almost simultaneously, the Foreign Ministry in Kathmandu announced in a press release, "the Government after careful consideration of the new situation has come to the conclusion that the new state of Bangladesh is an undeniable political reality."¹¹ Subsequently, both the countries showed keen interest in coming close to each other.

A major breakthrough in Bangladesh-Nepal relations was noticed with the exchange of official visits of Foreign Ministers of both the countries. Bangladesh's initiated the process in this regard. In June 1972, Bangladesh Foreign Minister paid a visit to Nepal. In his meeting with Nepalese Prime Minister, K.N. Bista, he emphasised on further strengthening the long tradition of close ties and also discussed the prospects of trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Both countries decided to cooperate in international forums and also strived to establish close bilateral political and commercial links in the interests of peace in the region for mutual benefit. Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister visit was reciprocated by the

¹¹ Times of India, 17 January 1972.
visit of the Foreign Minister of Nepal in January 1973. In a Joint Communique, both the countries agreed to make arrangements for development of trade and economic cooperation. Nepal expressed keen interest in arranging transit facilities for Nepalese trade through Bangladesh and agreed to work out mutually beneficial transit facilities. It was also agreed that Nepal would get port facilities in that country and because of recent Indo-Nepal understanding, there would be no problems from India.

In March 1973 some steps were taken to have telecommunication links between the two countries. In February 1975, Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Department opened one direct trunk telephone circuit in order to improve telecommunication facilities between the countries. Nepal's active support to Bangladesh for the membership of the United Nations was gratefully acknowledged by Bangladesh. Nepal was one of the sponsoring members for Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations. Inspite of early recognition of Bangladesh by Nepal, the bilateral relations between the two countries, did not gain ground, untill the change of government in Bangladesh.

Changing Relationship: Watershed

Nepal's reaction to the change of regime in Bangladesh by a violent coup on 15 August 1975 was not very strong. It became the

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14 Bangladesh Times (Dacca), 8 February 1975.
15 GAOR, A/PV. 2233, 134-5. Provisional Verbatim Record, 17 September 1974, New York, See also GAOR A/L 728 on Admission of Bangladesh to United Nations.
third country in South Asia after Pakistan and Burma to recognise the Government headed by the then President Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed. In March 1976, Nepal appointed its first Resident Ambassador in Bangladesh.

Hence, the year 1976 signalled a new era in Bangladesh-Nepal relations. Overcoming all the barriers and mutual suspicions which clouded the relationship between the two neighbouring countries since the emergence of Bangladesh, they decided to come together by signing four agreements covering wide range of cooperation. Significantly, these were the first formal agreements between the two countries since the establishment of diplomatic relations. On 2 April 1976 both countries signed four agreements on Trade and Transit, Technical Cooperation and Air Services and agreed to extend the Most Favoured Nations (MFNs) treatment of the mutual benefit of both excepting the cross border trade, customs union and free trade zone. Similar treatment was decided under the transit trade agreement which accorded freedom of transit to traffic and port facilities were made available Nepal in Bangladesh. Under the trade agreement Bangladesh agreed to export to Nepal twenty items which included tea, jute, carpets, specialised textiles, newsprints, wire and cables, cycle tyres and tubes, feature films, electrical goods, coal products, soap, cosmetics, fertiliser, insecticides and pharmaceuticals. Nepal also agreed to export to Bangladesh eighteen items under the trade agreement which included rice, wheat, pulses, mustard, oil and oil seeds timber and wood products, medicinal plants, herbs, tobacco, synthetic textiles, woollen carpets and boulders.\textsuperscript{16} The bilateral

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Bangladesh Times}, 5 April, 1976.
agreement on air services recognised the rights of the national air
lines, to land at each others airports, their frequency and tariff to be
mutually fixed and agreed upon.\textsuperscript{17} Under technical pact, both countries
agreed to provide facilities for on the job training of technical
personnel. The accords, of course, opened up the new vistas of
cooperation between the two countries. Bangladesh also envisaged
the scope for future cooperation in any field of mutual interest of both
countries in water resources and agro-based projects.\textsuperscript{18}

To benefit each other and reduce their dependency on the
developed countries, both countries agreed to exchange raw materials
as well as agricultural and industrial equipment. During the talks
between the foreign minister of the two countries, Nepal expressed its
eagerness to supply rice to Bangladesh on a long term basis in order
to solve the food shortage of Bangladesh, which otherwise would have
been imported from other foreign countries.\textsuperscript{19}

At regional level Bangladesh supported Nepal on various issues
for instance when Nepal had proposed in the 1973 Non-Aligned
Conference that Nepal should be declared a "Zone of Peace",\textsuperscript{20} (the
basic idea behind 'peace zone' proposal was to seek international
guarantee to Nepal’s security against India and China) The then
President of Bangladesh, Zia Ur Rahman during his visit to Kathmandu
in December 1977, reaffirmed his support to Nepal’s proposal.\textsuperscript{21} Again

\textsuperscript{17} Bangladesh Observer (Dacca), 5 April 1976.
\textsuperscript{18} Bangladesh Times, 6 April 1976.
\textsuperscript{19} Morning Post, 1 December, 1977.
\textsuperscript{20} Shaheen Akhtar, "Determinants of Foreign Policy Behaviour of Small
States in South Asia", Regional Studies, Vol.XIII, No.2, 1995, p.74. Also
see, Bangladesh Times, 2 December, 1977.
\textsuperscript{21} The Bangladesh Times, 21 December, 1977.
on the occasion of Nepali King Birendra's visit to Dhaka in January 1978, President Zia stressed on the need for declaring the region as well as whole of the Indian Ocean as a peace zone. To demarcate future avenues of cooperation, Bangladesh agreed to the setting up of a high level joint economic commission. Bangladesh emphasised to extend cooperation at a regional level in the field of irrigation, electricity, mines, marine, navigation and flood control in the South Asian region.

A new dimension was added to Bangladesh-Nepal relations with King Birendra’s visit to Dhaka in March 1980. An important highlight of this visit was the signing of two separate agreements on Joint Economic Commission and Cultural, Scientific and Educational exchanges between the two countries. The Joint Economic Commission recognised the benefits to be derived by the two countries for closer economic cooperation and the cultural agreement was also signed. The setting up of Joint Economic Commission with Bangladesh was first agreement of Nepal with any country. It indicated the keen desire of both the governments to promote close economic relations for mutual benefits. It contributed greatly to the closer economic cooperations in many areas. Bangladesh stressed to establish joint collaboration projects and more encouragement was provided to private sectors. Bangladesh President Zia-Ur-Rahman paid another visit to Nepal in April 19, 1981. Therefore by the end of 80s

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24 Bangladesh Times, 19 April, 1981.
Bangladesh’s relations with Nepal widened and bilateral trade rose rapidly from around Tk.70 million in 1979 to over Tk.225 million.25

The exchange of these friendly visits led to the signing of a tripartite agreement to link Nepal and Bangladesh by a rail road through Radhikapur Railway station in India and Biral Railway station in Bangladesh spanning a distance of about 18 miles. Simultaneously, Bangladesh agreed to offer Nepal all facilities at Chittagong, Khulna (Chalna) ports and overheads like Chilahati and Benapole.26 Subsequently, Bangladesh with Nepal’s cooperation started evolving a regional scheme for harnessing the waters of the Ganges and its major three tributaries flowing from Nepal into the Ganges, namely, Karnali, Gandak and Kohsi. Both countries identified eighteen sites suitable for building multipurpose storage-dams capable of holding enough water so as to augment the dry season flow of water in the Ganges.27

Relations between the two countries were further strengthened during the Ershad period (1982-91) after the formation of SAARC. It was decided at the sixth meeting of Bangladesh-Nepal Joint Economic Commission to take Nepalese transit trade through Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi (Mongla) port authorities offered port facilities for handling of one lakh tons of Nepalese cargo per annum and accordingly the Nepalese government was advised to use those facilities for transit cargo and for export to a third country.28 During

26 Ibid., p.160.
27 Ibid.
the 1987-88 financial year, the two countries had trade exchange worth Taka 15.1 million. Since the establishment of trade relations balance of trade remained in favour of Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{29} Although bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Nepal came almost to halt due to the expiry of Indo-Nepal trade and transit treaty in March 1989 but they continued their export-import through the sea route. Bangladesh sent first instalment of 3,000 metric tonnes of sugar by ship\textsuperscript{30} and Nepal airlifted eight tonnes of diesel from Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{31}

During President Ershad’s visit to Nepal in October 1988 Bangladesh took initiative to set up a joint study team to make recommendation for multiple and optimal use of water resources and flood management of South Asian region.\textsuperscript{32} The Bangladesh-Nepal Joint Economic Commission held its eight ministerial meeting in March 1990 and concentrated on new areas of bilateral economic cooperation particularly Joint Venture industries.\textsuperscript{33} Under the cultural exchange agreement both countries agreed to offer scholarship to each other’s nationals in higher education and expertise institutions in order to exchange experience and specialise in different fields of knowledge.

During the period of Begum Khaledia Zia, economic relations were further strengthened with Nepal. Bangladesh sent 30,000 litres of kerosene oil and 5000 pounds of tea for the flood and landslide victims in Nepal.\textsuperscript{34} Regular meetings of Joint Economic Commission

\textsuperscript{29} POT (Bangladesh Series), Vol.XV, No.42, February 28, 1990, p.464.
\textsuperscript{30} Bangladesh Times, 19 March 1989.
\textsuperscript{31} New Nation, 25 April, 1989.
\textsuperscript{32} POT, (Bangladesh Series) 'Vol.XIII, No.152, 5 October, 1988, pp.2082-83.
\textsuperscript{33} Bangladesh Observer, 31 March 1990.
\textsuperscript{34} Bangladesh Times, 4 August, 1993.
were held. In ninth meeting of Bangladesh-Nepal Joint Economic Commission held on 29-31 July 1995 in Dhaka a wide range of proposals and measures for active cooperation were discussed and agreed upon. The need for initiating joint investment and trade was also acknowledged.\(^{35}\) Bangladesh and Nepal collectively made efforts to convince India to provide a trade corridor through its territory to Bangladesh for Nepalese goods.\(^{36}\) The ‘people to people contact’ increased between the two countries after India allowed Bangladesh to issue ‘overland visas’ to Bangladesh national and business people travelling overland to Nepal.\(^{37}\)

Both countries showed interest in setting joint venture industries in textile, fertilizer and pharmaceutical sectors. Bangladesh’s export to Nepal widened with the increase in list of items like jute-goods, carpets, ready-made garments and pharmaceuticals. Nepal also started exporting lentils, corn and boulders. In 1995-96, Bangladesh’s export to Nepal stood at a little over $8 million, 0.36 percent of its total exports earning. Out of Nepal’s total export to SAARC, its exports to Bangladesh, on an average, accounts to 1.1 percent.\(^{38}\) Constant efforts made by both countries led to the agreement to enhance Bangladesh’s trade volume to $10 million a year with Nepal.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., vol.2, no.1, Jan-March 1998.


\(^{38}\) Ibid.

Finally a much awaited transit agreement was signed in 1976 which came into effect on July 1997, when India allowed Nepal to use the Mongla port in Bangladesh for their external trade using a 61-kilometre corridor between Banglabandha and Kakarbhitta in Nepal.\footnote{Bangladesh Foreign Policy Survey, Vol.5, No.7, July-Sept. 1997, p.35} It led to increase in flow of goods between the two countries. This brightened the prospects for phenomenal growth in Bangladesh-Nepal bilateral trade and establishment of joint ventures. Nepal’s involvement in the South Asian Growth Quadrangle have further provided more opportunities to exploit the potential for developing economies of both countries by joint collaboration.

**Bangladesh and Bhutan**

Bhutan is a landlocked country, bounded by the Tibetan part of China in the north and by India on the other three sides and has virtually no easy outlet to the outside world except through Indian territory. Bangladesh provides her an outlet to the rest of the world through its two major sea ports. (Chittagong and Chalna).

**Strengthening of Politico-Economic Ties**

Although Bangladesh-Bhutan relations began to develop in the early 1970s, the spiritual links between them is much older, dating back to centuries. The original charyapadas, the oldest known text in Bengali script, are actually the original scripture of Mahayana Buddhism, whose tantric sect is Bhutan’s spiritual school. Almost all scholars agree that Tantric Buddhism evolved in what is now part of Bangladesh and Assam in India.\footnote{Syed, Serajul Islam, Bangladesh-Bhutan Relations: From Isolation to Intimacy cited in M. Ahmed and Abul, Kalam (ed.) Bangladesh Foreign Relations: Changes and Directions, (Dhaka, 1989), p.51.}
The development of Bangladesh’s relations with Bhutan began during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Bhutan morally supported the war of liberation and it became the second country to recognise Bangladesh in December 1971. Bhutan also supported the issue of Bangladesh’s admission to the United Nations in 1974. Bhutan attaches great importance to the development of its relations with Bangladesh because of certain reasons. First, it perceived that friendly Bangladesh in addition to a friendly India, would be of great help to it in developing trade and commerce. As a landlocked country, it saw the advantage of another outlet. Secondly, economic calculations also played an important role in its relations with Bangladesh. Bangladesh provides Bhutan an outlet to trade with the rest of the world through its two major seaports in Chittagong and Mongla. Thus, Bhutan came to consider her prospective relationship with Bangladesh as being important politically, economically and psychologically. Even before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, both the countries took active interest in strengthening the bilateral relations through exchange of high level visits. The Foreign Minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering, paid an official visit to Bangladesh during April 15-20, 1972. A reciprocal visit of Shamsul Haq, the then Minister for local government, led a Bangladeshi delegation to Bhutan in August 1973. In early 1973, formal relations between Bangladesh and Bhutan were established with the exchange

44 Ibid., p.58.
of diplomatic representatives. The then President of Bangladesh, Mohammadullah officially visited Thimpu in 1974 to attend the coronation of the present King.\textsuperscript{45} Subsequently attempt were made to strengthen economic ties too. A trade delegation from Bangladesh visited Bhutan in 1979 to explore the possibility of economic cooperation.

However, the major move to strengthen the bilateral relations was taken in January 1980 when Bhutan and Bangladesh decided to set up diplomatic missions. This move paved the way for further cooperation between the two countries. At all levels of interactions, bilateral, regional and global the two countries by and large have been able to identify common interest. Both emphasized on developing relations with non-aligned countries in general and the South-Asian countries in particular.

In order to get complete benefit of geographical proximity, Bangladesh signed a Trade and Transit agreement with Bhutan in August 1980. Under the agreement the two countries agreed to accord the Most Favoured Nations (MFNs) treatment to each other in respect to trade. The agreement identified as many as twenty three items for export from Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{46} But this agreement became operational only in 1988 when India provided transit route through its territory. The King of Bhutan Singye Wangchuck visited Bangladesh in February 1984. During his visit again a protocol on trade and an agreement on economic and cultural cooperation were signed between the two

\textsuperscript{45} Kamaluddin, Ahmed, no.42, p.172.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., pp.173-74.
These agreements provided for institutional framework for continued expansion of trade relations and economic cooperation leading to further consolidation of bilateral relations. In 1986 Bangladesh waived 50 percent of tariff on imports from Bhutan. The tariff concession provided a boost to Bhutan's exports to Bangladesh. During President Ershad's visit to Bhutan in 1986, the two sides agreed to set up a Joint-Economic Commission in due course to coordinate mature cooperation. Bangladesh also signed two separate agreements on air services, cultural and information exchanges. In order to increase trade volume with Bhutan, Bangladesh emphasised setting up of joint ventures in order to encourage relations in private sectors. After the development of communication facilities through land transit in 1988 and rehabilitation of railway station, the trade received a major boost. Bangladesh set up a Joint Team of officials during the visit of President Ershad to Bhutan in the wake of devastating floods in Bangladesh in 1988, for the formulation of plans in the field of flood control and flood mitigation. In December, 1990 the Joint Team of officials prepared its first report in which it recommended cooperation in the fields of flood forecasting, warning and hydrometeorology through an action plan under an institutional panel work. The report emphasised on regular exchange of technical expertise between the two countries.

48 The Bangladesh Observer, February 6, 1984.
49 Bangladesh Observer, 4 June, 1986.
Bangladesh also faced the trade imbalance with Bhutan. As the figures show that from 1987, onwards, Bhutan’s export to Bangladesh began to pick up and by 1989 trade surplus rose to about Nu.126.2 million.\(^{53}\) In the talks held in Thimphu from 31 October to 3 November 1990, M. Shamsul Haq leader of the Bangladesh delegation emphasised the keen desire of Bangladesh to narrow down the gap in trade imbalance and requested Bhutan to increase its imports to settle the balance of trade between the two countries. Bhutan agreed to import assembled vehicles, jute bags and dry fish worth US$ 0.5 million from Bangladesh. It also agreed, in principle, to buy the entire quantity of jute bags required for their cement plants from Bangladesh. Begum Khaleda Zia's government accorded high priority to increase trade to mitigate its trade deficit with Bhutan which reached at 491.3 million in 1993.\(^{54}\) Recently, the transit route between Bangladesh and Bhutan via the Bhalu-Nakugaon land in Nalitabari which was closed down in 1965 after the Indo-Pakistan war was reopened in March 1998 after an interval of 33 years. It is expected to further boost Bangladesh-Bhutan trade.\(^{55}\)

**Technical and Cultural: Cooperation and Collaboration**

Aside from the bilateral politico-economic relations, there exists *technical and cultural relations* between the two countries even without any formal agreement. A modest technical cooperation was started by Bangladesh in 1980. Consequently, both countries agreed


\(^{54}\) *Morning Sun*, 4 March, 1993.

to give formal shape to technical relations and held talks in Dhaka in 1984 on railway and telecommunication facilities for speedy and efficient links. Bangladesh assured Bhutan for setting up of goods and transit sheds at Mogulhat, near Lalmonithat crossing point, and also suggested a Very High Frequency (VHF) link between Mogulhat and Thimpu. Bangladesh also offered Bhutan communication link up with outside world through Betbunia satellite station. Bangladesh floated scholarships to Bhutanese students for promoting higher education in Bhutan. Under an education and technical training programme between Bangladesh and Bhutan the former provided limited number of scholarships in the field of medicine, engineering, agriculture, veterinary science etc. Bhutan considers this generous assistance useful since Bhutan has shortage of qualified and trained personnel.

Beyond the bilateral relations Bangladesh and Bhutan have adopted by and large a common approach towards regional and international affairs. Both are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-77, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Both countries emphasise the need for greater efforts to promote the unity among the non-aligned countries. They also look upon the non-aligned movement as an important factor in the establishment of peace and stability. Both are committed to the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Owing to their small territory and being vulnerable to interference by big powers, both stress on the principles of peaceful co-existence. Bangladesh and Bhutan took serious objection when external interventions took place in

Kampuchea and Afghanistan in the late 1970s. They called for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Kampuchea and Afghanistan and for the respect of the independent sovereignty and the territorial integrity of these countries.\textsuperscript{58} Bhutan has been one of the most ardent supporters of Bangladesh's initiative for the SAARC. Bhutan considers that SAARC would create a climate of trust and cooperation in the region. Both demand the declaration of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

The formation of quadrangle or sub-regional forum (1997) in the Eastern Himalayan zone have further opened the new avenues of mutual interest for Bangladesh and Bhutan. It could help in overcoming infrastructural constraints and making optimum use of complementarities based on geographical contiguity.\textsuperscript{59} Relating to nuclear issues, Bangladesh and Bhutan both are signatory of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. In 1974 Pakistan sponsored a resolution in the UN General Assembly calling for the establishment of a nuclear free zone in South Asia. For the first time in 1987 Bhutan also supported it on this proposal.\textsuperscript{60} Therefore the constant efforts made by Bangladesh to strengthen and enrich its relations with Bhutan have been fairly successful.

**Bangladesh and Sri Lanka: Neighbour of the Ocean**

Though separated by sea, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are small neighbouring countries located in the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka’s

\textsuperscript{58} *Bangladesh Times*, 7 February 1984.


location in the mid-Indian Ocean is of focal importance not only for sea-borne routes but also for air-communications in the world. The existence of the strategic harbour at Tricomalee facing the Bay of Bengal on the Island’s east coast has increased the strategic value of this small country. The interests of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka converge in the context of wide range of security, trade and aid issues.

Political and Economic Foundation: Uncertainties and assurances

In initial years (1971-75) Bangladesh relations with Sri Lanka were governed by the later’s response to the liberation of Bangladesh. Sri Lanka had not only opposed but also provided the transit and refuelling facilities to Pakistan.\(^{61}\) When Bangladesh issue was discussed in the UN, Sri Lanka voted on the side of USA, China and Pakistan,\(^ {62}\) which was totally unacceptable to Bangladesh. Amerasinghe Sri Lankan representative at the UN advocated a three-point plan at the UN General Assembly meeting on 7 December 1971. This contained the elements which were not acceptable to Bangladesh. According to his plan the leaders of East Pakistan should “rescind” their demand for the establishment of a Government of Bangladesh. Further, according to Amersinghe’s plan, India’s right to intervene in the internal affairs of East Pakistan was ruled out.\(^ {63}\)

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\(^ {62}\) UN Year Book, 1971, p.152.

Inspite of no outstanding bilateral dispute between these two countries their relations could not grow until Sri Lanka granted diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh. On 3 March 1972, Sri Lanka recognised Bangladesh. From the day of this recognition Sri Lanka showed her willingness to help Bangladesh and when the latter suffered devastations due to floods, Sri Lanka contributed immediately to the relief measures. She also supported the admission of Bangladesh into the United Nations.\(^{64}\)

The post-Mujib period witnessed strengthening of political and economic relations between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Exchange of visits took place at highest levels and bilateral cooperation process was accelerated. The Sri Lankan President William Gopallawa visited Bangladesh in March 1977 and described the bilateral relations, as "Geographically we are neighbours, historically we are friends... ideological affinity has brought us into the fold of non-aligned movement." To this the Sri Lankan President expressed satisfaction on the development of "most cordial relation" between the two countries.\(^{65}\) In April 1979 both countries decided to open resident missions in each other's country. Both the countries view SAARC as a potent and effective instrument of peace, cooperation, development and friendship. Sri Lanka lauded Bangladesh for its sincere efforts to give SAARC a firm footing and said that SAARC reawakened among Sri Lanka, "ties of common culture and kinship which are the foundation of our regionality". President J.R. Jayewardene of Sri Lanka extended the roots of Sri Lanka-Bangladesh relations back to the territory called

\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.176.

'Janga Desa' - now Bangladesh. Both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka identified areas of mutual collaboration in export oriented industries, technical cooperation, shipping, direct air link and trade. Bangladesh is importing from Sri Lanka, technology for developing coconut plantation and coconut based industry. Bangladesh expressed her grave concern during the (80's) over ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh's stand was based on the policy of peace, stability and integrity of Sri Lanka. It had all along maintained that it is a domestic problem of Sri Lanka and a political solution should be found out without any external intervention. This is the reason that the Government of Bangladesh came out with a mild criticism to the air dropping of relief materials by India.

During Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's visit to Sri Lanka on 25-26 January 1995, a decision was taken to activate the Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Joint Economic Commission set up in 1985. During Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's visit to Bangladesh in March 1995, it was decided that the JEC meeting was to begin on 6-8 June 1995. Both sides signed a three year cultural exchange programme, covering cultural and educational cooperation between the two countries. Sri Lanka offered training for Bangladeshi teachers, facilities for vocational training for Bangladeshi and scholarship for students in agriculture, forestry, archaeology and engineering.

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66 POT (Bangladesh Series), 28 July 1986, p.1463.
Economic cooperation between the two countries not only indicated the degree of cordiality existing between them, but also helped the countries towards economic development. Under the first ever trade agreement signed on in 1977 between the two countries, Bangladesh agreed to export jute, newsprint, writing and printing paper, rayon yarn, hard board, dried fish, frozen prawn etc. and to import rubber, tyres and tubes, dry cell batteries, coconut oil and mica among other things. Sri Lanka purchased 5000 tonnes of newsprint from Bangladesh. It was also decided to form a ministerial level joint commission to review implementation of trade agreement and identify bottlenecks and suggest remedial measures. Another important feature of the agreement was the formation of a Joint Chamber of Commerce of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, at the trading and private sector level to review trade matters and suggest measures for expansion of trade. These agreements also paved the way for technical cooperation. Further, a direct telecommunication link between the two countries was set up. Bangladesh repatriated the machinery parts of ten jute mills which were off loaded in Sri Lanka during the liberation war. These goods were returned free of duty, penalty and damages as a special gesture on the part of the Sri Lankan government. During Ershad period, for expansion of trade with Sri Lanka, priority was given to non traditional items. Bangladesh offered bitumen, telephone cables, potato and tobacco for sale to Sri

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70 Swroop Rani Dubey, n.1, p.199. Also see Bangladesh Observer, 10 February, 1977.
Lanka. It expressed the desire to set up a mill for manufacturing jute bags with raw jute from Bangladesh and requested Bangladesh for technical assistance. Not only this, Sri Lanka increased the quantity of jute imports from Bangladesh.

However, transactions between the two countries remained confined to few items like jute, jute goods, urea fertilizer and coconut oil. Certain impediments like, lack of identification of the items which could be tradeable with each other, the absence of direct links, and lack of banking facilities existed in the way of expanding trade between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. These were taken into account during the period of Begum Khalidia Zia. In 1992-93, Bangladesh’s export to Sri Lanka was worth US$ 12.03 million against its imports of US$ 6 million. The trade deficit with Sri Lanka was Taka 3.622 million. In 1993-94, Bangladesh exported commodities worth US$6.86 million to Sri Lanka and imported goods worth $6.73 million from that country. Bangladesh exported 40,000 tons of rice to Sri Lanka. Implementation of the projects agreed during the visits of head of states of both countries in 1995 were taken into consideration. Sri Lanka expressed interest in joint venture projects, particularly in industries for canning fruits, and vegetables and coconut plantation in Bangladesh. Bangladesh agreed to open fruit canning units in Chittagong on a preferential basis. Bangladesh proposed to open jute mills in Sri Lanka which was implemented later. It was stated that the two countries would employ efforts to find to

72 Morning Sun, 4 March 1993.
74 Morning Sun, 9 February, 1993.
expand bilateral economic cooperation. Both countries agreed to exchange expertise and students in agriculture sector with a view to enhance appropriate technology and knowledge in these fields.

The objective of the political and security policy of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are common. Both are non-aligned and commonwealth countries. They have identical security perceptions of the region. Their views on the issues of the Indian Ocean Peace Zone, South Asia Nuclear Free Zone, Afghanistan and Kampuchea are similar. The excellent and cordial relations between them is based on their unanswering commitment to the well established principles of good neighbourly conduct.\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Bangladesh and Maldives: An Unfinished Portrait}

Maldives is the tiniest and weakest state of the South Asian region. It is a group of 1195 small coral islands, located in the central Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{76} The islands are close enough to both Sri Lanka and Southern part of India and this provides convenient anchorage for merchants and military. It also commands important sea lanes for merchant ships. More recently, its importance has enhanced as an airfield and communication centre, a major staging post on the way from Europe to Southeast Asia and Australia.\textsuperscript{77}

The objectives and principles of the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh and Maldives are generally similar. Both the countries subscribe to the similar objectives of preservation of national

\textsuperscript{75} Swaroop Rani Dubey, n.1, pp.193-202.
\textsuperscript{76} Shaheen Akhtar, n.20, p.80.
independence and development of peaceful and friendly relation with
other countries and at the core both pursue similar approach of
diversification of diplomatic and economic linkages with the rest of the
world. Both the countries are members of UN, NAM, Commonwealth,
OIC, G-77, SAARC NIEO, and South-South Cooperation. They have
identical security perception of the region. Their views on the issues of
the Indian Ocean Peace Zone, South Asia Nuclear Free Zone, Law of
the Sea, on Afghanistan and Kampuchea issue and Islamic solidarity
are similar. For both the countries, Foreign aid continues to remain a
significant determinant to shape the Foreign Policy postures.

Maldives is a hundred percent Muslim state which bestows it
with an added advantage to share the strengths of the Muslim world
as well as Bangladesh. The diplomatic alliances have substantial room
for growth in both the countries, as they have been lying low till
present. A boost in their foreign relations in consolidating their shared
perceptions will mutually benefit both states and bring harmony to the
region.

Bangladesh's foreign policy towards the small South Asian
countries remained focused on complementarities of the sub-continent
which to an extent helped Bangladesh to pursue its politico-economic
interest in the region. A concerning approach adopted by Bangladesh
on various international issues helped it in garnering support form
these smaller countries of the region due to the congruence of their
views on the subject, arising out of regional affiliations.