



The consent deficit: India's struggle to influence public narratives in Bangladesh

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Abstract

India–Bangladesh relations are often seen as historically close, as cultural affinity and linguistic similarity have shaped the relationship between India and Bangladesh. India's role in the Bangladesh Liberation War was the founding stone of India–Bangladesh relations. Despite close economic cooperation, trade, and connectivity between the two countries, anti-India narratives have increased in recent years. This article examines the paradox between the deep economic and cultural legacy shared by both countries and the rising mistrust and anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. It argues that relations between countries are not shaped only by historical events or state-level cooperation, but are increasingly influenced by public perspectives, domestic political competition, and the evolving idea of national identity. In this context, the article examines how public discourse in Bangladesh influences foreign policy perceptions and affects its relations with India. The gradual decline of the political legacy associated with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, generational changes in historical memory, and the strategic use of nationalist rhetoric by political actors have contributed to narratives that sometimes portray India as a dominant regional power. These narratives can overshadow growing economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement between the two countries. By examining the relationship between historical memory, domestic politics, and public discourse, the article highlights how perception gaps continue to shape India–Bangladesh relations today.

Keywords: India–Bangladesh Relations, Public Narratives, Anti-India Sentiment, Historical Memory, Domestic Politics, National Identity, Public Diplomacy, South Asian Politics

Introduction

India and Bangladesh are two neighbouring countries located in South Asia. Shared culture, linguistic similarities, and geographical proximity tie the relationship between the two countries. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is the foundation of modern bilateral relations. The close coordination between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi played a key role in building trust between the two nations. Despite their long-standing historical and cultural connection, the relationship is now viewed through more complex political and public perspectives.

For India, Bangladesh occupies an important position in its regional strategy because of geographical proximity, a shared border, and growing economic connections. The two countries share a long and sensitive border of more than 4,000 kilometres, which makes cooperation on border management, migration, and security issues essential for maintaining regional stability. Concerns related to irregular migration, cross-border crime, and the situation of minority communities frequently appear in political debates and policy discussions in India. Bangladesh has also emerged as one of India's important trading partners. According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India exports to Bangladesh around 2327 million US dollars in 2025. The relationship has gained wider strategic significance in recent years, particularly in the context of the expanding influence of China in South Asia and the continuing geopolitical dynamics involving Pakistan. In this broader context, maintaining stable and cooperative relations between India and Bangladesh remains essential not only for their mutual interests but also for preserving regional balance and stability in South Asia.

Stronger economic cooperation is generally expected to strengthen mutual trust between neighbouring countries. However, the case of India and Bangladesh highlights a

different reality. Although both countries have increased collaboration in several sectors, public narratives in Bangladesh sometimes reflect critical views toward India. This situation presents an important contradiction, where growing diplomatic and economic engagement between the two governments contrasts with increasingly critical narratives within Bangladesh. The increasing anti-India narrative raises an important question: why does mistrust toward India continue even though economic links are expanding and strong cultural similarities exist between the two countries? Understanding this contradiction is important for analysing the broader dynamics shaping contemporary relations between India and Bangladesh.

Existing studies are mostly focused on border issues, water-sharing disputes, geopolitical issues, and economic cooperation in the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. A large part of the literature examines the development of strategic relations and regional diplomacy between the two countries. These studies explain intergovernmental-level cooperation in detail, but give less attention to identity politics, public narratives, and citizen perceptions, which also play an important role in shaping bilateral relations. This study particularly explores the emergence of anti-India sentiment and analyses the importance of public narratives in India–Bangladesh relations.

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bilateral relations. This study particularly explores the emergence of anti-India sentiment and analyses the importance of public narratives in India–Bangladesh relations.

Existing Literature

Scholars studying relations between India and Bangladesh have examined a wide range of political, economic, and strategic issues shaping the bilateral relationship. Much of the existing literature focuses on border management, water-sharing disputes, regional geopolitics, and economic cooperation between the two countries. Several studies highlight the importance of trade relations, connectivity projects, and diplomatic engagement in strengthening bilateral ties. Other scholars analyse security concerns, migration issues, and regional strategic dynamics involving external actors. While these studies provide important insights into intergovernmental cooperation and regional politics, relatively less attention has been given to the role of public narratives, identity politics, and citizen perceptions in shaping bilateral relations. Understanding how these social and political narratives influence public attitudes toward India in Bangladesh remains an important area that requires further scholarly attention.

Scholars have widely examined the historical, political, and strategic foundations of India–Bangladesh relations. Much of the existing literature highlights the significance of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 in shaping the early trajectory of bilateral relations. India’s military and diplomatic support during Bangladesh’s independence created a strong foundation of goodwill and cooperation between the two countries. Researchers such as Sreeradha Datta and Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury have emphasized that the early relationship between India and Bangladesh was built on shared historical experiences, cultural proximity, and linguistic connections.

Several studies focus on the expansion of economic cooperation, connectivity, and regional integration between the two countries in recent decades. Scholars note that trade agreements, infrastructure projects, and cross-border connectivity initiatives have strengthened bilateral engagement and contributed to regional development in South Asia. Authors such as Prabir De and Smruti Pattanaik highlight the growing economic interdependence between India and Bangladesh and its importance for regional stability.

However, despite these developments, a growing body of literature points to the persistence of mistrust and the emergence of anti-India narratives within Bangladesh. Scholars argue that domestic political competition, nationalist rhetoric, and debates over sovereignty have shaped public perceptions of India. Ali Riaz and Meghna Guhathakurta emphasize that domestic political dynamics in Bangladesh often influence how India is portrayed in public discourse.

Another important strand of literature explores the role of historical memory and generational change in shaping public attitudes. Researchers suggest that younger generations in Bangladesh, who did not directly experience the Liberation War, may interpret historical events differently. As a result, the legacy of the liberation struggle and India’s role in it may carry less political influence in contemporary discourse.

Recent studies in international relations also highlight the growing importance of public opinion and narrative politics in shaping foreign policy. Scholars argue that interstate relations are no longer determined solely by state-level diplomacy or economic cooperation but are increasingly influenced by public narratives, media discourse, and identity politics.

While existing research provides valuable insights into the strategic and economic dimensions of India–Bangladesh relations, fewer studies specifically examine how public narratives and perception gaps influence the relationship between the two countries. This article seeks to address this gap by exploring the interaction between historical memory, domestic political dynamics, and public discourse in shaping contemporary perceptions of India in Bangladesh.

Objective

- This article analyzes how public narratives shape foreign policy attitudes in Bangladesh and highlights India’s difficulty in influencing public perception.
- To analyse the emergence and growth of anti-India narratives within Bangladesh’s political and public discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the factors shaping public narratives and perceptions of India within Bangladesh. Rather than focusing only on official diplomatic interactions or economic indicators, the research pays attention to the broader political and social discourse in which ideas about India are discussed and interpreted. The study draws on a range of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy discussions, newspaper articles, and public statements by political actors. By examining these sources, the research seeks to understand how political debates, media narratives, and public discussions contribute to the emergence and circulation of anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh.

The analysis is primarily interpretive and focuses on identifying recurring themes and narratives that appear in political discourse and public discussions. Particular attention is given to how historical memory, domestic political competition, and questions of national identity influence the way India is represented in different contexts. In doing so, the study does not attempt to measure public opinion through statistical methods; instead, it aims to provide a contextual understanding of how narratives are constructed and how they shape broader perceptions within society.

Through this qualitative and narrative-based approach, the article seeks to explore the complex relationship between state-level cooperation and public discourse. By focusing on the interaction between political narratives, identity debates, and historical experiences, the study offers a deeper perspective on the dynamics influencing contemporary relations between India and Bangladesh.

Results and Discussion

The objective of this article is to examine the role of public narratives in shaping foreign policy attitudes in Bangladesh and to understand how these perceptions influence the country’s relations with India. Traditionally, international relations between states have been explained through strategic interests, economic cooperation, or territorial

issues. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the role of public opinion, media discourse, and identity politics in shaping foreign policy preferences.

In the context of Bangladesh, public narratives are shaped by a combination of historical memory, domestic political competition, and nationalist discourse. These narratives influence how political actors, media institutions, and the general public perceive India's role in the region. While India and Bangladesh have developed strong economic cooperation and connectivity in recent years, public perceptions do not always reflect these positive developments.

By focusing on the relationship between narratives and foreign policy attitudes, this article seeks to highlight that the major challenge in India–Bangladesh relations lies not only in policy coordination but also in India's limited ability to shape or positively influence public perception in Bangladesh. Understanding this perception gap is essential for explaining why mistrust or anti-India sentiment can persist despite growing economic and diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

It also focuses on examining how anti-India narratives have emerged and developed within Bangladesh's political and public discourse. Such narratives are not formed in isolation but are shaped by a combination of domestic political competition, media framing, historical interpretations, and debates surrounding national identity and sovereignty. Political actors and parties often mobilize nationalist rhetoric to strengthen their domestic support, and in this process, India is sometimes portrayed as a dominant regional power influencing Bangladesh's internal affair.

The growth of these narratives is also linked to changes in historical memory and generational perspectives. While earlier political discourse in Bangladesh strongly acknowledged India's role in the Liberation War, younger generations may interpret this history differently due to evolving political contexts and educational narratives. Media discussions, social media debates, and political campaigns further amplify these perspectives, shaping broader public opinion.

By analysing the emergence and expansion of anti-India narratives, this study seeks to understand how political discourse and public perceptions interact to influence Bangladesh's foreign policy attitudes toward India. This analysis helps explain why negative perceptions may persist even in the presence of growing economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between India and Bangladesh cannot be understood only through the lens of diplomatic cooperation or economic engagement. While the two countries have significantly expanded collaboration in trade, connectivity, energy cooperation, and regional development, perceptions of India within parts of Bangladeshi society remain mixed and at times critical. The study suggests that these perceptions are shaped by a complex interaction of domestic political debates, historical memory, media narratives, and broader questions of national identity. In particular, political competition within Bangladesh has often contributed to the emergence of anti-India narratives, especially during election periods when issues such as border management, migration, and water-sharing disputes are framed in ways that appeal to nationalist sentiments. Political actors and

organisations such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami have at times used these issues in public discourse to criticise policies perceived as favouring India. Incidents along the border, including allegations of civilian casualties involving the Border Security Force of India, have also contributed to periodic tensions and have been widely discussed in Bangladeshi media outlets such as *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*. At the same time, debates surrounding unresolved bilateral issues—particularly the sharing of waters of the Teesta River—have continued to influence public perceptions of India's role in the relationship. The study further finds that historical experiences, especially the legacy of the Bangladesh Liberation War, still play an important role in shaping how the relationship is interpreted in Bangladesh. Although India's support during the liberation struggle is widely acknowledged, changing political contexts and evolving discussions of national identity sometimes lead to different interpretations of that shared history. In addition, discussions in academic institutions such as University of Dhaka and wider public debates on social media often contribute to the circulation of competing narratives about India's influence in Bangladesh's domestic and regional affairs. Another important observation of the study is that while India has continued to prioritise state-level diplomatic cooperation and economic integration, these efforts have not always translated into positive public perceptions within Bangladesh. The absence of sustained engagement with societal narratives, combined with the persistence of unresolved disputes, has allowed critical narratives to gain visibility within political and media discourse. Overall, the findings highlight that the contemporary dynamics of India–Bangladesh relations are shaped not only by formal agreements and strategic cooperation but also by public narratives, political competition, and evolving identity debates, all of which play a significant role in shaping how the bilateral relationship is perceived within Bangladesh.

Summary and Conclusion

India and Bangladesh share more than a border, they share history, language, culture, and struggles. From the Liberation War of 1971 to the daily lives of Bengali communities on both sides, our connection is deep and personal. Yet, despite this, the bond has not always translated into trust. In Bangladesh, public opinion often carries its own stories. Stories that sometimes paint India not as a friend, but as a dominating neighbour. These narratives grow louder during elections, in media debates, and through political rhetoric, showing that diplomacy alone is not enough. Even as India invests in trade, connectivity, and development, a part of the Bangladeshi public remains sceptical, highlighting a gap between government cooperation and people's perception. Trust must be earned through cultural engagement, citizen-level initiatives, and sensitivity to Bangladesh's identity and politics. The future of India–Bangladesh relations does not lie in agreements or projects alone; it lies in how people see each other, how shared stories are remembered, and how goodwill is nurtured. If India can engage effectively with these narratives, the partnership can become truly resilient, warm, and lasting, reflecting the depth of history and shared experience between the two nations.

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