

# India-Bangladesh Relations

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

Be it an entry-level job selection process, an M.B.A. entrance screening test, or a Bank's Probationary Officers selection test, Group Discussion (GD) is an important factor that considerably impacts the outcome of the selection of candidates. Usually, it has been seen that Group Discussion is a noisy and chaotic round, in which by shouting and displaying aggression, candidates feel they can impress the examiners. It is, therefore, crucial that candidates are made aware of some significant qualities that examiners look for in candidates during a GD round. First and foremost, examiners focus on the candidates' power of expression or communication skills. One must mind one's language. Group Discussion is a formal interaction. Therefore, candidates must consciously avoid using informal phrases and complicated words that are generally not in use. Examiners look for fluency and clear expression of ideas, not verbosity. One needs to be precise and to the point and speak confidently. Secondly, one must display the ability to adjust to others' views. One needs to be flexible to others' ideas as well. Being a team member, one must listen to and respect others' views, even though he/she may not always agree. The fact remains that members of a team may come from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds and may react to situations in various ways. One must be open to new ideas and able to deal with this kind of situation. Thirdly, candidates are expected to possess good reading habits and must keep track of current affairs. Usually, topics given for Group Discussions are based on current affairs, so one must know what is happening around him. Fourthly, one should develop good listening skills and pay attention to what others say. Finally, at the end of the GD, an effort must be made to reach a consensus, even when the topic may be somewhat controversial. These are some of the major attributes examiners look for in candidates during a Group Discussion round.

The above topic was given to a group of nine candidates during the screening of candidates for admission to the



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M.B.A. course of a prestigious management institute. On arrival, candidates were allotted identification numbers and asked to address each other using these numbers, not names. Three assessors, who were given the task of evaluating these candidates, thoroughly briefed all candidates on the process and conduct of this Group Discussion. Candidates were asked to maintain discipline while speaking and conclude the GD within 25-30 minutes.

Subsequently, the Group Discussion proceeded in the following manner:

**Candidate No. 9 :** Good afternoon, friends. I presume you all are eager to speak on this currently much-discussed topic. We all know India and Bangladesh share a bond of cultural heritage and historical events. India played a crucial role in the Liberation War in 1971, which led to the birth of Bangladesh as an independent country. India was also the first country to recognise Bangladesh as a separate nation. India-Bangladesh relations are significant to India owing to several reasons. These reasons are cultural, economic, geopolitical, strategic, etc. Since 1971, India has generally had cordial relations with Bangladesh despite some challenges. However, during the past few years, Bangladesh has been in

turmoil due to several reasons, which have also impacted India-Bangladesh relations. During this discussion, we need to talk about how India-Bangladesh relations have been shaping up all these years and what the future of these relations will be in the years to come.

You may now express your thoughts on this topic.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Number 9 introduced the topic and provided some background on India-Bangladesh relations. Friends, I feel we must deal with this subject keeping in view its historical background to understand and appreciate how these relations have been shaping up. Do you all agree?

**Candidate No. 8 :** I agree with you. Dealing with this topic and tracing its historical background would also give us a direction to proceed with our discussion.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Historically speaking, as pointed out earlier, the links between the two nations are civilisational, cultural, social and economic. The two countries have a shared history and common heritage originating from the Bengal region, and they have linguistic and cultural ties besides a passion for literature, music, and arts, among others. The fact remains that both nations were under the British Raj. Interestingly, Rabindranath Tagore created the national anthems of both countries. Since the partition was based on religious lines, East Bengal was transferred to Pakistan and became East Pakistan. Both the sides suffered considerable losses during the partition of India and the separation of so many families.

**Candidate No. 1 :** Subsequently, in 1971, India played a pivotal role in liberating East Pakistan and making it an independent Bangladesh. Bangladesh Liberation Day, 16th December, is celebrated as Vijay Diwas in India. However, from the mid-1970s, relations between the two nations worsened since Bangladesh started having close ties with Muslim nations and participated in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. During the beginning of economic liberalisation in South Asia, the two countries started more bilateral



engagements and trade relations. Later, the historic Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was also concluded in 1996.

**Candidate No. 8 :** We have adequately discussed the historical background of India-Bangladesh relations. I suggest that to discuss India-Bangladesh relations further, we need to first highlight why Bangladesh is so significant to India. Am I right?

**Candidate No. 9 :** Yes, you are right. We can choose our friends, not neighbours. Bangladesh is India's neighbour and shares a more than 4,000 km long land boundary along with a ravine and maritime boundary, with China nearby. Therefore, Bangladesh is significant for India's security and foreign policy issues. Secondly, India is pursuing Neighbourhood First Policy, which aims to build good relations with neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh. Thirdly, Bangladesh is India's one of the largest trading partners. To illustrate, the bilateral trade between the two nations in 2021-22 was \$18.2 billion. So, all this shows how significant Bangladesh is to India.

**Candidate No. 7 :** I think Number 9 nicely explained why Bangladesh is so important to India.

**Candidate No. 3 :** In this regard, I would like to add that the people of the two countries have a historical and cultural bond, and a large population of Bangladesh origin stays in India and vice versa. Also, the two countries share transboundary rivers and ecological systems, which makes it important for them to cooperate for water management and flood control. Conservation of the environment is another area that needs both nations to work together.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Friends, I think to carry this discussion further, we should now talk about the areas in which India and Bangladesh have been cooperating and what are the challenges faced by this relationship.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Yes, that should be the right way forward. I can talk about economic and commercial cooperation. Bilateral trade between the two countries has grown over the years, and Bangladesh has become one of India's largest trade partners. India has approved loans to develop Bangladesh's infrastructure. India also provides scholarships to Bangladeshi students. According to a revised trade deal with India, the two nations could use each other's land and water routes to send goods to a third country, removing long-

standing barriers in regional trade. Negotiations are still underway for Indian businessmen to invest in manufacturing, energy and infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. Bangladesh also wants to utilise India's experience of the Digital India programme.

**Candidate No. 1 :** I want to add that to improve people-to-people connections between the two countries, several rail links have been established and protocols on inland water transit and trade were signed for the transportation of goods and keeping their respective water navigable while providing infrastructure facilities. In this regard, the train link between Agartala (Tripura) and Akhaura (Bangladesh), which connects India's northeastern region to Bangladesh, is noteworthy.

**Candidate No. 3 :** The two nations share a 4,096 km border, which is the longest land boundary that India shares with any other country, and five Indian States, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya, share the borders. Therefore, defence relations between the two nations also assume significance.

**Candidate No. 9 :** Yes, you are right. Defence relations between the two nations are also noteworthy. Consequent to the signing of two agreements, the two countries' militaries conduct joint exercises and training of military personnel. India also provided a defence-related line of credit to Bangladesh worth \$500 million to purchase defence equipment. Both militaries have also been cooperating in measures to deal with counter-terrorism issues, natural disasters, etc. The two nations have taken the initiative to develop closer efforts to strengthen the Maritime Security Partnership and establish a coastal Surveillance Radar System in two ports in Bangladesh.

**Candidate No. 2 :** All this shows that bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh have been fairly close.

**Candidate No. 6 :** India has been assisting Bangladesh in meeting its energy needs. Bangladesh imports about 2,000 megawatts of electricity from India. India and Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2018 to cooperate in the implementation of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Bangladesh. Moreover, India and Bangladesh are engaged in regional cooperation through several multilateral forums like S.A.A.R.C. (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal

Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

**Candidate No. 1 :** Some other areas of cooperation include cultural ties. In this regard, the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre in Dhaka is being utilised as the main venue for celebrating common cultural links between India and Bangladesh. Also, for the last few years, Bangladeshi Civil Servants have been trained in India at Mussoorie. India would like to increase its connection with Bangladesh and assist Bangladesh in building infrastructure. It will be advantageous for India to maintain good relations with Bangladesh to counter China's influence in that country. Earlier, India also cooperated with Bangladesh in dealing with the Rohingya crisis. So, the two nations have been cooperating on several issues of common interest.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Friends, we have sufficiently discussed the areas of cooperation between the two countries. Let us now also talk about some significant challenges that impact India-Bangladesh relations. Do you agree?

**Candidate No. 5 :** Yes, you are right. I agree with you.

**Candidate No. 9 :** I feel the main point of contention between the two countries is over sharing the transboundary river waters. India and Bangladesh share more than 50 common rivers. In this regard, two treaties have been signed, but some treaties, such as Teesta and Feni, are still being negotiated. Farakka barrage dispute is yet another source of concern. There are also border disputes about the demarcation of the long-shared border, especially in the Tripura and Assam regions. Then the problem of illegal immigration keeps lingering as due to unrest in Bangladesh, a significant influx of migrants continues to enter Indian States bordering Bangladesh. Indian politicians have often raked up this issue.

**Candidate No. 6 :** I think yet another important challenge pertains to security. India has been concerned about Bangladesh-based terrorist groups carrying attacks in India and several insurgency groups having camps in Bangladesh. In the past, there have been several incidents of cross-border drug smuggling and human trafficking. Another serious issue is China's presence in Bangladesh. China has been making investments in Bangladesh and getting a foothold there. Bangladesh has joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Beijing has also made investments in Chittagong port. This impacts India's regional standing and strategic planning.



**Candidate No. 4 :** All this shows that India generally has cordial relations with Bangladesh, but there have been quite a few challenges as well.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Yes, you are right. I would like to mention that during the last few years, Bangladesh has been in turmoil due to several serious developments. These developments did not take place suddenly but over time. Needless to say, this newly-emerged situation has impacted India-Bangladesh relations in a big way.

**Candidate No. 1 :** I think a brief mention of these developments is desirable. The erstwhile long-serving Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Ms. Sheikh Hasina, was believed to have become increasingly autocratic during her 15-year reign. Further, given the massive unemployment problem, students protested against the quotas in government jobs. These protests soon transformed into a wider anti-government movement joined by people from all walks of life. This resulted in clashes, and over 300 people were killed.

**Candidate No. 9 :** Despite becoming a growing economy, Bangladesh could not solve the unemployment problem. Even after the top court scrapped the quotas, protests continued. Meanwhile, corruption continued for a long time, and the cost of living increased substantially. Democratic rights of the people were curtailed, and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted elections in 2014 and again in 2024, demanding free and fair elections. Institutions stopped functioning in the desired manner, and things got out of control. After these developments, Bangladesh reached a historic turning point when Ms. Sheikh Hasina resigned, fled the country, and reached India in a sudden development. After a brief period of uncertainty in the country, as per the demand of the student protesters, Nobel laureate Mr. Muhammad Yunus flew in from Paris to take over as the head of an interim government in Bangladesh. Consequently, an interim government was installed in Bangladesh on August 8, 2024.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Since the Indian Government continued to support the Hasina government during the protests, some protesters have taken a stand against India and even attacked the Indian community in Bangladesh. However, the newly installed government has not supported their stand and described these attacks as political and not communal. After Ms. Hasina fled Bangladesh, various criminal charges were filed against

her and her other Ministers. There is now a demand by protesters to send Ms. Hasina back to Bangladesh to face these charges. It remains to be seen how the Indian Government will deal with the issue of her extradition as and when the government of Bangladesh demands it.

**Candidate No. 1 :** All this shows that India-Bangladesh relations are presently not as cordial as they were under the regime of Ms. Hasina. There is presently an undercurrent against India among a section of Bangladeshi youth. However, the interim government chief Nobel laureate Mr. Muhammad Yunus has repeatedly said that Bangladesh wants good ties with India, but these must be based on fairness and equality. Towards this end, Bangladesh has already started high-level bilateral cooperation talks with India to deal with the flood situation. Bangladesh has also taken the initiative to revive S.A.A.R.C. and enhance regional cooperation in South Asia. So, the future of India-Bangladesh relations would largely depend on how the Indian Government deals with the current complex situation.

**Candidate No. 7 :** I think we have adequately highlighted the prevailing situation in Bangladesh.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Friends, I feel we should now talk about the way forward for India-Bangladesh relations.

**Candidate No. 9 :** I think relations between India and Bangladesh can be improved through some positive measures. These measures may include, besides deftly handling the current situation, addressing the Teesta River water dispute by reaching a mutual agreement to share river water in a time-bound manner. The two sides should further improve coastal, road, rail and inland waterway connectivity. They should enhance economic partnerships by giving a push to business and trade for mutual benefit. To counter China's influence, India should help Bangladesh with critical technologies and financial assistance. Finally, the two nations should tackle the refugee crisis with the help of other countries in S.A.A.R.C.

**Candidate No. 4 :** Friends, we need to wind up this discussion now as the time given to us is getting over now.

**Candidate No. 1 :** If you agree, I can conclude the discussion.

**Candidate No. 2 :** Yes, Number 1, please go ahead and conclude.

**Candidate No. 1 :** I am sure you will agree that we had a detailed and absorbing discussion on this currently hot international topic. At the outset, we spoke about the significance of India-

Bangladesh relations. This was followed by mentioning how these relations have developed over time. Subsequently, we talked about some major areas in which both countries have been cooperating. We also discussed the main challenges of India-Bangladesh ties. Since Bangladesh experienced massive internal disturbances during the past few years, we reviewed these developments fairly in detail to understand the current situation in Bangladesh. We discussed how an interim government was installed in Bangladesh after Ms. Hasina resigned as Prime Minister and fled the country. Lastly, we mentioned some significant measures that could be taken to improve India-Bangladesh relations. That marked the end of our discussion.

Thanks, all my friends. Have a nice day.

### **Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance :**

#### **Good: 1, 6 and 9**

*These candidates played a significant role in this Group Discussion. They possessed sufficient information on this topic and could convincingly articulate their arguments. This indicated that they had prepared the topic quite adequately. While they took an active part, they also allowed other candidates to speak. They spoke with the desired self-confidence but did not dominate the proceedings. They were aware of the latest developments in Bangladesh and other candidates did not dispute the facts put forth by them. The discussion was held in a cordial atmosphere, which assessors appreciated. They displayed good awareness of this topic. These candidates have been given 'Good' grades for all these reasons.*

#### **Average: 3 and 8**

*These candidates also spoke, but somewhat sparingly. It became apparent that they were not adequately prepared to participate in this competitive discussion. Therefore, their contribution remained limited only. They did take the initiative to make the discussion progress in the desired direction and interjected at crucial stages. They spoke with confidence, and it appeared that they had the potential to perform much better. Due to these reasons, their performance has been assessed as 'Average'.*

#### **Below Average: 2, 4, 5 and 7**

*The performance of these candidates was quite disappointing. It looked like they decided to come over for this Group Discussion without any preparations. In a competitive GD like this, it is rather difficult to put up a winning performance without adequate effort to prepare. More often than not, topics given for most group discussions are based on current affairs, and candidates must diligently read about topical events. Given these reasons, these candidates have been given a 'Below Average' assessment.*

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