

PART B

REGIONAL INFLUENCES ON INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS, 1975-1990

CHAPTER THREE

A New Beginning or the Darkest Hour? 1982-1984

This chapter concentrates on a brief period in the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations, but it is a period which reveals more than has been acknowledged regarding the conduct and character of those relations. Analyses of relations between Bangladesh and India during the regime of Ziaur Rahman rarely vary from the common theme that the difficulties which have dogged relations between the two states have usually been generated wittingly, or unwittingly, by Bangladesh. This chapter examines the period from 1982 to 1984, providing evidence to show that Indo-Bangladesh relations underwent both subtle and obvious changes due to pressures emanating not just from within Bangladesh but from the interaction between a variety of internal and external forces.

Bangladesh's relations with India during the regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad were no less intricate or sensitive than those existing while Zia was in power. This view does not accord with most broad, generally mild appraisals of Indo-Bangladesh relations during Ershad's regime. It becomes evident, in studying the period from 1982 to 1984, that the relationship between Bangladesh and India was noteworthy for its extremes. At the time, the international media considered that Ershad's coup in March 1982 had ushered in a 'new beginning' for Indo-Bangladesh relations, one which indicated that prospects for warmer Indo-Bangladesh relations were substantial. On closer inspection, relations between 1982 and 1984 indicate that, despite an auspicious beginning, the 3-year period as a whole represented perhaps the lowest ebb in Indo-Bangladesh relations experienced to date.

The first years of Ershad's regime, until Indira Gandhi's assassination on 31 October 1984, have also been treated as a distinct period in this chapter because Mrs Gandhi played a highly influential, personal role in directing India's government and foreign relations. Interpretations of Mrs Gandhi's

foreign policy behaviour have been numerous and contradictory, ranging from those which have emphasised her selfless determination to ensure regional harmony,¹ to those which stress that Mrs Gandhi's foreign policy simply reflected her dictatorial desire to maintain personal power.² According to South Asia analyst, Sashi Tharoor, Mrs Gandhi transformed both domestic and foreign affairs to 'ensure her personal survival and dominance', preferring to 'rule rather than reinstitutionalize, to control rather than reorient, to subvert rather than balance'.³ In a similar vein, analyst James Manor has claimed that Mrs Gandhi 'developed a deep personal need to rule' and if impeded would take 'audacious, even draconian action'.⁴ Whichever of the above opinions may be closest to the truth, Mrs Gandhi adopted a highly prominent and sustained presence in fashioning India's foreign policy for almost two decades. This warrants a specific study of her dealings with Bangladesh during the Ershad regime.

Given the deterioration in Indo-Bangladesh relations which accompanied Ziaur Rahman's military coup in 1975, the establishment of a second military order in Bangladesh in March 1982 might also be expected to have had an immediate and detrimental impact on those relations. Such an expectation would not be unreasonable if subscribing to the opinion that relations between the two states have been determined largely by the effects of political changes and instability occurring within Bangladesh; as exemplified by the following comment which places a clear emphasis on Bangladesh's primary role in directing the course of the relationship:

[I]n the aftermath of the overthrow of Sheikh Mujib...internal changes in...Bangladesh polity were reflected dramatically in its external relations as well. There was a sudden warming up of Bangladesh's relations with the United States, China and the Islamic world, in particular Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent with Pakistan. Relations with India correspondingly became somewhat patchy. In the past five years [1982-6]...Indo-Bangladesh relations have remained on an even keel. Bangladesh's response to India's efforts to nurture political, economic and cultural co-operation, while not negative, has been somewhat selective.⁵

1 S. Mansingh, *India's Search For Power: Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy 1966-1982*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 262.

2 S. Tharoor, *Reasons of State: Political Development and India's Foreign Policy Under Indira Gandhi, 1966-1977*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 361-2..

3 *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

4 J. Manor (ed.), *Nehru to the Nineties: The Changing Office of Prime Minister in India*, London, 1994, p. 8.

5 N. Chakravarty, 'Bangladesh', in U.S. Bajpai (ed.), *India and Its Neighbourhood*. New Delhi, 1986, p. 294. As a further example, Surjit Mansingh states: 'Since 1975, relations between India and Bangladesh have been soured by political changes in that country [Bangladesh] ...'. S. Mansingh, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

The same sources which emphasise the role of Bangladesh's domestic politics in determining the status of the relationship have also tended to conclude that Ershad's military coup and Islamic-style regime heralded an overall upswing in the cordiality of relations. This view contradicts their assessment of Ziaur Rahman's own military/Islamic orientation, considered largely responsible for the cooling of Indo-Bangladesh relations.⁶ The reasons given for the deemed improvement under Ershad are vague, although they imply that Ershad was judged as somewhat less inclined towards 'India-baiting' than Zia had been.⁷

Ershad's regime spanned a large portion of Bangladesh's history, also coinciding with an eventful and turbulent period of Indian domestic politics. His style of government did not replicate that of his predecessor, Ziaur Rahman, although there were some similarities. As a result, a study of Ershad's period of governance provides ample evidence to counter limited or stereotypical interpretations of Indo-Bangladesh relations, explanations which have tended to stress the adverse, overriding influence of Bangladeshi domestic strife; Bangladesh's military elite; and/or Bangladesh's shift to a non-secular form of government.⁸ The unprecedented foreign policy shifts occurring under Ziaur Rahman's high-profile, charismatic style of leadership may have played an undue role in colouring broad assessments of Bangladesh's relations with India. Ershad, on the other hand, has been described as a bland personality, 'an administrator perhaps more than a combat officer,'⁹ qualities which nevertheless act to provide a balancing, tempering ingredient in drawing conclusions about South Asia's personality-dominated interstate relations.

Comparing the course of Indo-Bangladesh relations during the regimes of both Ershad and Ziaur Rahman provides an opportunity to gain a clearer

⁶ For example, see N. Chakravarty, *op. cit.*, p. 294, and C.J. Gulati, *Bangladesh: Liberation to Fundamentalism (A Study of Volatile Indo-Bangladesh Relations)*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 78.

⁷ See P.S. Ghosh, *Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 96 and C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 85. According to analyst William Richter, Ershad was less antagonistic to India than Zia was, but 'considerably less pro-India than Mujib'. W.L. Richter, 'Mrs. Gandhi's Neighborhood: Indian Foreign Policy Toward Neighboring Countries', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol. XXII, nos. 3-4, 1987, p. 254.

⁸ P.S. Ghosh states: 'The fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman marked the watershed in Indo-Bangla relations and the growth of religious fanaticism and Bangladesh's change of stance in foreign policy seriously impaired [those relations].' P.S. Ghosh, *op. cit.*, p. 88. Ghosh also describes military rule in Bangladesh as having a negative impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations. *ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹ L. Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, Oxford, 1992, p. 153.

understanding of the more influential determinants of those relations. Of particular relevance were the political conditions prevailing, not just domestically,¹⁰ but also regionally, at the time both leaders undertook their respective coups.

When Zia came to power in November 1975, the post-Mujib souring of relations which had begun between Bangladesh and India was given substantial momentum due to the combination of particular circumstances: the steps which Ziaur Rahman deemed necessary to strengthen his newly-won hold on power, and the way in which Mrs Gandhi and the Congress government reacted to Zia's establishment of a military regime in Bangladesh. Amidst violent coups and counter-coups, with his own life in the balance, Zia was able to seize a tenuous opportunity to emerge as the leader and seeming saviour of Bangladesh.¹¹ The initial fragility of his political position and the high stakes involved prompted Zia to take an extreme course of action. This included a ruthless purging of military leftists and a campaign to control pro-Mujib 'dissidents', the latter group having sought sanctuary in India. Zia's determination to establish his leadership and expunge political defiance also included a willingness to confront the Indian government beyond the rhetorical level.

From the perspective of the Indian government, Mujib's demise and Ziaur Rahman's subsequent establishment of a military government in Bangladesh represented an assault on much that India had gained by Bangladesh's emergence in 1971. Described as the 'opportunity of the century',¹² Bangladesh's independence war and its outcome had given India an unprecedented boost in regional supremacy. Pakistan's internal collapse and ignominious defeat enhanced not only Indian morale and but also Indian military strength through the confiscation of Pakistani military equipment.¹³ Fortified by mounting international criticism of Pakistan's actions in the east wing, India had been able to reap the benefits accruing from Pakistan's losses without gaining the taint of obvious expansionist intent. Bangladesh's creation,

¹⁰ The domestic conditions will be examined in Chapter Six.

¹¹ For a detailed summary, see A. Mascarenhas, *A Legacy of Blood*, London, 1986, pp. 92-117.

¹² S.D. Muni, 'South Asia', in M. Ayoob (ed.), *Conflict and Intervention in the Third World*, Canberra, 1980, p. 53.

¹³ See Chapter Five and M. Rashiduzzaman, 'Changing Political Patterns in Bangladesh: Internal Constraints and External Fears', in M.M. Khan and H.M. Zafarullah (eds), *Politics and Bureaucracy in a New Nation: Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1980, p. 193.

followed by Mujib's warmth and gratitude towards Indira Gandhi and the Indian government, also supplied a convincing means of justifying India's deep-seated enmity towards Pakistan, and hence for any steps taken to keep Pakistan in check, particularly with regard to the simmering Kashmir dispute. Ziaur Rahman's successful bid for power in Bangladesh, his antagonism towards the Indian government and, especially, his willingness to put aside past enmity between Bangladesh and Pakistan were interpreted by Mrs Gandhi as being a manifestation of 'foreign' (Pakistani) attempts to destabilise Indo-Bangladesh relations.¹⁴ Bangladesh's stinging rejection of Indian patronage could be rationalised in terms which were much less damaging to Indian prestige. The confrontational stance which Zia took towards the Indian government was vigorously reciprocated as Mrs Gandhi reacted to his regime in a cool, sharp manner appropriate to that which was used habitually in dealing with the Pakistan government.¹⁵

In spurning close relations with India, and turning instead to the middle eastern Islamic states, China, Pakistan and the United States, Zia was rejecting India's assumption that an unwritten obligation of gratitude and compliancy should remain implicit in the newly-emergent state's dealings with its large neighbour. On a broader level, Zia's efforts to reorient Bangladesh's foreign relations coincided with the crest of regional pre-eminence which India had attained in the aftermath of the 1971 war. India's aura of dominance in the region had been given additional substance with Mrs Gandhi's circumvention of democratic procedure and her proclamation of a State of Emergency in India in June 1975. Mrs Gandhi responded to Zia's bid for power and his foreign policy strategies with indignation and a confident bellicosity which were aimed not only at Bangladesh, but Pakistan as well. The combination of Indian imperiousness and Indian disapproval of Zia were manifested effectively in the highly emotive Farakka Barrage issue, where the barrage's continued operation was sanctioned without Bangladesh's agreement.¹⁶

Several noteworthy differences emerge when comparing the above circumstances surrounding the establishment of Zia's regime with those concerning General Ershad's own successful bid for leadership. These

¹⁴ *New York Times* (New York), 31 December 1975.

¹⁵ The shift in Bangladesh's foreign policy following Mujib's assassination has been described as a 'slap in the face of India'. See L. Lifschultz, 'New Delhi's 'views' on the Dacca Coups', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 28, 1975, p. 17.

¹⁶ See *The Bangladesh Observer*, 6 February 1976.

differences were reflected in the way in which India reacted towards Ershad's coup.

Indian reactions to Ershad's coup contrasted noticeably with those exhibited during Zia's assumption of power. The calm, even resigned, Indian reactions to Ershad's coup prompted general optimism that relations between India and Bangladesh would improve. In appraising Ershad's coup, a *Times of India* editorial adopted the following posture: 'It had to take place and it has taken place.'¹⁷ Such a nonchalant reaction implied that broader pressures were playing a more important part in modifying India's attitude towards Bangladesh, as opposed to trepidation over Ershad's specific ambitions and strategies. The latter obviously had not aroused much concern because the same editorial described Ershad as an 'unknown and enigmatic figure'. Ershad was portrayed therefore as simply the instigator of a coup which more or less 'had to happen'; an image which contrasted markedly with that produced in India by Ziaur Rahman's bid for power. Indira Gandhi's reaction to Ershad's coup was also mild, her comment being: 'India naturally preferred a democratically elected government,...[b]ut what has happened inside a country's borders was its own concern.'¹⁸

Of greater significance for Indo-Bangladesh relations at the time was the fact that Mrs Gandhi's response did not include raising the spectre of 'foreign' or Pakistani intervention. For example, in replying to a question concerning possible external involvement in Ershad's coup, Mrs Gandhi replied that the Indian government 'did not have any knowledge'.¹⁹ India's External Affairs Minister, Mr Narasimha Rao also seemed little concerned by the military take-over in Bangladesh, concurring that it was an internal matter and that India 'attached fundamental importance to peace, harmony and co-operation with all its neighbours and stability in the subcontinent'.²⁰ Rao added: 'It is our hope that the continuing friendship and cooperation between India and Bangladesh will be maintained.'²¹ Ershad's 'swift, smooth and bloodless' coup²² fortuitously coincided with a period of tentative rapprochement between India and Pakistan,

17 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 25 March 1982.

18 *ibid.* Mrs Gandhi's reaction was in glaring contrast to her response to Ziaur Rahman's coup which prompted her to declare: '[T]hings happening in "our neighbourhood were not entirely good and cause us grave concern.'" *Times of India* (Bombay), 8 November 1975. See also Chapter One, footnote no. 55.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid.*

22 *ibid.*

where both states had been taking hesitant steps towards signing a no-war pact. On the same day as Ershad's coup, Narasimha Rao commented that some encouraging signs were emerging with regard to Pakistan, indicating that state's desire to improve its relations with India and representing a 'rare opportunity' for India to come closer to Pakistan; a 'chance of peace' not to be missed.²³ It was not surprising that Ershad's rule was accepted with little fuss or criticism by India since India and Pakistan were also peddling a softer line towards each other.

This correlation emphasises again the influential nature of the historical ties between the three states, bonds which nevertheless were not marked by tolerance and equality. India's reactions to Ershad's coup underlined the reality of Bangladesh's peripheral status in India's foreign policy concerns and strategies, with Pakistan normally being the focus of far greater Indian attention.

As shown above, the regional political circumstances which prevailed at the establishment of Zia's and Ershad's regimes were of considerable contrast. Differences in regional pressures and expectations coinciding with Zia's and Ershad's political ascendancy were equally compelling in shaping Bangladesh's relations with India. The Indian government had achieved a position of unquestionable regional dominance, partly due to its involvement in Bangladesh's independence war. Mujib's assassination and its aftermath had an undermining impact on that pre-eminence, delivering a sharp blow to euphoric notions of Indian regional patronage, and, especially galling, providing psychological benefits to Pakistan. Because Zia emerged at a time when Bangladesh's relations with India were already politically charged, he presented a clear target for the venting of Indian anger and indignation.

Ershad, by contrast, came to power when Indo-Bangladesh relations had regained at least some degree of stability. Zia's regime had already established that a military take-over in Bangladesh did not necessarily equate with pure opportunism and oppression of the populace,²⁴ characteristics which could create additional problems for neighbouring India. Ershad's strategic, controlled coup²⁵ and his intended style of government augured that the uneasy but

23 *ibid.*

24 According to D.A. Wright, even Zia's critics within Bangladesh 'have admitted that oppression was not a characteristic of his government.' D.A. Wright, 'Bangladesh and Its Indian Ocean Neighbours', *Bangladesh Bulletin*, Vol 6, no. 2, May 1979, p. 5.

25 See Chapter Six.

stabilised relations between the two states during Zia's regime would not be modified significantly or deteriorate further: a position which accorded with India's long-term regional strategy of maintaining where possible a *status quo* with its neighbours.

Adjustments occurring in India's regional and extra-regional relations were also working in Ershad's favour. Although restored to power in 1980, Mrs Gandhi and the Congress-I had been chastened to some extent by their 1977 election defeat, resulting in a less magisterial approach towards the other South Asian states. The Soviet Union's incursion into Afghanistan in 1979 had also brought new and wide-reaching pressures to bear on Indian foreign policy, modifying and improving, for a time, some of India's most preoccupying relationships: those with Pakistan, China and the United States. Any reconciliation between India and Pakistan inevitably had repercussions for Bangladesh. Whether by accident or design, Ershad's coup took place at a time of comparative regional rapprochement, a phase which eased the relationship between the Indian government and Bangladesh's new military order.

Once established in power in Bangladesh, Ershad had a reasonably free hand, initially at least, to direct Bangladesh's domestic politics and foreign relations. Opposition parties were disunified and muzzled, intra-military feuding was in abeyance, and the Indian government appeared to accept his occupancy of Bangladesh's leadership with equanimity. Ershad's relatively stable position on gaining power, compared with the more unpredictable one faced by Ziaur Rahman, had favourable repercussions for the way in which Ershad and the Indian government began their negotiations on some of the more prominent issues, long-standing and emerging, between their respective states. A stable and cordial relationship between Ershad and the Indian government seemed assured.

Nevertheless, as will be shown below, such promising pre-conditions for amicable relations were to be offset by more influential and wide-reaching regional pressures. Bangladesh's relationship with India during Ershad's regime was conducted under the shadow of India's increasing preoccupation with domestic and regional political traumas. Apart from the issue of mounting discontent amongst the Assamese in India's north-east, Bangladesh played only a peripheral role in the burgeoning crises facing the Indian government. Sinhalese-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka; Sikh agitation in the Punjab; Hindu-Muslim communalism; the Bhopal disaster; and Indira Gandhi's assassination in

October 1984; all placed the Indian government under enormous pressure. The severity of India's domestic tension, particularly during 1983 and 1984, prompted South Asia analyst, Robert Hardgrave, to declare: 'Never in the thirty-seven years since Independence and the trauma of partition has India faced more difficult times than in 1984.'²⁶

The political tumult occurring in India inevitably impinged on the course of Indo-Bangladesh relations during Ershad's regime, yet the link has tended to be down-played, particularly by pro-Indian analysts. The emphasis, as already pointed out, has too often been placed on Bangladesh's renowned domestic instability as determining the character of that state's relationship with India. Several examples of this type of interpretation have already been provided, but the following comment by Partha Ghosh encapsulates the sentiment which appears to underlie many of the stereotypical views of Indo-Bangladesh relations:

This basic reality of Bangladesh politics, that except for the secularists, all [other political] forces...are, for structural as well as historical reasons, hostile to India, needs to be borne in mind while discussing the nature of [the] Indo-Bangla relationship.²⁷

Ghosh's conclusion implies that India is endowed with a fundamental benignity which has been subject to excessive and unjustified hostility from Bangladesh. Yet the evidence has pointed to a more intricate relationship, whereby neither one state nor the other can be held wholly responsible for directing the course of the relationship. The nature of that relationship has been shaped more by the interplay of attitudes and beliefs which have evolved in both India and Bangladesh, a reciprocal association which this study illustrates.

1982 had the semblance of a honeymoon year for Bangladesh's relations with India. Neither Ershad nor Mrs Gandhi had as yet become too enmeshed in the preoccupying demands of domestic political unrest of subsequent years. While Ershad was expressing assurances that his government's foreign policy would place special emphasis on fostering good relations with the neighbouring countries,²⁸ Mrs Gandhi had little reason to be concerned about any looming changes to the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

²⁶ R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1984: Confrontation, Assassination, and Succession', *Asian Survey*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1985, p. 131.

²⁷ P. Ghosh, *op. cit.*, p. 64. The 'other' political forces to which Ghosh refers include the Islamic orthodox, Marxists and the military.

²⁸ *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 25 March 1982.

The existence of a cordial regime in Bangladesh, combined with an unconcerned Indian Government appeared to offer the best hope for smooth relations between the two states. Ershad's mild but amicable overtures to India merged well with Indira's conservative foreign policy approach which, in the opinion of one analyst, had been lacking initiative since her return to office in 1980.²⁹ According to the more caustic viewpoint of S. Tharoor, Mrs Gandhi's foreign policy had always lacked creativity due to her 'obsessive concern with independence'.³⁰ In over-zealously guarding Indian independence, Tharoor has considered that Mrs Gandhi limited India's foreign policy options, restricting the avenue of diplomacy and, ironically, distancing India still further from the Nehru ideal of non-alignment.³¹ The prime minister's efforts to preserve India from external interference would have been more fruitful, according to Tharoor, if they had been spent instead on forging political, economic and strategic linkages in a world in which interdependence was the maxim.³² Mrs Gandhi's personally-conducted foreign policy, emphasising the traditional tendency to maintain the *status quo*, did little to promote regional harmony, yet fluctuations in cordiality did occur. The comparative warmth between India and Bangladesh during 1982 represents one example, but the reason for the improvement lies partly in the same weaknesses in India's foreign policy pointed out above. The following comment by Tharoor provides one explanation for why the fluctuations have occurred, although his criticisms could also apply more broadly to describe typical aspects of post-Partition foreign policy formulation in the South Asian region:

While some of the Nehruvian expectations of the international system may have been modified in the face of the new realities,...Mrs Gandhi's 'pragmatism' was only of the short-sighted, reactive variety, a 'realism' that informed tactics and ignored strategy. She had, indeed, no foreign policy, only an inchoate collection of foreign policy decisions, emerging from a world-view that was an uneasy blend of predilection and principle.³³

In keeping with Tharoor's comment, India's relations with Bangladesh have tended to be reactive and lacking in long-term strategy. Exceptions can be found, where both states appeared to be working towards a more stable and mutually-beneficial relationship, but they become less convincing when examined further. The circumstances associated with Ershad's two-day visit to

29 S. Ganguly, 'The Prime Minister and Foreign and Defence Policies', in J. Manor (ed.), *Nehru to the Nineties: The Changing Office of Prime Minister in India*, London, 1994, p. 154.

30 S. Tharoor, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.*, p. 350.

New Delhi in October 1982 for talks with Indira Gandhi represented an appropriate example.

The October talks between Ershad and Mrs Gandhi had eventuated after six months of promising shuttle diplomacy, begun in May with the successful goodwill visit to Dhaka by Indian External Affairs Minister, Mr Narasimha Rao.³⁴ The ensuing October summit was widely regarded at the time as a successful, mutually-agreeable one in which both states had compromised a little to accommodate the other's wishes. The success of the talks suggested that a new phase in harmonious relations had begun for the two states. The Saudi Arabian news media was sufficiently impressed by the outcome of the talks to describe it as an historic achievement which spoke of the 'statesmanship of the two leaders', and which represented a 'good augury' for the subcontinent since it improved the quality of relations between India and Bangladesh.³⁵ The People's Republic of China also chimed in with a favourable view of the talks, expressing approval of the moves by both India and Bangladesh towards a 'permanent solution of the unresolved problems between them'.³⁶ The Indian press was particularly enthusiastic, lauding the summit as the first serious attempt to improve Indo-Bangladesh relations in eight years, the decline being portrayed as the consequence of political changes which had taken place in Bangladesh following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib.³⁷

The October talks were especially important to Bangladesh because they tackled what most Bangladeshis considered to be the more worrisome bones of contention between the two states, issues in which the larger state consistently held the 'higher ground': the Farakka Barrage, the Tin Bigha Corridor, New Moore Island, the maritime boundary demarcation and the trade imbalance between the two states. Most of these issues had been slipping into a stalemated torpor, a condition which suited the Indian government's advantaged position in all those issues. The vulnerability of Bangladesh's position was especially significant at the time the talks took place because of the imminent expiry of the 1977 Farakka Agreement, due for reappraisal within a

³⁴ At the conclusion of his visit, Rao expressed 'India's firm belief in "nurturing" a relationship with Bangladesh based on friendship, co-operation and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity'. *Times of India* (New Delhi), 23 May 1982. For further details of Rao's visit to Dhaka and the wide range of issues discussed, see *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 23-24 May 1982 and *Times of India* (New Delhi), 23-24 May 1982.

³⁵ *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 14 October 1982.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 15 October 1982.

³⁷ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 16 October 1982.

month, on 4 November. Anxiety on the part of Bangladesh was perhaps partly responsible for an over-enthusiastic response to the outcome of the talks, which when given closer inspection, achieved less than it seemed. With the Agreement due to expire, however, just a continuation of the *status quo* would have been greeted with relief in Bangladesh.³⁸

On the whole, the summit talks were cordial and, to some extent, fruitful, with the most obvious breakthrough being made regarding the Tin Bigha Corridor, the narrow strip of land linking two Bangladeshi enclaves with the mainsoil of Bangladesh. Under an official agreement signed at the talks, Bangladesh was provided with a 'lease in perpetuity' which granted 'undisturbed possession and use of' the Tin Bigha Corridor.³⁹ The Indian government still owned the Corridor, but the 10,000 inhabitants of the Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves were no longer obstructed in their access to the rest of Bangladesh. The Indian government had, according to an Indian editorial, 'done the right thing by its smaller neighbour'.⁴⁰ The Tin Bigha corridor dispute did not, as it turned out, end there,⁴¹ but the signing of the lease by India was a firm gesture of political goodwill.

Other, genuinely conciliatory, agreements were signed at the summit. For example, the establishment of a Joint Economic Commission was agreed upon to address the trade imbalance problems, as well as to improve scientific and technical cooperation 'on the basis of equality and mutual benefit'.⁴² Less tangible results were forthcoming with regard to some of the more controversial issues, such as the demarcation of the maritime boundaries and the ownership of New Moore Island, but the Indian government had indicated that these matters were still open to negotiation and future talks were arranged.⁴³

In resolving the issue of greatest concern to Bangladesh - the future of the Farakka Agreement - the talks were deemed by both states to have been

38 The reason for this was that the 1977 agreement was, after all, a temporary, non-binding one and could be revoked upon its expiry - as Khurshida Begum has pointed out. K. Begum, *Tension over the Farakka Barrage: A Techno-Political Tangle in South Asia*, Stuttgart, 1988, pp. 184-5.

39 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 8 October 1982.

40 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 October 1982.

41 The lease was subsequently challenged legally by residents of West Bengal, thwarting the implementation of the lease and protracting the issue. C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 182. In late June 1992 India finally leased (maintaining sovereignty over) the corridor to Bangladesh for 999 years. *The Europa World Year Book 1996, Volume 1*, London, 1996, p. 501.

42 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 8 October 1982.

43 *ibid.*

successful, although the recommendations raised more problems than existed already. Ershad was certainly aware that if he could be seen as engineering a breakthrough in such a contentious and emotive dispute as the Farakka Barrage, it would provide an exceptional boost in legitimising his assumption of Bangladesh's leadership. Perhaps this motive explains why he claimed, following his 'historic' visit to India, that Bangladesh and India had, for the first time, agreed to reach a 'permanent solution to the most pressing problem of the sharing of the Ganges waters at Farakka'.⁴⁴

Despite the public expressions of optimism and Ershad's rhetoric, a study of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which was reached on Farakka at the talks, there was little of substance to indicate that a permanent solution was within reach. According to the MOU, the 1977 Farakka Agreement was to be terminated, although for the following two dry seasons, sharing of the Ganges water was to continue 'exactly' as it had been implemented under the 1977 Agreement.⁴⁵ Within that eighteen-month period, a pre-feasibility study on schemes to augment the dry-season flow of the Ganges was to have been completed by the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC). The summit euphoria obscured the fact that some changes to the 1977 Agreement were made, alterations which favoured India, especially during times of exceptionally low flow.⁴⁶

More ominous was the MOU's endorsement that a permanent solution to the Farakka issue would definitely be provided by augmentation of the Gangetic flow. Both states had already mooted their preferred methods of augmentation, Bangladesh opting for storage dams on the Ganges in the Indo-Nepalese border region and India wishing to construct a canal across Bangladesh, linking the Brahmaputra River with the Ganges⁴⁷ (see Figure 9). Even during the cordial Janata years, both Zia's and Desai's regime had expressed their disapproval of the other's preferred option, each considering

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*

46 According to Kuldeep Singh, the MOU placed India in a better position than previously because the agreement stipulated that during periods of exceptionally lean flow the water would be divided via consultations between both governments, rather than by a guaranteed minimum of 80% to Bangladesh, as had applied with the 1977 agreement. K. Singh, *India and Bangladesh*, Delhi, 1987, p. 137. India's argument was that the MOU allowed for greater flexibility during times of extreme drought. See Editorial, *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 October 1982.

47 These proposals had been put forward in 1974, but more formally in 1978, in response to the need for long-term planning outlined in the 1977 Agreement. See K. Begum, *op. cit.*, p. 192, and B. Crow, (et. al.) *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 106.

Figure 9: The Three River Development Proposals

Source: B. Crow (et al.), *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1995, p. 187.



the alternative proposal to be unrealistic.⁴⁸ The strong stand taken by both states on each other's scheme, due to the obvious pressure of political considerations, prompted the following comment by K. Begum in her rigorous study of the Farakka dispute:

For an observer what is most striking is that the outright rejection of each other's proposal is not supported by any thorough investigation or study of the subjects. This indicates that the very ideas of the two proposals are unacceptable to the two parties; therefore, there is little scope to study the technical shortcomings or details of the two proposals.⁴⁹

Even without a detailed study, it was not difficult to envisage that the social, economic, political and administrative implications of both proposals would have been substantial. Begum's study of the augmentation schemes has shown clearly that the impact of India's proposed link canal would have the more deleterious impact.⁵⁰ The sheer size alone of the so-called 'canal', estimated to be the largest in the world and the equivalent of seven Suez Canals,⁵¹ pointed to likely technical and financial difficulties.⁵² The adverse social, environmental and political consequences of the canal for Bangladesh have been pointed out by other analysts who, like Begum, concluded that the adverse effects of the canal would far outweigh the benefits.⁵³ Begum argued further that India's objection to Bangladesh's proposal of storage dams on the Ganges was not justified because India itself had constructed and planned to construct a number of storage dams, some of them involving Nepal.⁵⁴ Begum concluded that Mrs Gandhi's political penchant for bilateralism⁵⁵ was the principal reason why India rejected the Bangladesh proposal. Not only was

48 See *Lok Sabha* debates, vol. 17, no. 16, 7 August 1978, pp. 86-7, and *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 31 May 1979. See also B.M. Abbas, *The Ganges Waters Dispute*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 118-124. K. Begum, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-8. The rejection of each other's option continued throughout the remainder of Zia's regime. See *Asian Recorder*, 19 February 1981, p. 15891.

49 K. Begum, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

50 *ibid.*, pp. 202-3. For Begum's summary of the possible side-effects of the link canal, see pp. 197-8.

51 K. Begum, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

52 Pro-canal arguments were boosted by the World Bank's unperturbed approval of the scheme, describing it as 'practical and reasonable'. S.S. Bindra, *Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 120.

53 For example, K. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 924. For a pro-canal viewpoint, see C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 120-3.

54 K. Begum, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

55 India's preference for a bilateral approach was made clear during the UN discussions on Farakka in November 1976, where Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr Jagat Mehta insisted that the UN should avoid interfering directly in the Farakka issue and instead allow India and Bangladesh to resolve their differences via bilateral negotiations. See *The Statesman* (Delhi) 18 November 1976.

Nepal involved in that proposal as a third party, but as an upper-riparian state to India, Nepal would have been in an ideal position to turn the tables on the Indian government. Nepal could then, if it had chosen, have exploited its advantageous location and exert pressure on the India government over not only the Farakka issue, but perhaps also to more general political and economic advantage.⁵⁶

Both India and Bangladesh had indicated unequivocally their rejection of the other's preferred option well before the MOU was signed at the summit talks in 1982. Whether either of the two augmentation proposals offered a realistic solution to sharing the Ganges water equitably was not the issue. The decision to pursue the avenue of Ganges augmentation in the expectation that the JRC would reach a compromise solution within eighteen months seemed therefore to have been greeted with unjustified approbation and optimism. Predictably, the JRC was not able to fulfil its task of finding a mutually-agreeable solution within the allotted time period.⁵⁷ It was very unlikely that an issue as vexatious and as politically-charged as Farakka was would have been resolved by reworking schemes which had already aroused political hostility and veto. It was also possible that such schemes could have created more problems than they solved.⁵⁸ India's uncompromising decision to opt exclusively for a link canal across Bangladesh, a scheme with enormous social, environmental and political consequences for Bangladesh, evoked fears of the colonial tradition⁵⁹ and did nothing to dispel deepseated Bangladeshi assumptions of Indian arrogance and dominance. Despite the debatable progress made by the MOU, which achieved less overall than the 1977 agreement, the summit talks were hailed as an outstanding success, or, as expressed by the Times of India, the summit 'could not have been friendlier or more fruitful'.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 25 March 1982.p. 210-5. In reviewing Begum's study of the Barrage, Kazi Mamun criticises Begum for not emphasising that Indian qualms about including Nepal in the augmentation talks with Bangladesh were because of Nepal's advantageous, upper-riparian position on the Brahmaputra. See 'Book Reviews', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 62, 1989, pp. 414-5.

⁵⁷ By May 1984, the expiry date of the MOU, the Farakka augmentation plans had not advanced beyond the stalemate level of 1978. See *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 7 May 1984 and *Asian Recorder*, June 17-23, 1984, p. 17798.

⁵⁸ Perhaps the most worrisome outcome of the link canal for Bangladesh was the likelihood that India would have control over the canal offtake and outfall, thus placing Bangladesh in a similar position of vulnerability as had been created by the Farakka Barrage itself. See K. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ K. Begum, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-9.

⁶⁰ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 October 1982.

In examining why the summit should have stimulated such an enthusiastic reaction, it would appear that the broad security concerns which had evolved in both states played an underlying role. The warmth associated with the 1982 summit and the more general improvement in Indo-Bangladesh relations at that time has tended to be ascribed to Ershad's conscious decision to revive 'good neighbourliness in regard to India'.⁶¹ While Ershad's attempts to restore warmth to the relationship in 1982 may have played a part, wider regional pressures were of greater influence. Ershad's debut as leader of Bangladesh was accompanied by signs of a more cordial relationship between India and Bangladesh, but the dictates of India's traditional foreign policy concerns had a more substantial role in bringing about an improvement in the relationship.

Indian foreign policy had been forged largely in response to Partition and the repercussions of the Cold War, producing a sense of weakness and vulnerability to great-power presence in the region. South Asia analyst, S. D. Muni, has concluded that while India's sense of vulnerability to greater global forces was eased by a growing confidence in the 1970s, the long-held fears and suspicions have lingered on in the form of a 'persecution psyche'.⁶² Evidence of India's foreign policy having been permeated by an unjustified preoccupation with regional security can be found in the fluctuating course of disputes between India and Bangladesh.

The improvement in Indo-Bangladesh relations in 1982 can be linked clearly to India's traditional interest in the great powers and the security of the whole South Asian region. The more cordial relations between India and Bangladesh were largely a reflection of the simultaneous easing of some of India's most tension-ridden relationships with Pakistan, China and the United States. China had viewed the no-war pact being mooted between India and Pakistan with firm approval, also professing a desire to normalise relations with India.⁶³ In a similar fashion, Indo-United States relations were entering a new phase of cordiality and cooperation, exemplified by Mrs Gandhi's decision to pay a goodwill visit to Washington in July 1982, the first such visit in over ten years.⁶⁴

61 C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

62 S.D. Muni, *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis*, New Delhi, 1993, p. 21.

63 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 20 October 1982.

64 See *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 October 1982 and *New York Times* (New York), 29 July 1982.

These auspicious developments in India's foreign relations in 1982 were further boosted by comparative domestic stability in India. Ominous signs of deep-seated political unrest⁶⁵ had not as yet become especially demanding of attention, allowing the Congress government to pursue the trivial but politically demanding pressures of increasing intra-party factionalism. The traditional insecurities and concerns which were habitually evident in Indian foreign and domestic policy were not prominent because of a more confident, flexible and conciliatory foreign policy stance being pursued.

The easing of tension between India and Bangladesh followed, the relationship receiving what could be described as a shower of congeniality and brotherhood in the wake of the Indian government's pursuit of larger foreign policy stakes. This conclusion brings into question the relevance of regime compatibility to interstate relations in South Asia. Ideological affinity between states has often been pointed to as a prerequisite for warmer relations, as exemplified by the following comment by S. D. Muni who has attempted to resolve the divergent pressures which have shaped Indian regional foreign policy:

It may not be out of place here to mention that changes in the political structures of the neighbouring countries, if compatible with stated ideological preferences of the Indian state may result in lessening India's dilemma of choosing between security interests and ideological preferences while evolving policy responses to critical developments in the neighbouring countries. In general, the ideological character of the Indian state and its compatibility or otherwise with the characters of polities in its neighbourhood is a vital factor to be taken into account in understanding India's approach towards its neighbours.⁶⁶

While the notion of ideological compatibility can provide one explanation for the establishment of warmer relations between the South Asian states, it is questionable whether that characteristic should be described as a vital factor in determining the conduct of relations between India and Bangladesh. The idea of ideological compatibility carries a connotation of political balance and equality, a position which had still not emerged between India and Bangladesh. There was little to distinguish ideologically the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, yet both regimes had differing and fluctuating relationships with the Indian government.

More pragmatic considerations appear to have played a greater role in the relationship, such as political opportunism and the reality of Indian regional supremacy. The degree of warmth present in Indo-Bangladesh relations has

⁶⁵ Such as the intensifying autonomy demands of the Sikh political group, the Akali Dal.

⁶⁶ S.D. Muni, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

tended to correspond with the extent to which the Bangladesh government has fitted in with the Indian government's particular foreign and domestic goals. The amount of free play which leaders of the Bangladesh government have had in moulding relations with India has generally been set according to the tolerances of the Indian government. The warmth of the 1982 summit talks between India and Bangladesh was in keeping with India's wider concerns at the time. Ershad's overtures to the Indian government were awarded gracious acceptance but the warmth was shallow. The outcome of the talks did not indicate that any substantial improvement in relations had occurred. On the contrary, the summit results, especially with regard to the Farakka Barrage, confirmed Bangladesh's subordinate and vulnerable position, one which could evince gratitude in the smaller state for India's decision not to press for an even more advantageous position.

The over-reaction to the summit exemplified the way in which the prevailing degree of political tension or goodwill between the Indian and Bangladesh governments had habitually outweighed more appropriate or logical foreign policy considerations. Fluctuations in tension associated with the Farakka issue, probably the most politically sensitive issue to impinge on the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, have shifted consistently according to the dictates of existing political warmth, a pattern least likely to produce a technologically feasible, mutually-beneficial and long-term solution to the issue. As concluded previously,⁶⁷ the reaching of any form of mutually-satisfactory agreement between India and Bangladesh was a noteworthy achievement not to be underestimated. The generally favourable reaction to the Farakka MOU may have gone beyond what was merited, but the agreement had stabilised the dispute temporarily. Yet if, as it happened, the 1982 summit talks and their outcome were regarded in the press as the zenith of warm relations between the two states, then the future of Bangladesh as an independent state receiving due regard for its sovereign wishes looked bleak indeed. Bangladesh's position in the relationship had remained a vulnerable one and even a high degree of widely acknowledged political goodwill between India and Bangladesh had not produced substantial benefits for Bangladesh.

Any attempt to appease the Indian government, as Ershad undertook in 1982, did not preordain a more favourable or equitable outcome, even if tension was reduced. The political stratagems, whims and fears of Mrs Gandhi and her Congress-I government easily outweighed whatever strategy would be pursued

⁶⁷ See Chapter Two.

by the Bangladesh government. The extent to which Ershad could initiate a significant change in Indo-Bangladesh relations therefore appears to have been limited. A more realistic view of Ershad's overtures towards the Indian government would be that he had embarked on a political gambit which fortuitously happened to accord with, or was prompted by, Mrs Gandhi's concurrent foreign policy designs; a manoeuvre which perhaps was aimed more at acquiring political approbation than to promote the interests of Bangladesh as a whole. Nevertheless, while the long-term benefits of the October summit may have been minimal for Bangladesh, Ershad had made some contribution towards the stability of Indo-Bangladesh relations, demonstrating in the process considerable political acumen. He had adopted a stance which did not exceed limits acceptable to the Indian government, but instead of damaging his public image, he had managed to reinforce his domestic and international popularity.

Tharoor's criticisms of Mrs Gandhi's foreign policy as being an uncoordinated series of reactive, idiosyncratic and uncompromising decisions has some justification when considering the history of the Farakka Barrage dispute. The overriding principle which seems to have governed Mrs Gandhi's perspective of the issue was that the dispute should not step beyond the bilateral level; whatever solution was to be implemented, it should not involve a third state, such as Nepal. India was not only the upper-riparian state to Bangladesh, but also by far the more powerful one, a relationship which meant that Mrs Gandhi could set the terms of the issue, controlling rather than accommodating the smaller state. Even during a time of comparative regional stability, as in 1982, Indian regional pre-eminence was manifested and maintained unequivocally. Concerning Farakka, Bangladesh received no more, perhaps less, by way of a mutually-acceptable solution from the Indian government in 1982, despite the espousal by both governments of goodwill towards each other. Mrs Gandhi's regional policy could be described therefore as one which was consistent only in its determination to preserve Indian regional predominance; a policy which ran counter to the qualities of logic, fairness and vision.

Bangladesh has also been criticised for being unreasonably uncooperative towards India in finding an equitable solution to the Farakka dispute. S. Mansingh points to Bangladesh's failure to 'fully substantiate' complaints of environmental damage and to Bangladesh's refusal to carry out joint surveys with India on the environmental impact, both examples being

evidence of a lack of vision on the part of Bangladesh.⁶⁸ Zia's government, in particular, was accused of protracting the issue for 'selfish motives' and 'political interests'.⁶⁹

Neither the Indian nor Bangladesh governments could be praised for a conciliatory approach to the problem of sharing the Ganges, but if either state had been entitled to be intransigent over Farakka then Bangladesh appears to have had the greater reason to claim that right. The Farakka Barrage was constructed by India for India's benefit. Furthermore, while the advantages associated with harnessing the Ganges went largely to India, they were secured at the expense of Bangladesh which bore the brunt of the adverse side effects. When the Gangetic flow was found wanting, both states turned to the remedy of augmentation, an avenue which emerged as a political and technological nightmare, ironically presenting the opportunity for India to extend its controlling influence over not only the Ganges, but Bangladesh's other major river, the Brahmaputra, as well.

The superficiality of the perceived improvement in Indo-Bangladesh relations under Ershad's new regime becomes obvious when examining the course of the relationship subsequent to 1982, when Mrs Gandhi's government slipped into a cauldron of domestic and regional crises and Indo-Pakistan relations regained some of their traditional tension. Ershad's government also faced mounting domestic strife. The character of relations between India and Bangladesh following the honeymoon year of 1982, up until Mrs Gandhi's demise, accorded even more closely with Tharoor's assessment of Mrs Gandhi's foreign policy, with little obscuring the fact that the relationship was reactive, *ad hoc* and lacking in initiative.

Peter Bertocci has stated that 'not all was darkness on the Indo-Bangladesh front' during 1983-4, citing as evidence the renewal of a trade agreement between the two.⁷⁰ While noteworthy, the trade agreement represented perhaps the only respite in a particularly uncooperative, indeed grim, period in Bangladesh's relations with India. Relations had also taken a plunge in 1975, after Mujib's death, but the parlous state of Indo-Bangladesh

⁶⁸ S. Mansingh, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁶⁹ S.S. Bindra, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁷⁰ P.J. Bertocci, 'Bangladesh in 1984: A Year of Protracted Turmoil', *Asian Survey*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1985, pp. 155-168. For details of the trade agreement renewal which went a little further to redress the trade imbalance against Bangladesh, see *Asian Recorder*, 4-10 November 1984, p. 18017.

relations during 1983-4 represented an exceptionally inauspicious portent for the future of those relations.

Examination of the condition of relations between the two states during the last eighteen months of Mrs Gandhi's regime has been relatively neglected in broad overviews of Ershad's regime, such as those noted above. Looking at Ershad's regime as a whole, relations between India and Bangladesh could be described as relatively stable when compared with Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Sri Lankan relations, for example. Nevertheless, the impression of stability between India and Bangladesh could have been generated partly by the effect of increasing domestic political instability impinging on the governments of both states. Even a very optimistic view of Indo-Bangladesh relations, emphasising their long-term stability, would be unlikely to conclude that Bangladesh had achieved a less subordinate position in the relationship.

From the more specific perspective of Indo-Bangladesh relations over 1983-4, the picture which emerges is much more serious than a superficial overview might reveal, with deep distrust, insecurity and mismanagement being exhibited by both states towards each other. Some of the least constructive characteristics of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, such as India's imperiousness and disdain and Bangladesh's oversensitivity and unwillingness to negotiate bilaterally were epitomised. It was no coincidence that the plunging level of cordiality in relations between the two states in 1983 accompanied the sharpening of Indian domestic social conflict and the general heightening of tension in South Asia.

The eruption of ethnic and communal violence in Assam and the Sikh-majority Punjab in 1983 placed immense pressure on Mrs Gandhi and the Congress-I, which in turn responded with defensive measures lacking in 'political sense', exacerbating rather than defusing the conflicts.⁷¹ According to W. Morris-Jones, Mrs Gandhi's Congress-I government bore a special responsibility for the extent of Sikh and Assamese unrest because of the way in which its ruling elite had continually sacrificed party institutions and constitutional integrity for the sake of personal political gain.⁷² Morris-Jones has drawn a direct correlation between the Congress-I's corruption of the processes of responsible government on one hand and political

⁷¹ W.H. Morris-Jones, 'India - More Questions Than Answers', *Asian Survey*, vol. 24, no. 8, 1984, p. 811.

⁷² W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 813-4. Many other analysts have also made this point.

mismanagement of the crises in Assam and the Punjab on the other. The corruption which was sapping Congress Party ideals therefore had direct and adverse consequences for Indo-Bangladesh relations which deteriorated sharply as a result of the violent unrest in Assam in 1983.

While stability of the Congress-I was not necessarily threatened by the conflicts in Assam and the Punjab (especially since the opposition parties remained in the grip of internecine struggle⁷³), Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian and centralised form of government was proving to be incapable of responding adequately to the pressure of rising regional disaffection. Ironically, an amassing of power at the centre had reduced the government's ability to curb widespread social unrest. Centralisation had been achieved at the expense not only of Congress Party integrity, but also that of the institution which had traditionally played an important role in maintaining Indian social stability: the Indian civil service.⁷⁴ In Hardgrave's opinion, the Indian bureaucracy had steadily degenerated under Mrs Gandhi's regime to become 'a cheap alloy, corroded by low morale, corruption, and political interference'.⁷⁵ With India's governing elite having assumed a role beyond its capability, and with personal loyalties having been given precedence over the logic of sound political decision-making, it was to be expected that such politically eroding tendencies would also permeate India's dealings with Bangladesh. Adverse effects on the relationship were especially likely since Bangladesh played an integral part in the issue of Assamese discontent.

More often than not, the underlying cause of the unrest in Assam has been ascribed to the poverty-stricken, overpopulated conditions in East Bengal/Bangladesh which had caused many of the inhabitants to migrate illegally into India's northeast states in search of 'greener pastures'.⁷⁶ This argument was also the Indian government's long-standing official position on the matter, as exemplified during mid- to late-1980 when Assam and Tripura erupted in violence.⁷⁷ The inadequacy of an explanation based on Bangladeshi

⁷³ R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1983: New Challenges, Lost Opportunities', *Asian Survey*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1984, p. 209.

⁷⁴ See R.L. Hardgrave, *India Under Pressure*, *op. cit.*, p. 4, and W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 813-4.

⁷⁵ R.L. Hardgrave, *India Under Pressure*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁷⁶ P.S. Ghosh, *op. cit.*, p. 81. For a similar point of view, see S. Mansingh, *op. cit.*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 271.

⁷⁷ For sample accounts which describe India's perspective of the disturbances in Assam and Tripura, see *The Statesman* (Delhi), 11 July 1980 and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (Calcutta), 22 October 1980. In the latter account, Mrs Gandhi also added

immigration as the sole foundation of Assamese political and economic grievances becomes clear when considering that migrations into Assam had been occurring in the millions since the 1820s, coming from a variety of locations apart from Bengal, such as Rajasthan, Punjab, Nepal, and Bihar.⁷⁸ While the population of Assam has increased at a much faster rate than the rest of India, especially since 1961,⁷⁹ other ingredients apart from Bangladeshi immigration have exacerbated Assamese dissatisfaction. South Asia analyst Myron Weiner has illustrated the complexity and variety of reasons why Assam has become a region of political tension, pointing to the combined pressure of historical, social, demographic and cultural circumstances.⁸⁰ It is also evident that the increasing political corruption, mismanagement and inflexibility on the part of the Indian government played a part in fuelling the discontent, impairing relations with Bangladesh in the process. Not only did Bangladesh present the clearest target upon which to focus growing Assamese anger and frustration, but the methods by which the Indian government attempted to solve the perceived cause of the Assam problem also had adverse consequences for relations with Bangladesh.

Morris-Jones has concluded that Assamese unrest has grown due to 'real neglect and real deprivation'.⁸¹ Assamese fears of being 'outnumbered, outbought and...outvoted' in their own homeland have been fostered, according to Morris-Jones, by not only the influx of large numbers of Bengali Muslims into Assam but also by the policies of the central Indian government.⁸² He has criticised Mrs Gandhi for having exploited the influx by placing the non-Assamese immigrants onto the electoral rolls in the expectation that members of this group would be 'docile', pro-Congress-I voters.⁸³ The validity of this criticism was reinforced by Mrs Gandhi's insistence that

the 'foreign hand' ingredient, accusing 'certain foreign powers' of exploiting the unrest at India's expense.

78 M. Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, New Jersey, 1978, p. 80.

79 Population in Assam grew between 1961 and 1981 at an average of 35.52% while the rest of India grew at an average 24.76%. *Census of India, 1981*, Series 1, India, Paper 1 of 1981, cited in C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

80 M. Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-143.

81 W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 811. This view is held by other analysts, such as M. Weiner, *op. cit.*, p.83, and C.J. Gulati who has conducted a detailed study of the Assam problem and Bangladeshi infiltration. See C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

82 W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 811.

83 *ibid.* Morris-Jones also points out that Assam has been impoverished by the central government's failure to compensate Assam adequately for the substantial contribution its products (oil and tea in particular) have made to the national income.

elections for the Assam state assembly and twelve vacant parliamentary seats should go ahead, despite the threat of a boycott by Assamese political parties.⁸⁴ The ensuing polls, held in February 1983, heightened political and cultural tension in Assam to the extent of civil war, leaving thousands dead and requiring the presence of a virtual army of occupation to restrain further violence.⁸⁵

From one perspective, therefore, Bangladeshi infiltration could be blamed for the increased unrest in Assam, but from another, the machinations of the Congress-I regime can be seen as a catalyst for fomenting political agitation in the region. Neither one perspective nor the other explains the cause of Assamese unrest adequately, yet both the Indian and Bangladesh governments adopted a blinkered view of the problem, emphasising just one of the perspectives, the one most likely to absolve political responsibility.

In seeking absolution for the 1983 election carnage in Assam, described as the most serious violence in India since 1947,⁸⁶ the Congress-I gave 'top priority' to the 'aliens' issue, announcing a package to appease Assamese demands.⁸⁷ The Government's solution focused on reinforcing the Indo-Bangladesh border, the porous state of which was considered ultimately responsible for the growing tension and violence in Assam. A programme to detect and deport 'foreigners' in Assam was 'vigorously taken up' by the central government which also increased the number of border outposts and stepped up police presence in Assam.⁸⁸ Perhaps interpreting the post-election calm which descended on Assam as 'an undetonated bomb that could go off at any moment',⁸⁹ the Indian government opted to supplement its offers of appeasement to the Assamese with a bizarre and questionable scheme: the sealing of the entire Indo-Bangladesh border with a 3,300 kilometre barbed wire fence, estimated to cost half a billion US dollars.⁹⁰

84 R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1983: New Challenges, Lost Opportunities', *op. cit.*, p. 210.

85 W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 811. See also *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 28 February 1983, & *Times of India* (New Delhi), 28 February & 6 March 1983. According to the *New York Times*, 28 August 1983, at least 5,000 were killed in the election violence.

86 R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1983: New Challenges, Lost Opportunities', *op. cit.*, p. 210.

87 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 4 April 1983.

88 *ibid.*

89 R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1983: New Challenges, Lost Opportunities', *op. cit.*, p. 210.

90 *ibid.* After the February violence in Assam, illegal immigrants were reported as opting to move into areas such as Bihar and West Bengal instead, hence the Indian

The fence plan was announced by the Indian government less than two weeks after the formal launching of an integrated programme for regional cooperation, a scheme mooted by Ziaur Rahman in 1980 for improving South Asian interstate relations. Known initially as the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC), the programme to enhance regional cooperation was described as an 'historic' and 'great beginning' which reflected the 'political will, sincerity and determination of the seven nations'.⁹¹ Mrs Gandhi also praised the SARC initiative, expressing her hope that 'cooperation among the seven countries would increase their capacity to withstand pressures, enable them to move ahead to a future of freedom, peace and prosperity and give a strong impetus to closer friendship and greater stability in the region'.⁹²

The SARC understanding offered economic benefits for relations between India and Bangladesh, prompting the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Economic Commission to take a wide range of measures to 'expand and accelerate' economic cooperation between the two states.⁹³ Political cooperation was another matter, the reality representing a stark contrast to Mrs Gandhi's rhetoric and her effusive support for attempts to foster regional cooperation. Those who had perceived the creation of SARC as a 'route to security'⁹⁴ - a potential means of diminishing the arms race and conflict in the region - would have had their optimism quickly curtailed. Even amidst the radiance of the new-found SARC spirit, India was delivering both defensive and provocative messages to Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Pakistan's increased military assistance from the United States in the wake of the Afghanistan crisis had been causing considerable unease within the Indian government. India's reaction to the perceived challenge to regional stability was sharp and direct, with little hint that a SARC-inspired approach would be implemented; as exemplified by the following comment by Indian external affairs minister, Narasimha Rao: 'We want peace. But it is not enough to have peaceful intentions if some quarters had different intention....[I]f war comes, we are prepared for it.'⁹⁵

government's decision to fence the entire Indo-Bangladesh border. See *New York Times*, 28 August 1983.

91 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 3 August 1983.

92 *ibid.*

93 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 22 August 1983.

94 L.R. Baral, 'SARC, But No 'Shark': South Asian Regional Cooperation in Perspective', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1985, p. 412.

95 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 13 August 1983.

The ethics of the SARC proposal were not only ignored by India, they were also contravened with regard to diplomatic relations with Bangladesh. India's scheme to fence the Indo-Bangladesh border had been planned and announced without consultation with Bangladesh, a heavy-handed move described as 'not only unheard of in the present day world but also inconceivable even between two hostile neighbours.'⁹⁶ Narasimha Rao's assurances that the border fence would not sour relations were partly based on the far-fetched notion that taking direct action to prevent illegal migration would cause less friction than including the matter in bilateral talks which would 'only mean adding one more item to the long list of unresolved issues between the two countries'.⁹⁷ India could further justify taking matters into its own hands because Ershad had adopted the uncompromising position that no Bangladesh nationals were infiltrating illegally into India, using rhetoric rather than evidence to justify his stand:

[W]e have achieved our independence after supreme sacrifices to belong to the country...Our people are living in complete harmony and peace. We have security of life and food to feed our people...It is therefore out of the question for our people to leave for any other country illegally as has been alleged.⁹⁸

Since, according to Ershad, the problem in Assam was not of Bangladesh's making, the issue was not a valid cause for negotiation, a stand of dubious logic and one virtually guaranteed to exacerbate tension over the matter. Whether open to negotiation or not, the fence plan itself represented an emotive and extreme course of action, inviting unpredictable and extreme responses.

The Indian government had hoped that the fence plan would soothe Assamese anger, but the announcement prompted the reverse, being greeted in Assam with cynical derision,⁹⁹ and rekindling anti-government activity which had been suspended in the region for four months.¹⁰⁰ In Bangladesh, national pride and the traditional fears of Indian dominance were easily manipulated

⁹⁶ *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 3 September 1983. For details of the fence announcement see *Times of India* (New Delhi) 13 August 1983.

⁹⁷ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 22 August 1983.

⁹⁸ *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 15 August 1983. Ershad's stand lacked credibility and according to most analysts of the issue, considerable numbers of Bengali Muslims and Bangladeshis have entered Assam illegally, especially since 1970. Morris-Jones has described the post-1970 migration as a 'veritable invasion'. W.H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 811. According to Indian officials, more than 9,000 'infiltrators' from Bangladesh were arrested between January and June 1983. *New York Times*, 28 August 1983.

⁹⁹ R.L. Hardgrave, 'India in 1983: New Challenges, Lost Opportunities', *op. cit.*, p. 210.

¹⁰⁰ *New York Times*, 28 August 1983.

regarding the fence proposal which offered a classic means of acquiring national and international support, the ultimate aim being to defuse the growing political opposition to Ershad's military regime.¹⁰¹ Having denied Bangladesh's responsibility for Assamese grievances, Ershad wasted no time in pointing out to India the demeaning aspects of an iron curtain-style fence being constructed to encircle much of Bangladesh without Bangladesh's consent:

We were disturbed by your decision [to construct a fence] because it humiliates and belittles us before the world. We should live like good friends and as neighbours we expect to be consulted.¹⁰²

It was doubtful whether Narasimha Rao genuinely believed that by presenting the fence proposal as a *fait accompli* he would minimise the risk of jeopardising the stability of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Bangladeshi indignation, if not outrage, were manifested immediately, yet the central Indian government remained unperturbed and determined to build the fence regardless of Bangladeshi opinion. Even Assamese and wider domestic criticism did not dent the government's resolution to implement the scheme, further exemplifying the Congress-I's political callousness and over-centralisation. Commencement of the fence's construction prompted sabotage activity by Bangladeshis, military mobilisation by both states, violent border skirmishes, mutual recriminations between the two governments, anti-Indian rallies in Bangladesh, and heightened insecurity in Bangladesh concerning all the serious, unresolved disputes with India.¹⁰³ The Indian government remained unrelenting in insisting that the fence would go ahead,¹⁰⁴ making it clear that Bangladesh's 'aggressive action' would not be tolerated. Technically, the fence was being constructed within Indian territory¹⁰⁵ and, as with the Farakka barrage, there was little that Bangladesh could do to vent frustration and anger without being accused of impinging on India's sovereign rights. Bangladeshi accusations, anger and indignation over the fence were little match for what the Indian government could do if it chose, as the Indian media sought to remind Bangladesh:

¹⁰¹ Although kept on a tight rein, political parties were beginning to unify their opposition to Ershad's enforcement of martial law, with a hartal demanding a return to democratic government being held on 1 November 1983. *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 2 November 1983.

¹⁰² *Asian Recorder*, 22-28 October 1983, p. 17421.

¹⁰³ See *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 22-26 April & 29 October 1984, *New York Times*, 22 & 25 April 1984 and *Times of India* (New Delhi), 22 & 24-26 April 1984.

¹⁰⁴ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 27 April 1984.

¹⁰⁵ The fence was located provocatively 9 inches within Indian territory. *The Economist*, V. 291, 28 April 1984, p. 47.

Surely even Lt.-Gen. Ershad and his cohorts must know that...they are playing with fire, to put it no more strongly than that. The course on which Dhaka seems embarked on at present is vastly more reckless than the despatch by it of gunboats to the disputed island of New Moore in 1982 [sic]¹⁰⁶....The patience India has shown despite the Bangladeshi provocations is a measure of its keenness to live in peace and harmony with Bangladesh. But the Ershad government must realise that there are limits to which this patience can be tried.¹⁰⁷

Commentators on the fence issue pointed out the improbable and impractical aspects of the fence, problems such as its vast length and cost; the potential disruption for legitimate trade and immigration; and the virtual impossibility of making the fence impenetrable or actually finishing it without the wire being stolen as quickly as it was put in place.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, in any form, even as a draft plan, the decision to construct a patrolled fence around much of Bangladesh represented a stark symbol of contempt by the Indian government for Bangladeshi sensitivities. To emphasise the impracticalities of the fence plan simply side-stepped the fact that in any form it had considerable political and psychological implications for Indo-Bangladesh relations. India's decision to build the fence was intended to put Bangladesh in its place, in more ways than one. It also showed that despite India's domestic and regional problems, the Indian government had little fear from what Bangladesh might attempt by way of rousing international support.

With the stability of Indo-Bangladesh relations 'impaled on barbed wire',¹⁰⁹ the euphoria of the 1982 summit dissolved with little trace, followed unsurprisingly by the foundering of efforts to resolve long-standing disputes, such as the Farakka Barrage and the border demarcation. Even the leasing of the Tin Bigha corridor, supposedly agreed upon at the summit talks, became embroiled in a legal challenge to last nearly 8 years.¹¹⁰ The glimmer of cooperation, essentially the SARC initiative, which came to Indo-Bangladesh relations between the 1982 summit and Mrs Gandhi's assassination, did little more at the time than rub salt into Bangladesh's wounds.

The condition of the relationship between Bangladesh and India during 1983 and 1984 was at least as tense as that which existed while Ziaur Rahman and Mrs Gandhi were in power, but 1983-4 presented a grimmer picture for relations in the long term. One of the main reasons for this appeared to be that

¹⁰⁶ It was, in fact, 1981.

¹⁰⁷ *Times of India* (New Delhi), 25 April 1984.

¹⁰⁸ According to the *Economist*, V. 291, 28 April 1984, p. 47, the fence would 'almost certainly add a new item to the smugglers' inventory: barbed wire'.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

India and the Congress government were in a far less comfortable position than in 1975-6 when Zia was establishing his position in Bangladesh. Despite the setback which the military takeover in Bangladesh meant to India, India still held a secure, commanding position of advantage in the region. The Indian government's reactions to Bangladesh's military take-over were strident but expected. In 1983-4, by contrast, the Indian government was proving to be increasingly corrupt and inept in the face of spiralling domestic turmoil and regional insecurity, the latter being heightened by the possibility of another war with Pakistan and by Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka.¹¹¹ The erratic and increasingly harsh way in which Mrs Gandhi's government attempted to restore domestic and regional security at the time did not bode well for harmonious relations with Ershad's regime in Bangladesh, even if the latter had professed a desire for friendlier relations with India. Along with defensiveness and political mismanagement, the Indian government was becoming more prone to a reliance on the military to settle threats to internal security. Operation Blue Star, the Indian Army's forced entry into the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984, was the Indian government's answer to resolve a particularly volatile and critical domestic crisis.

There was little indication that India would act differently towards Bangladesh in a crisis that compared in severity with Assam. It seemed clear that while the Indian government felt vulnerable and while Mrs Gandhi remained in power, India would not hesitate to use whatever amount of force was necessary to counter action deemed to be threatening, irrespective of how friendly the prevailing Bangladesh government might be. At the very least, a pressured and insecure Indian government would give little quarter to Bangladesh's own sensitivities and insecurities, and would not necessarily act with pragmatism and discretion. The fence issue represented a classic example. With the momentum of communal tension rising in South Asia from 1983,¹¹² and the Congress-I's *ad hoc* remedies proving ineffective, there was little likelihood that relations between India and Bangladesh would not suffer as well.

111 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 27 October 1984. Part of the tension between India and Pakistan arose from India's accusations that Pakistan was giving assistance to Sikh separatists in the Punjab.

112 According to official data, communal incidents and the number of persons killed in India has risen 'alarmingly' since the mid-eighties. For example, in 1975, 205 incidents were recorded, while in 1985 there were 525. See S. D. Muni, 'Ethnic Conflicts, Federalism and Democracy in India', in S.D. Muni (ed.), *Understanding South Asia: Essays in the Memory of Late Professor (Mrs) Urmila Phadnis*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 149.

The cordiality and stability of Indo-Bangladesh relations which accompanied Ershad's inaugural year hinted that a more mature, perhaps egalitarian relationship would emerge. Yet despite the congeniality of regional conditions and the optimistic rhetoric of both Ershad and Mrs Gandhi, the brief period of cordiality had at best brought little more than a reinforcing of the *status quo*. By the end of 1983, the prospects for a 'new beginning' seemed less than non-existent.

The pressures of overpopulation and political instability in Bangladesh have always impinged on relations with India. General Ershad no doubt hampered the prospects for a genuine transformation in Indo-Bangladesh relations by preferring to manipulate domestic fears of India when political expediency demanded, rather than seeking practical solutions for the long-term benefit of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the events of 1982-4 show that India's role in directly fashioning the shape of relations with Bangladesh has been a much greater one than has generally been acknowledged. At the same time, Indian foreign policy itself has been moulded, if not hindered, by the momentum of not only entrenched traditions harking back to Partition, but also protracted dominance by a powerful individual: Mrs Indira Gandhi. Combined, these two aspects represented a formidable foil during a large portion of the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations, driving home to Bangladesh that its viability and future have been perennially circumscribed by India's agenda. Never was this message delivered more clearly than in 1983-4.

PART B

REGIONAL INFLUENCES ON INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS, 1975-1990

CHAPTER FOUR

The 'New Era' of Regional Amity and Co-operation: 1985-1990

This chapter examines Bangladesh's relations with India from 1985 to 1990 and evaluates the impact of India's regional and domestic concerns on the relationship between the two states. The time period covers both the remainder of Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime, and the post-Indira prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi, a stage in Indo-Bangladesh relations on which very little research has been done. The second half of the 1980s was characterised by an unprecedented movement towards South Asian regional co-operation and this chapter will assess the extent to which the trend impinged on Indo-Bangladesh relations.

From 1985 to 1990, both Bangladesh and India were participants in the emerging, 'more truly worldwide', phenomenon of regional, transnational affiliation.¹ Regional coalitions were beginning to emerge in areas where the obstacles to cooperation had hitherto proved intractable, such as in South Asia, parts of Africa and parts of the Pacific.² Paradoxically, the period was also one in which the states of Bangladesh and India faced escalating domestic political, communal and ethnic instability. These tensions added new layers to the South Asian region's traditional political insecurities.

According to international relations analyst, Norman Palmer, a new, more realistic type of regionalism had been evolving globally during the 1980s. Unlike its earlier form, the regionalism of the 1980s was characterised by a non-European focus and by the replacement of ambitious notions of regional integration with those based on the principle of loose, flexible, mainly economic, cooperation between states.³ Even South Asia, described as a

1 N.D. Palmer, *The New Regionalism in Asia and the Pacific*, Lexington, 1991, p. 2.

2 *ibid.*, p. 17.

3 *ibid.*, p. 11. In December 1987, US Secretary of State George Schultz commented: 'regional associations...are fast becoming an important and effective new milieu for political and economic interactions in the world....Regional, political, and religious

'region without regionalism',⁴ was not immune to the 1980's trend towards regional associations. After five years of hesitant moves by various South Asian states towards fostering regional cooperation and self-reliance, these aims were given support in December 1985, in Dhaka, with the holding of the first heads of state summit of the organisation for South Asian Regional Cooperation (subsequently called SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation).⁵ The creation of SAARC indicated that a framework for multilateral, regional cooperation had emerged in South Asia, despite the civil strife which was occurring in several of the member states, and despite the fact that India, the largest and most politically powerful member, had a long-standing preference for bilateral political negotiations.

India's initial consent to the establishment of a regional forum was based on the proviso that the organisation's agenda should be restricted as much as possible to regionally non-contentious matters. Yet, even within the realm of trade (in India's view, an 'acceptable' area for SAARC involvement), the possibility of fostering genuine economic benefits in the region was minimal, apart from a strengthening of India's already dominant economic position. Since, in the opinion of the smaller states, Indian economic dominance was virtually synonymous with Indian political dominance, the potential for SAARC to offer an economic vehicle for regional reconciliation was limited at best. South Asia had always been 'conspicuous for the absence of even marginal intraregional trade',⁶ a condition which substantially impeded the all-too-slim prospects for SAARC's long-term success.

Scepticism, as well as effusive rhetoric, accompanied the launching of SAARC. While the heads of state spoke glowingly about SAARC having ushered in a new era of amity,⁷ many commentators were not as optimistic. For example, the editor of the *Times of India* stressed that it would be a miracle if

blocs of nations...now provide platforms for a number of countries to exercise influence in global affairs', cited in N.D. Palmer, *ibid.*, p. 16.

4 This comment was made by Peter Lyon, cited in N.D. Palmer, *ibid.*, p. 75.

5 The SARC organisation was launched formally in August 1983 by the seven South Asian foreign ministers, but the December 1985 summit was attended by all the heads of government, giving greater stature to the organisation. See *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 8 December 1985.

6 In 1980, the share of intra-SAARC trade of the SAARC member countries was on average only 3.2%. By 1989, the figure had actually dropped - to 2.9%. 'SAARC Regional Study on Trade, Manufactures and Services', cited in, S.D. Muni (ed.), *Understanding South Asia: Essays in the Memory of Late Professor (Mrs) Urmila Phadnis*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 231.

7 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 December 1985.

SAARC did not founder under the 'strain of contradictions' which abounded in the region.⁸ Despite the obstacles, SAARC was to acquire some standing over time;⁹ defying extinction to date by broadening its agenda gradually to address some of the smaller states' political concerns,¹⁰ but without provoking excessive Indian resistance.

Throughout the second half of the 1980s, South Asia was characterised by an incongruous blend of increasing political instability on one hand, and a cautious, yet resolute, fostering of regional consciousness on the other. The emergence of a regional awareness, exemplified by the creation of SAARC, had some beneficial consequences for Indo-Bangladesh relations. However, the emerging regional focus in South Asia did not result simply from the triumph of altruistic desires for regional harmony and cooperation. India's perennially sensitive and regionally-impinging security concerns were of much greater relevance than the promotion of regional awareness, the former having a direct impact on relations between India and its smaller neighbours. The Indian government's uncharacteristic support for a regional forum was driven by a transformation of Indian security perceptions. This shift was spurred to a considerable extent by the dual pressures of escalating regional strife, and the changing course of superpower interrelations.

The spread of increasingly uncontrollable civil unrest in India on many fronts, such as in the Punjab, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kashmir forced a more regional outlook upon the central Indian government. From India's point of view, the underlying cause of the unrest in these trouble-spots was, without exception, linked to the policies and problems existing in particular neighbouring states. The more civil unrest increased in India, the more the Indian government felt compelled, in the interests of political survival, to monitor, and modify where possible, the actions of neighbouring governments.

⁸ *ibid.*, 10 December 1985.

⁹ The following assessment was made in a recent overview of SAARC's achievements:

'Thus it is to be observed that, in ten years of existence, SAARC has provided itself with an institutional framework, has seen the development of numerous programmes of cooperation in the economic, cultural, scientific and technical domains, has made it possible to increase contacts at the highest political levels and has given experts, scholars and academicians the opportunity to exchange ideas at innumerable conferences and seminars on SAARC. This is a far from negligible and virtually unexpected balance, if it is seen in comparison with bilateral political relations, which have not always been on a fair course'. G. Boquerat (et al.), *SAARC Economic and Political Atlas*, Pondy Paper in Social Sciences, No. 20, Pondicherry, 1996, p. 17.

¹⁰ Such as the control and use of rivers.

Ironically, India's regional focus was stimulated by growing political fears and insecurity, not, as the rhetoric suggested, because of a heartfelt realisation that by suppressing differences in the interests of regional unity, all the South Asian states would be much better off strategically and economically.¹¹

The conduct of superpower interrelations had always had considerable ramifications for Indian foreign policy. Noteworthy changes in global politics emerged in the mid-1980s. These changes impinged upon India's relations with the Soviet Union and the United States, easing Indian security fears in some respects, but fostering them in others. On the whole, the changes contributed to a more regional preoccupation on India's part. Traditionally, India's self-appointed role of regional security manager was aimed largely at reducing opportunities for great power interference in the region. By the mid-1980s, this compulsion had moderated to some extent, due to an easing of superpower tensions and the accompanying development of a more diversified and less-aligned Indian foreign policy.¹² Global tensions, which had been heightened by Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, began to mellow by the mid-1980s. Soviet *glasnost* and *perestroika*¹³ emerged, producing a mood of political reconciliation which embraced not only the Soviet Union and the United States, but also the People's Republic of China. The easing of global tensions, especially the new-found warmth between the USSR and China, produced foreign policy quandaries for India, highlighting the uneasy relationship which had existed between India and China since the Sino-Indian war in 1962.

In contrast to the moderation of superpower rivalry, Indo-Soviet rapprochement began to undergo a subtle distancing as both states began to broaden their foreign policies, even within the military sector.¹⁴ The Indo-Soviet treaty of 1971 was still operative, but the peace and friendship alliance had been ratified in an era of global polarity, unlike the mid-1980s, where

¹¹ As an example: Rajiv Gandhi viewed SAARC as 'pointing the way to collective self-reliance in order to overcome problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and disease in the area', *Times of India* (New Delhi), 8 December 1985. and Ziaul Haq commented that SAARC would 'make a signal contributor to the consolidation of peace and stability in the area'. *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 9 December 1985.

¹² For details of the reasons for the shift in India's foreign policy, see: Harish Kapur, 'India's Foreign Policy Under Rajiv Gandhi', *The Round Table*, Vol. 304, 1987, pp. 469-479.

¹³ *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (restructuring) were policies implemented in the late 1980s by the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. They were aimed at making the Soviet government more open and answerable to the public and at implementing political and economic reform in the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ Harish Kapur, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

unequivocal Soviet support for Indian interests was less assured. Also contrary to established relations, the United States had begun to make expansive diplomatic overtures to India, offering the post-Indira government economic and military concessions and pandering to India's deep-seated desire to be considered a major world power.¹⁵ The United States also appeared less inclined to meddle in South Asian politics, or to play upon Indo-Pakistani differences in the latter half of the 1980s.¹⁶

An improvement in relations between India and China was less forthcoming, although a mellowing did develop in response to the evolving mood of superpower reconciliation. In the wake of the 1962 war, China represented India's greatest military threat and was its chief rival for ascendancy in Asian and global affairs. Indian fears of Chinese influence and expansion in the subcontinent were well-entrenched and not easily allayed. While of global benefit, warmer relations between the Soviet Union and China¹⁷ presented a foreign policy dilemma to India. Any rapprochement between India's hitherto staunchest ally and one of India's most feared rivals meant a reappraisal of the deep stakes which India had in Soviet strength and support. India could no longer expect unequivocal Soviet support in resolving altercations and long running disputes with China. At the same time, Sino-Indian relations were no longer hindered by the weight of Soviet disapproval and were free to develop along new lines. Indian efforts to come to terms with the shifting nature of superpower interests were not noted for their strategic vision, tending to be hesitant and *ad hoc*. China, by contrast, acted promptly to exploit the foreign policy openings, extending overtures of warmth towards India in 1985. These initiatives were rebuffed warily by Indira's successor, Rajiv Gandhi,¹⁸ pointing to India's deep-seated distrust of Chinese intentions.

No substantial breakthrough was achieved with Sino-Indian border issues during the 1980s, although eventually some progress was made in the diplomatic sphere.¹⁹ Between 1985 and 1990, China held an unequivocally

15 The US was prepared to offer some sensitive defence technology to India, but in the long term, the USSR was considered by India as a more reliable source of military equipment and spare parts. Harish Kapur, *op. cit.*, pp. 470-1.

16 A. Kapur, 'Indian Foreign Policy: Perspectives and Present Predicaments', *The Round Table*, No. 295, 1985, p. 236.

17 Warmer relations between China and the Soviet Union culminated in May 1989, with Mikhail Gorbachev's historic visit to China.

18 A. Kapur, *op. cit.*, 236.

19 Some confidence-building measures were eventually implemented on India's part to improve relations, such as Rajiv's ice-breaking trip to China in December 1988, the

commanding position over India's northern borders. India could no longer assume that Soviet assistance would be forthcoming and with large portions of India's border regions becoming increasingly volatile, scope for Chinese political advantage and interference was considerable.²⁰

The new era of South Asian regionalism was therefore also a period in which Rajiv Gandhi and his government faced substantial foreign policy challenges. The reconfiguration in superpower relations and the unpredictable implications for Sino-Indian relations, together with India's increasing domestic instability, all combined to put pressure on the Indian government. These pressures meant that it faced a very difficult task in pursuing a foreign policy which was coherent, and consistent with the developing mood of South Asian regional cooperation. The Indian government's foreign policy predicament impinged on the course of relations with Bangladesh, resulting in erratic fluctuations between antagonism and cooperation. These shifts reflected the interaction between the two prevalent and opposing forces of regional cooperation and regional conflict.

Although the movement towards regional cooperation did have an impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations, Rajiv Gandhi's personality and foreign policy predilections played a more dominant role. Initially lauded as 'Mr Clean' and praised for his affable nature,²¹ Rajiv soon gained a reputation for impulsiveness, a managerial-style of leadership, a contempt for politics and the bureaucracy; and for restricting executive power to as few people as possible. These characteristics were noted in the Indian press. In assessing Rajiv's personality and style of regime, *The Times of India* commented: '...[Rajiv] is not accessible to his ministers even of the cabinet rank, not to speak of MPs. All crucial decisions are taken by a small group....The cult of personality has been

first such visit since Nehru's in 1954. According to *The Bangladesh Observer* 25 December 1988, Rajiv's trip had 'broken the ice in Sino-Indian relations', but the road to friendship between the two 'Asian giants' was 'still paved with doubts'. The ever-present tension over border delimitation was further reinforced in April and May 1987, when Himalayan border clashes occurred between Indian and Chinese forces.

20 H. Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947-92: Shadows and Substance*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 206. The potential for conflict erupting between China and India has also extended to the naval sphere with each expanding its naval capability since the 1980s. China continues to put pressure on India by supplying Pakistan with weaponry, such as surface-to-surface missiles, which China has been sending regularly to Pakistan since 1991. R. Thakur, *The Politics and Economics of India's Foreign Policy*, London, 1994, p. 74.

21 S. Ganguly, 'The Prime Minister and Foreign and Defence Policies', in J. Manor (ed.), *Nehru to the Nineties: The Changing Office of Prime Minister in India*, London, 1994, p. 155.

in operation as never before....[His] managerial approach is essentially a non-democratic one'.²²

Like his predecessors, Indira and Nehru, Rajiv considered foreign policy formulation to be his personal preserve. He worked on establishing a high international profile, aiming to bolster his charismatic appeal and to counter the common accusation in the Indian press that he was inaccessible. His personal interest in foreign policy matters was evident in his penchant for undertaking international diplomatic visits himself, rather than delegating the task to a minister. During a four-year period of his Prime Ministership, Rajiv visited 48 countries, more than either his predecessors or successors.²³

Rajiv's emphasis on diplomacy and conciliation towards India's South Asian neighbours was particularly pronounced during his first year of office. The western press appeared, at that time, to take a more approving view, compared with sections of the Indian media, of Rajiv's personality-dominated governance and foreign policy:

India is maintaining a brisk diplomatic pace to develop cordiality with its Sub-continental neighbours raising hopes of a breakthrough in relations with at least three countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. The important factor in the unfolding scenario is the personality of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, credited by many with a desire to break new ground.²⁴

Rajiv's interest in foreign affairs was focused on South Asia, reflecting the wider trend towards regionalism. The initial period of his regime was marked by a particularly conciliatory demeanour towards India's neighbours. It was a period of comparative euphoria in which great hopes were held in the region that India's new leader would seek permanent resolution of regional disputes and would actively foster regional cooperation. Abundant enthusiasm and idealism permeated Rajiv's overtures towards the other States. In October 1985, at the eighth Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) at Nassau in the Bahamas, Rajiv espoused optimistic hopes for regional co-operation. This was in view of the imminent launching of SAARC, an organisation which Rajiv saw as a means of contributing towards 'creating understanding for fruitful cooperation in social, cultural and scientific fields and

²² *Times of India* (New Delhi), 27 February 1986. (Article by Girilal Jain, 'Rajiv Gandhi's Personality')

²³ H. Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947-92: Shadows and Substance*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 131, 2 January 1986, p. 29.

removing communication gaps and misunderstandings'.²⁵ SAARC would, according to Rajiv, provide 'a meaningful vehicle for forging a greater understanding among the member countries...'.²⁶ He also hoped that SAARC would help promote 'fraternal feelings among the people, with the leaders of respective countries coming together for effective cooperation among themselves'.²⁷ He praised Bangladesh for its role in the creation of SAARC, describing Dhaka as the 'new strength of unity of the region'.²⁸

The idealism and regional goodwill espoused by Rajiv at CHOGM were taken up eagerly by the Bangladesh press. Rajiv and Ershad formally agreed at the meeting to renew efforts to resolve the dispute over the Farakka barrage. *The Bangladesh Observer* declared boldly that the Farakka issue would be 'settled within one year'.²⁹ This was a very optimistic view of the agreement when considering that the 1982 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on Farakka had expired in June 1984, and no genuine progress had been made in finding a mutually agreeable solution to augmenting the dry-season Gangetic flow, despite attempts dating back to 1977.

The Nassau accord reached between Gandhi and Ershad did offer some hope for a resolution of the Farakka dispute. Despite the appearance of simply preserving the *status quo*, the accord did represent a positive step, eliciting the effusive media response in Bangladesh. The outcome of the accord was another three-year MOU, signed a month later at a meeting of the Ministers for Irrigation and Water Resources of both States. The agreement for sharing the dry season flow was established on much the same basis as that of the 1982 MOU and took effect in 1986.³⁰ The Nassau accord also initiated the creation of a Joint Committee of Experts (JCE), a body which was to be assigned the task of completing, within twelve months, a study of alternatives for water sharing and augmentation in the Ganges/Brahmaputra Basin.

The terms of reference of the JCE were much broader than those of the coexisting Joint Rivers Commission which had been formed in 1977 essentially to assess augmentation schemes for the Ganges. The JCE, by contrast, was expected to examine the river systems of the Ganges/Brahmaputra basin, the

25 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 October 1985.

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*

29 *ibid.*, 19 October 1985.

30 *ibid.*, 19 October 1985.

aim being to establish a formula for the equitable sharing of all major cross-border rivers between India and Bangladesh, not just the Ganges at Farakka.³¹ The technical options to be considered by the JCE for flow augmentation were also correspondingly broad, such as the construction of additional barrages and canals within Bangladesh and dams on the Indian section of the Brahmaputra river.³²

These developments in the Farakka issue indicated a promising degree of flexibility and initiative, both of which had been singularly lacking in the course of the dispute hitherto. Rajiv's agreement to allow Nepal to be included in the discussions on water augmentation with Bangladesh was a particular exception,³³ a concession which had not been entertained by the Indian government previously. The JCE was given permission by India to 'approach Nepal for the limited purpose of eliciting data on the feasibility of augmenting lean season flows at Farakka from storages in Nepal'.³⁴

The SAARC ambience and Rajiv's fostering of regional cordiality contributed to further expressions of goodwill between India and Bangladesh in 1985-6. These included assurances between Rajiv and Ershad that the growing, mutual problems of tribal insurgency³⁵ and border infiltration in both India and Bangladesh would be addressed cooperatively.³⁶ Initially, at least, the launching of SAARC and the change of regimes in India had beneficial consequences for Indo-Bangladesh relations. The improvement was closely tied to the simultaneous warming of India's relations with Pakistan. The change of regime in India and the launching of SAARC prompted bilateral talks and agreements between Rajiv and the Pakistan President, Zia-ul Huq. Following the SAARC summit, Zia made a diplomatic visit to New Delhi where he and Rajiv announced that various steps would be taken to normalise Indo-Pakistani relations.³⁷ The SAARC charter excluded the use, even the threat, of force by

31 B. Crow (et al.), *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 201.

32 *ibid.*, pp. 203-4.

33 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 11 December 1985.

34 B.G. Verghese, *Waters of Hope: Integrated Water Resource Development and Regional Cooperation within the Himalayan-Ganga-Brahmaputra-Barak Basin*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 366.

35 The issue of tribal insurgency will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

36 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 10 December 1985.

37 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 131, 2 January 1986, p. 29. The announcement was made on 17 December 1985.

any of the South Asian states in settling mutual differences.³⁸ Building on the SAARC initiatives, India and Pakistan mutually agreed not to attack each other's nuclear facilities.³⁹ Other agreements were made or planned during Zia's December visit. They included: improved trade and communication links between India and Pakistan; a revision of the highly restrictive travel policy between the two states; a return visit by Rajiv to Islamabad;⁴⁰ and negotiation of differences over the Siachin glacier area in northern Kashmir.⁴¹ Zia-ul Huq was especially delighted with the progress in relations with India, commenting: 'In such a short time we have achieved so much and in such a cordial atmosphere'.⁴²

The improvement in India's relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh was welcomed by many, the 'smiles and salaams' receiving international media attention.⁴³ Nevertheless, the auspicious signs and rhetoric which pointed to a substantial breakthrough in South Asian international relations were of limited depth and duration; and were obviously dependent upon the Indian government's sense of political security.

The initial waves of SAARC solidarity and Rajiv's foreign policy vigour did have a mellowing impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations for a period of about twelve to eighteen months. Relations between the two states lost much of their SAARC-inspired warmth during the subsequent phase, from about mid-1986 to Ershad's removal from government in 1990. There were many reasons for the decline, and, as will be shown below, most were associated with the Indian government's attempts either to shore up a crumbling domestic power base or to ensure Indian stability and dominance in the region.

According to SAARC's charter, regional negotiations were supposed to be restricted to politically non-contentious matters. This restriction virtually guaranteed that, as a means of maintaining cordial South Asian relations, SAARC was very limited in scope. The 1985-6 warmth of South Asian relations was, to a large extent, a reflection of Rajiv Gandhi's bilateral foreign policy

38 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 10 December 1985.

39 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 131, 2 January 1986, p. 29.

40 The visit was planned for April 1986, but was cancelled due to increasing Indo-Pakistani tension over alleged Pakistani assistance to Sikh extremists in the Punjab.

41 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 131, 2 January 1986, p. 29.

42 *ibid.*

43 *ibid.*

initiatives in the region. His initiatives were, in turn, dependent upon the prevailing degree of Indian domestic stability. As Indian political instability increased, Rajiv's initiatives began to falter, and so did the relative cordiality of international relations in the region.

An array of domestic and regional problems began to exert pressure on Rajiv's personalised regime in 1986. In circumventing the traditional and bureaucratic machinery, Rajiv and his coterie acquired considerable executive power. At the same time, with such a narrow power base, Rajiv became increasingly vulnerable to political challenges and the pressure of democratic processes. This became evident in 1987 when Rajiv's clean personal image tarnished rapidly with his perceived involvement in the Bofors scandal and his blatant attempts to bury the matter.⁴⁴ The subsequent loss of several by-elections by Rajiv's Congress-I party also undermined his domestic political strength,⁴⁵ prompting erratic and impulsive responses on Rajiv's part. These included arbitrary dismissals, such as that of the 'popular and articulate' Foreign Secretary, A.P. Venkateswaran.⁴⁶ Pressures increased further as Rajiv's domestic programmes, such as economic liberalisation, began to falter.⁴⁷

A similar capriciousness infused Rajiv's foreign policy decisions, some of which were of questionable strategic benefit to India. In dealing with the People's Republic of China, Rajiv was particularly erratic. In 1985-6 he irritated the Chinese government considerably, ignoring Chinese overtures for normalisation of relations, and adopting a 'forward policy' towards China which involved the deployment of troops and subsequent border clashes between the two states.⁴⁸ Rajiv then backed down in an attempt to mollify the Chinese, visiting China himself in 1988 and creating diplomatic embarrassment by his categorical endorsement of the Chinese claim to Tibet.⁴⁹ As explained by analyst S. Ganguly, '[p]ersonal whims rather than strategic imperatives seemed

44 For a summary, see S. Wolpert, *A New History of India*, Fourth Edition, New York, 1993, pp. 426-7. According to Wolpert, Rajiv ousted the finance minister, V. P. Singh from the cabinet because of Singh's attempts to uncover embarrassing and corrupt government dealings, such as the Bofors defense contract.

45 S. Wolpert, *op. cit.*, p. 427. Of particular concern to Rajiv's party was the loss of the Haryana by-election, Haryana state being considered a long-time bastion of Congress-I support.

46 *ibid.*

47 S. Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

48 H. Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947-92: Shadows and Substance*, *op. cit.*, p. 196-7.

49 S. Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

to have played a rather disproportionate role in the making of foreign and defence policy during the Rajiv Gandhi administration'.⁵⁰

The *ad hoc* nature of Rajiv's personalised foreign policy was reflected in the fluctuating degree of cordiality present in the region. Signs of diplomatic tension between India and Pakistan appeared within a few months of SAARC's triumphant inauguration. In March 1986, Zia-ul Huq stated that India was 'cooling off' ties with Pakistan, applying the accusation, commonly used by both states, that troops had fired over the Kashmir border, killing civilians in the process.⁵¹ The ease and speed with which tensions resurfaced between India and Pakistan drew attention to the superficiality of the 'new era of understanding, fraternity and cooperation'⁵² deemed to have been stimulated by SAARC's creation. The broad issue of Kashmir, the major obstacle to a genuine improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations, was carefully skirted both at the SAARC summit and during Zia's December visit to New Delhi. The tendency for both states to avoid negotiations on the most intractable issues was illustrated in Zia's reply when asked about Pakistan's claim to Kashmir during his December visit. He commented: 'We have decided to start with areas of agreement and leave out disagreements for the time being. Kashmir will come at a proper time'.⁵³

The incipient warmth of Indo-Bangladesh relations also faded as the euphoria of SAARC gave way to renewed regional antagonisms. As with Kashmir, several long-standing points of contention between India and Bangladesh received little attention because of the SAARC charter excluding controversial bilateral matters. The atmosphere of SAARC cordiality did not generate noticeable progress in any of the disputes between the two countries, apart from some attention to the Farakka barrage and the sharing of the Ganges. Issues such as India's procrastination in handing over the Tin Bigha corridor to Bangladesh; the disputed ownership of New Moore Island and the Muhuri charland near Tripura; and the construction of the fence around Bangladesh, continued to impair relations between the two states.

While these border disputes between India and Bangladesh remained unresolved, the issues had settled into a desultory stalemate, with little

50 *ibid.*

51 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 March 1986.

52 *Times of India* (New Delhi), 9 December 1985.

53 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 131, 2 January 1986, p. 29.

indication that any serious efforts were being made by either government to improve matters. In mid-July 1985, Bangladesh repeated its claim to the entire area of the disputed Muhuri charland and a number of skirmishes along the Indo-Bangladesh border ensued over the next twelve months.⁵⁴ As in the past, no progress or compromise was achieved.

The fence issue showed a similar lack of political interest on the part of both governments. The plan to construct a barbed wire fence around the entire Bangladesh border to restrict illegal immigration had been an emotive issue in 1983, incensing Bangladeshi popular opinion and souring Indo-Bangladesh relations considerably. The fence construction had been suspended temporarily in 1984, but the announcement in October 1985, that work would be resumed, drew little response from Bangladesh.⁵⁵ The announcement was sandwiched between the cordiality of the Nassau CHOGM and the launching of SAARC, both events helping to defuse any tension generated.

The stalemated nature of the fence issue was exemplified by the following comment by a spokesperson for the Mission of Bangladesh to the UN in which he espoused the standard government line that there were no illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India:

The Government of Bangladesh has repeatedly made it clear that there are no Bangalees in Assam, and the question of their expulsion to Bangladesh has not arisen at all....There has not been a single case of communal disharmony in Bangladesh since independence. So does it stand to reason that Bangalees should have emigrated to Assam?⁵⁶

At border talks held in New Delhi in April 1986, a similar stance prevailed, where the Bangladesh government delegation denied India's charge that continual large-scale illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into India was occurring. The delegation sidestepped the accusation by admitting that there may have been 'some cases of stranded Pakistani Biharis caught while crossing the Indo-Bangladesh border on their way to Pakistan'.⁵⁷ With regard to the fence itself, the Indian government still did not acknowledge the logistical impracticalities of the scheme, complaining instead of the disappearance of border pillars and fencing material, and demanding that Bangladesh be more cooperative in patrolling the border.⁵⁸ The mutual lack of political will to

⁵⁴ See *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, Volume XXI, December 1985, p. 34052 and *ibid.*, Volume XXXII, July 1986, p. 34483.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, December 1985, p. 34052.

⁵⁶ *New York Times* (New York), 18 January 1986.

⁵⁷ *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 10 April 1986.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

maintain stable relations was further exemplified by a border clash which occurred on the Muhuri River immediately following the April border talks.⁵⁹ Two members of the Bangladesh Rifles were killed in the clash. Neither India nor Bangladesh made a serious effort to negotiate a resolution of their outstanding border disputes.

For political reasons, the promising Farakka initiatives also lost their momentum in 1986. The Bangladesh, Indian and Nepalese governments each played a role in hampering the implementation of those initiatives. By 1986, the discussed options for sharing and augmentation of Gangetic water had expanded well beyond the original, limited proposals put forward by the Indian and Bangladesh governments. Methods to augment the Gangetic flow had been restricted to the two options: India's proposal for a link canal from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges; and Bangladesh's proposal for the construction of storage dams in Nepal. Alternative options were discussed in 1986-7 by the Joint Committee of Experts. These included: the construction of barrages and a link canal within Bangladesh; Nepal's participation in discussions and plans to augment the Ganges; and a guaranteed minimum dry season flow for Bangladesh on each of its major common rivers. As pointed out by Ben Crow, the mooted of these alternative options by the JCE was a worthy achievement in itself, regardless of whether or not the proposals were actually put into practice.⁶⁰ At the same time, the emphasis on finding an appropriate river sharing formula, as opposed to Ganges augmentation, was driven to a large extent by Bangladesh's apprehension over India's construction of new barrages on other common rivers, such as the Teesta and the Gumti.⁶¹ Bangladesh's vulnerability was increasing, so a package agreement for all shared rivers was particularly desirable from its point of view.

The new proposals foundered under a welter of political pressures and the weight of traditional antagonisms. The Bangladesh government was not blameless in preventing the proposals from coming to fruition,⁶² and neither were the Indian and Nepalese governments. Frustrations, disagreements, and 'politicisation of technical differences' dogged the efforts of the JCE to establish the new line of river development proposals.⁶³ The JCE consisted of many of

⁵⁹ *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, Volume XXXII, July 1986, p. 34483.

⁶⁰ B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 189.

⁶² The Bangladesh government's role will be examined in Chapter Six.

⁶³ B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 202.

those who had been staunch proponents of the limited and divisive, but familiar old line, and who lacked the commitment or confidence to take the new proposals beyond the discussion table. As a result, the JCE easily fell victim to factionalism, indecision and political pressures, its meetings becoming less productive and increasingly intermittent into 1987.⁶⁴

Despite the appearance of being a step forward, Nepal's involvement in the Indo-Bangladesh river sharing arrangements accentuated the hurdles facing the JCE. The inclusion of Nepal in negotiations, even tentatively, heightened entrenched and traditional antagonisms associated with Indo-Bangladesh border issues. Rajiv's magnanimous concession in allowing Nepal's participation in river-sharing negotiations did not sit well amongst conservative Indian government circles, causing discomfort, confusion and paralysis. The new tide of regionalism and the creation of SAARC did not dent India's traditional penchant for bilateral negotiations when dealing with important issues with its neighbours. Even the initial, tentative steps to bring Nepal into the water sharing discussions between India and Bangladesh stalled rapidly.

Discussions were held in Nepal between three teams of experts from Bangladesh, India and Nepal in late October 1986 and in the following month between Rajiv, Ershad and King Birendra of Nepal at the second SAARC summit. Ershad described the talks as 'very positive',⁶⁵ but in fact little was achieved. The Nepalese government was particularly concerned that any plans for building storage reservoirs in Nepal would be of 'mutual benefit' and neither the Indian nor Bangladesh government was able to provide that assurance in a formal sense. Both 'accepted the principle of mutual benefit',⁶⁶ but both India and Bangladesh insisted that Nepal should first supply river flow data before any formal, written commitment to Nepal could be made. The stalemated talks were described thus:

The Nepal meeting was a complete waste of time and money. Even the request for data was a formality. Virtually all of the data requested had already been obtained through informal bilateral discussions between India and Nepal and Bangladesh and Nepal. The government of Nepal was, nevertheless, not willing to acquiesce in the formality of exchanging data because that would have set a precedent of involvement in river development without formal representation in the decision-making process.⁶⁷

64 *ibid.*

65 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 November 1986.

66 B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 206.

67 *ibid.*

Essentially, what Nepal wanted was an official, trilateral arrangement with India and Bangladesh. The Indian government appeared to concede to this desire and promised to prepare a paper outlining Nepal's benefit and what was to be expected of Nepal in return. The paper never eventuated and Nepal's role in augmenting Bangladesh's Gangetic flow faded into oblivion.⁶⁸ The reasons why the Indian government failed to deliver the paper which would have resolved the deadlock with Nepal were the subject of controversy, although it appeared that the inertia of India's traditional adherence to bilateralism was the main ingredient, or perhaps 'masterly inaction', rather than deviousness or dishonesty. The Indian Secretary of the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, July 1985-February 1987, later gave the following explanation:

The Government of India was *not* convinced...of the rightness of the multilateral or regional approach. It was not the Government of India which offered to produce a paper; Nepal and Bangladesh thrust on India the responsibility of producing a paper on a thesis which it was not enthusiastic about. There was genuine bewilderment in India on what kind of paper to prepare and how to prepare it. Even the bureaucracy could not produce a draft....Quite possibly, there was equal bewilderment at the political level; in any case, directions never came.⁶⁹

The bewilderment and confusion were a consequence of the way in which Rajiv Gandhi had taken a personal interest in Indian foreign relations and had come to dominate India's foreign policy. Gandhi's decision to include Nepal in the negotiations was clearly a personal whim, and did not reflect a fundamental, deep-seated change in India's traditionally bilateral foreign policy, as shown in the following extract based on an interview between Ben Crow and an unidentified, but senior Indian Water Ministry official:

He [one of India's senior irrigation officials] recalls being called in with others to see Rajiv in July 1985, and asked to find new initiatives. According to this senior official: 'Rajiv came in with good intentions, even if they weren't always very well thought out. He wanted new initiatives.' Prime Minister Rajiv asked them, 'why can't we break this logjam in water relations with Bangladesh?' He also asked, 'why are we resisting the trilateral approach' of including Nepal in the water negotiations, as Bangladesh had long been pushing for? 'We have had long talks with Nepal, making very little progress. Wouldn't it help if Bangladesh came along?'⁷⁰

According to Crow, the official's response to Rajiv's questions was to reiterate 'India's long-standing adherence to bilateral negotiations' and to warn of the danger 'that trilateral negotiations might establish a precedent for Bangladesh

68 *ibid.*, p. 207.

69 *ibid.*, p. 208.

70 *ibid.*, p. 194-5.

to demand, as a right, a share of water stored in Nepal'.⁷¹ Crow's source added that 'Rajiv eventually accepted many of these arguments'.⁷²

The Nepalese government's recalcitrance and the Indian government's subsequent indecisiveness had a moderating impact on Bangladeshi plans for Gangetic augmentation.⁷³ Less ambitious plans which did not involve Nepal were put forward in Bangladesh, but the controversial, political and factionalised nature of the issue promptly interfered with the implementation of those alternatives.

The JCE report, submitted at the SAARC summit in November 1986, reflected the failure of the experts to achieve anything of worth in determining appropriate sharing and management arrangements for the Gangetic basin rivers. The committee lapsed into old and new line factionalism. Even basic questions could not be resolved, such as the number of rivers which should be classed as common to both India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh considered fifty-four rivers to be common to both and requiring individual assessment, while India considered those to be parts of larger river systems and, hence, confined the figure to nine.⁷⁴ Not only did the teams disagree on how the water flow should be apportioned, they also disagreed on which rivers should come under a long-term sharing arrangement.

In turn, the JCE's fragility succumbed to the pressures of entrenched, old line views on augmentation which focused on storage dams in Nepal as being the only viable option. Nepal's perceived recalcitrance in participating in Gangetic augmentation contributed to divisiveness and uncertainty amongst the Bangladesh members of the JCE. Implementing the old line augmentation proposal also promised to be an extraordinarily difficult task. As pointed out by Crow, the Bangladesh proposal meant the submergence of a large area of Nepalese land (over 600 square kilometres); the dams were to have been amongst the largest in the world and opposition to such dams, for social and environmental reasons, was already widespread in South Asia; and the proposal would have required co-operation from Nepal and India for the

71 *ibid.*, p. 195.

72 *ibid.*

73 B.G. Verghese, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

74 Joint Rivers Commission, Dhaka, 'Position Paper on the Issues of the Memorandum of Understanding of November 1985', 19.3.87, cited in K. Begum, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

foreseeable future.⁷⁵ Despite these expected difficulties, old line proponents, such as the Bangladesh foreign minister, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, continued to bring their political predilections to bear on the conduct of the Farakka issue.⁷⁶ The debate in Bangladesh over whether to concentrate on water sharing arrangements or to augment the Ganges remained on-going for the rest of Ershad's regime, with little being achieved.

India, for its part, again began to push for its preferred option: augmentation rather than river sharing schemes, and in particular, the construction of the Brahmaputra-Ganges link canal. India insisted that priority should be given to augmentation rather than water sharing, once it became obvious that the JCE would not be able to present a unanimous report by the looming November 1986 deadline and would need an extension of tenure.⁷⁷ The JCE eventually expired in November 1987 and, more worrisome for Bangladesh, the three-year 1985 MOU was not extended in 1988.⁷⁸

Because of the resurgence of old line positions in both India and Bangladesh, negotiations on water sharing effectively ground to a halt by mid-1987. The particularly severe floods of 1987 and 1988 revitalised discussions on river development between the two governments, but the emphasis was placed on flood control, rather than water sharing, and did little to foster co-operation between the two states.

Those of the old persuasion in Bangladesh used the floods to justify and strengthen their stance on Ganges augmentation, blaming India's poor management of the Farakka barrage for the severity of the floods and insisting that the construction of headwater reservoirs outside Bangladesh was intrinsic to effective flood management. Despite the dubious scientific evidence for this view,⁷⁹ Ershad endorsed the traditional stance.⁸⁰

75 B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 191.

76 To be examined in Chapter Six

77 B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 249.

78 *ibid.*, p. 216. A new Joint Committee of Experts was eventually formed in 1992.

79 For a summary of the arguments see B.G. Verghese, *op. cit.*, p. 371. Most of the flooding in 1988 derived from the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, not the Ganges.

80 This was exemplified by the following comment by Ershad: 'The main source of flood control lies across the geographical bounds of Bangladesh and as such, cooperation of regional countries, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China was vitally necessary to keep Bangladesh from recurring disaster.' *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 17 October 1988.

Those advocating new initiatives, such as water sharing in Bangladesh focused on measures which did not require Indian cooperation and could be implemented wholly within Bangladesh. Large amounts of international aid were garnered to fund purely domestic flood management projects,⁸¹ but the inertia of the old line was considerable, with the result that Indo-Bangladesh relations deteriorated further. The uneasiness of relations was exemplified by the way in which Bangladesh reacted to India's attempt to provide flood relief. An Indian Air Force helicopter rescue and relief mission, sent within eight hours of Ershad's international appeal for flood relief operations, was suddenly asked, less than a week later, to return to India on the pretext that it was no longer needed.⁸² India retaliated with indignation, criticising Bangladesh for internationalising its domestic flooding problem in the hope of capitalising on international sympathy in its bilateral dealings with India over river management. India also rejected accusations in the Bangladeshi media which placed excessive blame upon the larger state for causing the severity of the flooding. Colourful accounts in the Bangladeshi press interpreted the severity of the floods as being caused by a variety of factors originating within India, such as Indian glacier-melting experiments in the Himalayas; excessive discharge from upstream dams in India; the Farakka barrage; and recent earthquakes which were of India's making.⁸³

Despite the political recriminations, some co-operative efforts were made by India and Bangladesh to address the issue of flood mitigation, but these were superficial and ineffective. In the wake of the 1988 floods, an Indo-Bangladesh Task Force was constituted at a summit meeting between the two heads of government in New Delhi in September. The aim of the Task Force was to study the Ganges and Brahmaputra waters jointly for flood management and water flow and to produce a report within six months. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* took a cynical view of the Task Force, drawing attention to the poor performance of similar bodies in the past:

...the decision to set up a high-powered task force of experts to study the two rivers jointly for flood management and water flow...merely places a new body on top of the moribund Bilateral Rivers Commission, created 10 years ago.⁸⁴

81 B.G. Verghese, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

82 *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 October 1988, p. 24.

83 *ibid.*

84 *ibid.*

While the Task Force was able to report some progress with short-term measures, such as improved flood forecasting and warning systems, larger scale ventures which involved both countries did not come to fruition. According to Verghese, India hampered progress because of its reluctance to supply Bangladesh with detailed water-flow data concerning the Ganges and the Brahmaputra.⁸⁵ Bangladesh needed the data in order to develop more sophisticated flood control schemes, based on dynamic river flood routing models which could have been implemented with World Bank assistance.⁸⁶ India was reluctant to provide the data on the grounds that such readily available information might invite third party interference or be used to advantage by states such as Nepal or China.⁸⁷ India's apprehension and excessive cautiousness were symptomatic of its bilaterally-inclined foreign policy and its acceptance of the *status quo*.

The river sharing and development negotiations between Bangladesh and India effectively entered a period of stagnation from 1987. This condition resulted from the increasing preoccupation by the respective governments with more politically-threatening concerns. The domestic problems facing Ershad were mounting, as were those confronting Rajiv Gandhi, but the latter faced increasing difficulties on the regional as well as domestic front. The following developments were particularly troublesome and demanding for Rajiv: his decline in popular support from 1987 and eventual election defeat in November 1989; mounting domestic economic difficulties; the crisis in Sri-Lanka's Tamil-Sinhala ethnic conflict in mid-1987, and the ensuing controversy over direct Indian intervention;⁸⁸ the mobilisation of Indian and Chinese troops on India's northeast frontier; the increasing tension in Indo-Nepalese relations due to the activities of the growing Gurkha National Liberation Front;⁸⁹ the increasing militant, secessionist demands from tribal groups in India's northeast; and the heightened Indo-Pakistani tension and brinkmanship in 1986-1987 over Kashmir and Pakistan's alleged assistance to Sikh extremists in the Punjab.⁹⁰ Clearly, the increasing stress to which Rajiv Gandhi's regime was subjected, domestically

85 B.G. Verghese, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

86 *ibid.* The aim of the model was to allow planners 'to posit the full range of possible flow conditions and test simulated engineering works'.

87 *ibid.*

88 For a summary, see S.D. Muni, *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis*, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 76-83.

89 S. Wolpert, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

90 For details of Indo-Pakistani relations at that time see S. Yasmeen, 'India and Pakistan: Why the Latest Exercise in Brinkmanship?', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1988/89, pp. 64-72.

and regionally, was reflected in the government's waning efforts to respond to Bangladeshi insecurities and concerns.

Contrary to 'international trends towards cooperation and reconciliation', and a brief improvement in 1985, Indo-Pakistani relations deepened in hostility during the 1980s.⁹¹ Traditionally, the state of Indo-Pakistani relations was an indicator of the level of prevailing tension in the region. The growing tension in Indo-Pakistani relations from 1986 contributed towards the general sense of unease and suspicion in relations between India and its neighbours. Even issues which India perceived as minor irritants, such as Bangladesh's water sharing fears and demands, were encumbered with excessive political constraints and rivalries. These increasing pressures easily outpaced the tentative moves towards regional co-operation.

The cordiality of Indo-Bangladesh relations in 1985-1986 was partly associated with the launching of SAARC, but, more significantly, the improvement coincided with the early phase of Rajiv Gandhi's regime. Rajiv's naively enthusiastic, but individualistic and erratic attempts to remould Indian foreign policy had beneficial consequences for Indo-Bangladesh relations, but the effects were temporary. Both regionalism and personality did have some bearing on the relationship between the two states, but the pressure of Indian domestic and regional security concerns was ultimately of much greater influence. The movement towards regional co-operation coincided with increasing regional instability. Indian insecurity and bellicosity grew correspondingly.

Just as Rajiv attempted to foster warmer regional relations during the first flush of his rise to power, similar efforts were made in 1990 by the newly-elected Indian coalition government headed by V. P. Singh. The regime's dynamic External Affairs minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, showed particular initiative in trying to resuscitate India's relations with its neighbours, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.⁹² In February 1990, Gujral visited Bangladesh⁹³ for wide-ranging and amicable discussions on the main outstanding issues: water sharing, tribal insurgency, the Tin Bigha corridor, ownership of New Moore Island, and the large trade imbalance between the two countries. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* praised Gujral's efforts in Dhaka

91 R. Thakur, 'India After Nonalignment', *Foreign Affairs*, Spring, 1992, p. 171.

92 S. Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

93 This was the first visit by an Indian External Affairs Minister for three years.

as setting 'the right tone for future substantive talks.'⁹⁴ The talks were co-operative, but Gujral gave few firm assurances, even concerning the expired interim agreement on sharing the Ganges.⁹⁵ Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Anisul Islam Mahmud, took a more reserved line, commenting: 'The complex issues that remained as irritants in Indo-Bangladesh relations could not be resolved to our satisfaction'.⁹⁶ As with preceding Indian regimes, such as those of Desai and Rajiv Gandhi, the Singh government began with fresh and sincere intentions to tackle issues marring relations with the other South Asian states. For each of the Indian regimes, those intentions quickly succumbed to more dominant pressures, such as political expediency, domestic instability or traditional interstate rivalries and expectations.

The speedy demise of the Singh government, combined with India's growing political and communal instability,⁹⁷ ensured that negligible progress was made in resolving the issues between India and Bangladesh. By the end of 1990, optimistic hopes that a new era of cordiality had begun in the region were conspicuously absent. Bangladesh's relationship with India had not altered essentially, remaining subservient and stalemated. The following comment by former High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India, Abul Ehsan, indicated that hope for better relations with India had not disappeared entirely by 1990, but, given the history of relations to that time, his sentiments appeared rhetorical, idealistic and forlorn:

India and Bangladesh are neighbours and it is imperative that both the countries remain good neighbours. If India means well for the people of Bangladesh, it should endeavour to give back to Bangladesh a share of water nearest to the historical flow of the Ganges at Farrakah which entered into Bangladesh through [the] centuries. This can be done through [a] realistic approach and good neighbourly relations. Once this is done, Nepal, West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh will be rejuvenated with economic growth of enormous dimensions, and the lower riparian Bangladesh will at least be saved from desertification, salinity and near ecological disaster in [the] course of a few years.⁹⁸

A study of Indo-Bangladesh relations during the latter half of the 1980s shows that those relations did not improve in the long-term. The launching of SAARC had raised hopes for genuine and lasting regional co-operation in

94 *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 March 1990, p. 29.

95 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 February 1990.

96 *ibid.*, 19 February 1990.

97 The coalition government collapsed in November 1990 largely because of opposition from within by the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Hindu-Muslim communal tension was exacerbated by the BJP over the Babri Masjid (at Ayodhya), a mosque allegedly built on the ruins of a Hindu temple marking what was believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity, Lord Ram.

98 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 July 1990.

South Asia, but this did not eventuate. The subsequent period was, contrary to optimistic aspirations, one of heightened regional tension. The Indian government resorted increasingly to undemocratic and populist procedures and became more inclined to intervene directly in neighbouring affairs deemed threatening to Indian security. According to South Asia analyst, Ramesh Thakur:

India has cut a sorry figure in recent times. It is ailing internally, wracked by political turmoil, social ferment and economic stagnation. By the end of 1989, after five years in power, the Rajiv Gandhi government had achieved the dubious distinction of being on bad terms with all its neighbors.⁹⁹

India's more regional preoccupation and increasing tendency to intervene in regional affairs was not just a response to intensifying domestic and regional instability. It was also a reflection of a long-standing and growing determination to be unequivocally the most dominant power in South Asia.¹⁰⁰ Fundamental changes had occurred in superpower aspirations and rivalries, with the result that both the United States and the Soviet Union were taking a somewhat less partisan stance over South Asian politics and appeared less inclined to interfere. At the same time, the United States was establishing a broader interest in the region: continuing to supply arms to Pakistan,¹⁰¹ but also working to improve traditionally strained US-Indian relations. As a result, two contradictory pressures were at work on South Asian international relations: on one hand, India was facing increasing domestic instability, but on the other, it was finding greater freedom to manoeuvre in South Asia. India was less answerable to a more detached Soviet Union, while a more agreeable United States offered India better leverage against Pakistan. The entrenched and universal fear of Indian domination in the region in turn ensured that traditional antagonisms were fostered, rather than resolved, at a time of regional awareness and reduced superpower meddling. By 1990, even an optimistic view of Bangladesh's relationship with India was unlikely to extend beyond the hope that the *status quo* would be preserved.

⁹⁹ R. Thakur, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁰ H. Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947-92: Shadows and Substance*, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁰¹ In 1988, Pakistan ranked as the fourth largest recipient of US military aid after Israel, Egypt and Turkey. S. Yasmeen, *op. cit.*, p. 69.