

# Bangladesh-Brazil Relations Out to 2041



*Portuguese settlements in the North Bay of Bengal (1510-1749). -Courtesy: Marco Ramerini of colonialvoyage.com*

Connections between Bangladesh and Brazil can be traced back to five centuries ago when Brazil and Chattogram (Sandwip) were both Portugal's colonial territories. Since then bilateral exchanges are reflected in the language (i.e. Janala, Padri, Kedara, Vaga, Cha), flora and fauna, food and folk traditions. 'Our demographic, economic and political weight, along with our cultural riches and diversity, allow us to see the world through a prism of our own.' Brazil was the first Latin American country to recognise and establish diplomatic representation in Bangladesh triggering the construction of bilateral relations. Bangladesh and Brazil established diplomatic relations in 1972. Bangladesh's Embassy in Brasília was opened the following year. The Brazilian Embassy in Dhaka was established in 1974. In 1998, the Brazilian embassy was closed, having been reopened in 2009. Bangladesh, which closed its embassy in Brasilia in 2002, reopened it in 2012.

The bilateral relation between Brazil and Bangladesh may be seen in the perspective of the evolving global economic and geo-strategic architecture. The vital importance of such cooperation underpins the necessity of "strategic partnership" based on the convergence of enduring interests. It is in these contexts Bangladesh gradually increases its diplomatic foot print striding across the globe. The re-opening of Bangladesh's embassy in Brazil, the only representation of Bangladesh in the South America till date is a glaring example of such magnificent national strategic undertakings.

Stock Taking: Bangladesh-Brazil Bilateral Relations: Brazil is the fifth biggest country in area and population, and in 2024, the eighth largest economy in the world. It has a large

and diverse base of agriculture, manufacturing, mineral wealth, services and exports. Brazil is blessed with mineral wealth and has large reserves of oil, gas, iron ore, tin, copper, bauxite, manganese and gold. Brazil also has 20% of the freshwater reserves of the world and the largest forest cover in Amazon - which contributes 20% of earth's oxygen. Brazil enjoys a moderate and agreeable climate.

**Cooperation in International Forums:** In 2013, Bangladesh sought Brazilian support for its candidacy for the Human Rights Council in 2015 and non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2016-17 terms. In 2014, Brazil secured its support for Bangladesh for the positions of Human Rights Commission of the United Nations and CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). Bangladesh also supported Brazil's candidacy for the post of Director-General of the World Trade Organization. Brazil has been providing US\$ 3 million in aid to Bangladesh for disaster management. The visit of Brazilian foreign minister in April this year and his statement to help Bangladesh join BRICS has further bolstered the two friendly countries bilateral relations.

**Cooperation in Culture, Education and Agriculture:** In 2011, Brazil proposed the signing of a cooperation agreement in several potential sectors, including agriculture, health, education and sports. In 2014, and also reiterated in 2024, Brazil expressed interest in extending cooperation with Bangladesh to work on bilateral, regional, global levels for governance, trade promotion, green energy, reducing hunger and climate change issues.

**Economic Relations:** Bangladesh has a strong interest in exporting its clothing, but has had difficulty entering the Brazilian market, due to high tariff barriers. Brazil, on the other hand, is a major exporter of sugar, wheat and cotton to the country. In 2017, Brazilian imports from Bangladesh totalled US \$ 157 million, while exports totalled US \$1.6 billion, recording a surplus of US \$ 1.4 billion. Brazil's main export products to Bangladesh include agricultural products such as sugar, while Bangladesh has been exporting mainly Ready Made Garments (RMG) products. Fast forward to 2024, during the maiden visit of Brazilian foreign minister in Bangladesh, both the countries have agreed that a preferential trade agreement (PTA) between Bangladesh and South American Trade Bloc MERCOSUR is likely to enhance business opportunities. It is also worth noting that the trade between the two countries has increased to \$ 2.72 billion in 2023 from \$ 1.52 billion in 2021.

**Bilateral Consultation Mechanism:** Despite the growing importance of bilateral relations, there is a lack of high-level political contacts between the two countries. An auspicious change in this dynamic occurred on March 20, 2017, when the Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of a Bilateral Consultation Mechanism was signed in Dhaka, followed by the first meeting of the mechanism. The agreement provides that political consultation meetings will be held every two years, alternatively in Brazil and Bangladesh, and chaired by senior Foreign Service officials. The periodic meeting of authorities of both parties within the scope of these mechanisms can catalyse the process of identifying mutual interests and negotiating agreements, as it encourages the parties to present progress at each edition. In addition, it opens an opportunity for further

dialogue on topics of mutual interest and coordination on multilateral issues. As mentioned above, the Brazilian foreign minister during his meeting with his counterpart in April this year asserted that Brazil will "very strongly and positively" consider Bangladesh's inclusion in BRICS.

Since it was also agreed in the meeting to work together for the promotion of various bilateral and regional trades and investments, emphasis may also be given on defence cooperation, coordination in multilateral organizations, assistance between diplomatic, military academies, promotion of Blue Economy and maritime research institutions among others.

**Challenges, no it's Opportunities:** The first ever official visit by a Brazilian foreign minister to Bangladesh and Bangladesh's Honorable Prime Minister's forthcoming visit to Brazil by invitation of the Brazilian President are stark indicators of opening the doors of the two friendly countries becoming even strategic partners. Though there are apparent challenges that might impede growing bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Brazil, as it is seen to be addressed, likely to turn the challenges into opportunities. Some among them are highlighted below:

**Physical Distance:** Though there is a 15,915 km distance between Bangladesh and Brazil, in 2024, it's increasingly easy to take advantage of the technology available in our favour. And thanks to globalization and one of its main goals, which is to shorten the distances. Today, it is possible to arrive in one country from another within 24 hours travel. That said, it's not acceptable to use the distance excuse in order to avoid forming closer relationships between these two countries. Brazil might take advantage of the Bangladesh's geographic position and its demography in order to maximize its presence in Asia while enjoying the benefits of a great partnership between the two friendly-nations that, historically, have the potential to bear many fruits. Both countries share views on improving global governance, in order to make it more transparent, democratic, inclusive and efficient, as well as on the environment, south-south cooperation and combating poverty.

**Language:** Since language is the carrier of culture, the lack of language skills is one of the obstacles to the political, economic, military, trade, and cultural exchanges between Bangladesh and Brazil. It is not simple to promote the language exchange between the two countries, but an educational cooperation promoting language teaching/learning starting by the respective Embassies in each other's capitals would be a great start to this engine.

**Tariff Barrier:** Frankly speaking, the trade balance has always been favourable to Brazil. A first step could be to reduce the gap and bring the business community closer. Creating channels of dialogue between chambers of commerce has started in recent years with the meeting and signing of a few MoU during the visit of former Bangladesh's state minister for foreign affairs to Brazil in July 2022.

**Political Perspective:** From a political point of view, despite the reopening of embassies, the relationship is so far limited to bilateral trade. Bearing in mind the strategic

positioning of Bangladesh, getting closer to Dhaka will not only raise the profile of the Brazilian presence in the region, but also closely monitor the evolution of the Asian geopolitics. In the opposite perspective, Brazil could also stand out as a strategic partner for Bangladesh. Indeed, Bangladesh is already part of the group of 18 priority countries to participate in the initial activities of the Centre of Excellence against Hunger, a partnership between the Brazilian government and the United Nations World Food Program, which aims to encourage capacity development in the field of food security, nutrition and school feeding.

**Bangladesh-Brazil Free Trade Agreement:** In 2018, Bangladesh and Brazil had agreed to form a joint chamber of commerce and sign the FTA to boost bilateral trade and commerce. For Bangladesh, the Brazilian market is a promising export destination for RMG products. However, the country is still not getting proper access to Brazil's market because of the high tariff barrier as highlighted above. This issue can only be resolved by signing an FTA.

**Four Areas of Business Potentials:** The principal areas where both countries can cooperate are:

**Agriculture:** "Brazil is an agricultural superpower. It is not only self-reliant in food security but has a surplus to export and be a global player." Geographically, Bangladesh located in the Bay of Bengal, has the capacity and proximity to serve Nepal, Bhutan, India and also China, the most populous countries in the world. Bangladesh has strong agriculture that is one of the country's most important economic pillars. But low productivity and almost exclusive use of human labour, which makes it impossible to harvest all the products generated. As a result of this reality, the country needs to import agricultural machinery. And in this regard Brazil in general and particularly its State Paraná could be a viable destination.

**Clothing Products:** Brazil's young population (falling under the age of 29 years) accounted for more than 60.0% of the total population of the country. The growing number of young population in the country is anticipated to have more demand for clothing and fashionable accessories through 2030. Brazil's strong clothing imports, high spending of people on apparel items, and shifting consumer preferences towards latest fashion are rendering Brazil a prominent destination for manufacturers and retailers of the apparel industry. Moreover, the status of Brazil being one of the top exporters of finest quality apparels and textile has worked in favour of the Brazil apparel market. Brazil is considered as one of the most promising apparel industries owing to increasing fashion consciousness and diversified demographics.

Bangladesh could play a role in offering quality clothing if there is an easier trade process established. It would be a win-win situation for both the countries. In 2014, during the World Cup in Brazil, for example, one hundred Brazilian factories had ordered T-shirts for World Cup fans. Though there are no exact numbers, but it might represent between 500 million and 1 billion US dollars. Bangladesh is therefore an important figure on the global

textile scene, second only to China as the largest producer of clothing, employing more than four million people in the clothing industry.

**Pharmaceutical Products:** Brazil is now one of the most attractive and promising pharmaceutical markets in the world. Brazil's increasingly elderly population, which will lead to a rising incidence of chronic and lifestyle-associated diseases vis-à-vis the country's robust investment in healthcare, will be key drivers of pharmaceutical market growth in future. Brazil has emerged as a global manufacturing hub for pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, which would open space to countries such as Bangladesh to invest heavily in the manufacturing.

**Defence Cooperation:** Brazil is in an enviable position for not having "enemies" in her Strategic Defence Policy. In the absence of enemies, Brazil's defence doctrine is based only on perceived "vulnerabilities." Bangladesh's foreign policy dictum stipulates, "Friendship to all, malice to none." Thus, Brazil and Bangladesh can realistically innovate and create a benchmark in defence cooperation and military modernization, which may include updating doctrines, training, restructuring of the defence forces, and a supporting defence industry. This could encompass a variety of common and complementary activities, for example, educational exchanges between military schools, joint training for peacekeeping operations, military participation in simulations and training programs, mutual involvement in strategic projects, technology-related partnerships, sharing best practices, and high-level visits etc. There seems to be much potential for convergence, collaboration, and integration at various levels and various projects in both countries' defence industries.

**Issue of Climate Refugees and the Antarctic Cooperation:** Bangladesh being the seventh most climate vulnerable country can benefit from cooperation with Brazil. Various aspects for cooperation could be:

**Climate Refugees:** When a fifth of the land is predicted to be flooded owing to climate change, climate refugees of Bangladesh will try to get to the west and at this point, given the constitutional obligation to accept asylum, Brazil is likely to become a popular destination. To garner best possible Brazilian support the role of more discerning foreign policy and more effective diplomacy is crucially important for building partnership.

**The Antarctic Cooperation:** The 12 nations that signed the Antarctic Treaty on 01 December 1959 (entered into force on 23 June 1961) at Washington, D.C. became the original 12 consultative nations. As of April 2010, 17 additional nations, where Brazil and India also achieved consultative status by acceding to the Treaty and by conducting substantial scientific research in Antarctica. As of 2024, a total of 57 Antarctic Treaty nations who agree to abide by the treaty and may attend consultative meetings as observers representing about two-thirds of the world's human population. The effects of the melting ice in the Antarctic, according to experts, will increase the sea level rise thus causing flood in Bangladesh as an "environmental consequences". Given the pretext of "common heritage of mankind", comprehensive environmental protection and

conducting substantial scientific research in the Antarctica, Bangladesh may benefit from the Brazilian experience.

Forecast for the Bilateral Scenario out to 2041: What will be the outcome of the effort to build a solid relationship between Bangladesh and Brazil by the end of 2041? According to O'Hanlon (2018), "technological change of relevance to military innovation may be faster and more consequential in the next 20 years than it has proven to be over the last 20 years..." Bangladesh has been experiencing a unique trajectory of growth in recent years. The potential of the Bangladesh-Brazil trade may be seen as a means of expanding the trade and investment ties in other areas as such science, technology, education and culture. It is time to elevate the partnership to new heights, leading to more exchanges, more tourism, more trade, more investment and more people-to-people contacts.

Relations between Brazil and Bangladesh have historically been cordial and friendly, but well below their potential. Although economic demands often stimulate bilateral dialogue, this relationship will not go well if the Brazilian and Bangladeshi governments do not give it impetus. Therein lies the biggest challenge in bilateral relations: involving the government and society in approximation initiatives that allow to deepen the existing level of interaction, with emphasis on the commercial area. In this regard, there seems to be potentials to work upon policy formulation in the context of 'the makings of Bangladesh - Brazil strategic partnership out to 2041'. And within its auspices the following sub-areas can also be considered:

- a. Renewable energy could be the way out for Bangladesh and Brazil.
- b. Micro economic management for poverty eradication and sustainable inclusive development for Bangladesh and Brazil.
- c. Science diplomacy: Bangladesh -Brazil cooperation in biotechnology.
- d. Defence diplomacy: Bangladesh - Brazil defence cooperation and the UN peacekeeping operations.
- e. Maritime Diplomacy: Bangladesh - Brazil cooperation in Blue Economy.
- f. The Antarctica exploration cooperation.
- g. Bangladesh-Brazil possibilities for migration cooperation.

In his book, 'On Grand Strategy', J W Gaddis framed strategic thinking saying that a compass points true north from the position of the observer, but it does not advice about the "swamps and deserts and chasms" that one might encounter en route. If in pursuit of one's destination he dives ahead, heedless of obstacles and achieve nothing more than sinking in the swamp, then what's the use of knowing the true north? Likewise, studying and trying to understand bilateral relations by outsiders are of little use if the concerned ministries are late to identify new opportunities for collaboration, by bringing dynamic views and new opportunities, particularly in the context of developing Bangladesh-Brazil future relations.

Finally, Bangladesh and Brazil two newfound old brothers may find themselves contributing to secure global commons: national, regional, and international stability, peace and prosperity as "dreamt" by Bangladesh's Father of the Nation and "hoped" by

the South American pride - Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda. And this may be the trailblazer in the context to develop Bangladesh-Brazil relations out to 2041.

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