



FROM DISPUTE TO COOPERATION: THE CHHITMAHAL (ENCLAVES) SETTLEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper examines the role of resolving the Chhitmahal (enclave) issue in the development of Indo-Bangladesh relations. This study employs secondary sources to analyse the issue through the lenses of historical context, policy development, and geopolitical implications. The study argues that the Land Boundary Agreement (2015) is not just a border settlement; instead, it has established a new foundation for bilateral trust, security cooperation, and administrative efficiency. Simultaneously, this resolution has greatly contributed to human development and citizenship in the border region. However, amid political changes in 2024, new questions have emerged regarding the sustainability of this achievement. Overall, the study demonstrates that resolving the enclave issue has structurally strengthened bilateral relations, though its long-term success depends on political continuity.

Keywords: *Indo-Bangladesh Relations, Chhitmahal, LBA 2015, Constructivism, Human Security*

Introduction

The relationship between India and Bangladesh holds special significance in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, rooted in historical ties, geographical proximity, and mutual dependence. Although this relationship has gradually developed since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, its progress has not always been smooth or straightforward. Instead, it has advanced at different times through cooperation, mutual understanding, and strategic coordination, as well as mistrust, disagreements, and border issues. In particular, border demarcation, sharing of transboundary river waters, illegal migration, and security concerns have long played a vital role in shaping the nature and direction of this bilateral relationship (Shahriar, 2021; Obaidullah & Howlader, 2025).

In this broader context, the Chhitmahal issue is viewed as a unique and complex aspect of Indo-Bangladesh relations. As of 2015, there were 51 enclaves within India's borders and 111 enclaves within Bangladesh (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). According to geographic definitions, an enclave is a territory belonging to one state but wholly controlled by another. This territorial fragmentation creates not only political and economic barriers but also long-term alienation, social upheaval, and deep human unrest among the inhabitants (Whyte, 2002). In the case of Bangladesh, the policy supporting this enclave was a mistake rooted in colonial India and a response to the pre-colonial feudal land system, which was further complicated and left unresolved during the post-colonial state-building process after the 1947 partition (Van Schendel, 2002).

The most significant aspect of the enclave problem is its humanitarian impact. The inhabitants of these regions have long lived in almost complete isolation from state services (Alam, 2021). Their citizenship has been uncertain, administrative support has been limited, and basic rights such as education, healthcare, and legal protection have been nearly absent (Barman, 2014). Consequently, these populations have been forced to live in a sort of "institutional vacuum," where they are not recognised as full citizens of any state (van Schendel, 2005; Jones, 2009). This situation has raised human rights concerns and has also fueled long-standing distrust and diplomatic tensions between India and Bangladesh.

On the other hand, the Chhitmahal issue has also affected bilateral relations from both security and administrative perspectives. The absence of an effective administrative presence in these remote areas has undermined border management and sometimes created opportunities for illegal activities (Alam, 2021). As a result, it is regarded not only as a humanitarian or historical issue but also as a real security concern. This situation has impeded the development of mutual trust between the two countries.

However, after lengthy negotiations, an effective solution to this complex issue was achieved through the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 2015. Under this agreement, both countries exchanged their enclaves and granted citizenship rights to the affected people. As a result, a long-standing unresolved problem was resolved through diplomatic dialogue, serving as a significant example in the South Asian context. This process not only clarified the border demarcation but also fostered a new environment of trust and cooperation in bilateral relations (Alam, 2021).

The main objective of this study is to analyse how resolving the enclave issue has changed the structure, nature, and dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Specifically, this study explores the impact of this solution on enhancing bilateral trust, strengthening security cooperation, and developing regional connectivity. It also assesses the sustainability of such a diplomatic solution and how its effects might evolve. Overall, this study views the enclave issue not just as a border dispute but as part of a broader relational transformation. It aims to understand how solving a long-standing, complex problem can create a new foundation for cooperation and mutual trust between the two countries.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs three main theoretical perspectives in international relations- Constructivism, Liberalism, and Realism- to analyse the enclave problem. Each perspective offers a different view of the issue; however, Constructivism is chosen as the primary framework because it most effectively explains the social and human dimensions of the problem.

According to the Constructivist perspective, international relations are not determined solely by the balance of power or material interests; instead, ideas, identities, and perceptions significantly influence how states behave (Wendt, 1999). From this viewpoint, the Chhitmahal problem serves as an important example in which the citizenship of enclave-dwellers living in territorial isolation becomes uncertain, and their socio-political identity faces a crisis. Since these communities have been outside the state structure for a long time, a sense of marginalisation has developed, weakening the relationship between the state and its citizens. Therefore, when this community officially gained citizenship through the 2015 agreement, it was more than an administrative reorganisation; it represented a reconstruction of identity. This change also positively affected mutual trust between the two countries, which can be clearly understood through Constructivist analysis.

On the other hand, Liberalism emphasises international cooperation, interdependence, and institutional coordination (Keohane & Nye, 1977). From this perspective, the resolution of the enclave issue can be seen as a successful example of cooperation, in which the two states resolved their long-standing disputes through dialogue and compromise. The LBA (2015) is a clear demonstration of this cooperation, showing that states can choose collaboration over conflict for mutual benefit and stability. This process was not only about resolving the border issue; it also had a positive impact on future economic connectivity, trade, and regional cooperation. Consequently, Liberalism helps explain this event as a “win-win outcome.”

On the other hand, Realism emphasises the security, sovereignty, and strategic interests of the state (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, the Chhitmahal problem is seen as a security issue because the lack of effective administrative control in isolated territories weakens border management and creates opportunities for illegal activities. Therefore, solving this problem can also be viewed as a step toward strengthening state security and border control. However, the Realist perspective has a limitation: it cannot fully explain the human and social dimensions of this problem.

Overall, these three theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional analysis of the Chhitmahal problem. However, special emphasis is placed on Constructivism because it offers the most effective framework for explaining the core aspects of this issue: identity, citizenship, and the reconstruction of trust.

Historical Background

To analyse the historical background of the Indo-Bangladesh Chhitmahal issue, one must first note the Mujib-Indira Accord, signed on 16 May 1974, officially known as the Land Boundary Agreement (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). The then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, signed this bilateral agreement in New Delhi. The main objective of the agreement was to resolve inconsistencies in the demarcation of the Redcliffe Line (1947) border, consolidate the border through the exchange of Chhitmahal, and ensure the territorial integrity of both states. Simultaneously, one of the primary goals was to address the long-standing humanitarian crisis faced by the enclave-dwellers, who had been living in a state of statelessness for many decades.

However, its implementation did not begin immediately after the agreement was signed. Although Bangladesh ratified the treaty in 1974, political disagreements in India and the lengthy delay in enacting the necessary amendments to the Indian Constitution slowed the process down. Ultimately, after 41 years, the treaty was fully implemented in 2015 with the passage of the 100th Constitutional Amendment in the Indian Parliament. This implementation is regarded as a significant milestone in South Asian diplomatic history, as it provides a rare example of a peaceful, diplomatic resolution to a long-standing border dispute.

The enclave issue is not just a recent border dispute; it originates from a long-standing historical process rooted in the subcontinent's pre-colonial political structure. Specifically, territorial relations, military conflicts, land exchanges, and administrative agreements between the Cooch Behar Kingdom and the Mughal Empire led to the formation of separate territories within the same region, each governed by different authorities (Whyte, 2002). These isolated territories later came to be known as “Chhitmahal” or “enclaves” (van Schendel, 2002). This history demonstrates that the enclave problem primarily arose from a historical-political territorial setup that conflicted with the modern concept of nation-state borders.

During the colonial period, the British administration maintained the existing administrative structure without fundamentally reorganising this complex territorial setup. The British did not explicitly redraw borders for administrative ease or political stability, so these isolated territories became more permanently established. This resulted in an inconsistent border structure, which later created a complicated border issue for independent states. Many researchers view this colonial border policy as part of the colonial state's administrative rationality, in which control was prioritised over the territory's social realities.

This problem became even more complex during the Partition of India (1947). During the partition of British India, new states were created based on religious and political grounds, but the administrative and political status of the enclaves was not clearly defined. As a result, these isolated territories were divided between India and East Pakistan, forming 162 enclaves. This unusual border arrangement created serious challenges for administrative control, law and order, civil rights, and the delivery of government services. In many cases, the inhabitants of the enclaves were compelled to live in a near-stateless condition, leading to a long-term humanitarian crisis.

After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the establishment of new diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh created a favourable political environment for resolving the enclave problem. In this context, the LBA (1974) was signed. Although the agreement was not implemented for a long time, it remains an important diplomatic milestone in Indo-Bangladesh relations. It has made the enclave issue a significant topic in international discussions as a regional political and humanitarian concern.

Analysing the historical context of the enclave problem shows that a single political event does not cause it; rather, it results from long-term historical and geopolitical factors, including pre-colonial territorial arrangements, colonial administrative policies, the 1947 partition, and the subsequent state-building process. This ongoing historical development eventually necessitated a diplomatic solution, culminating in the Mujib-Indira Pact.

Impact on Bilateral Relations

The Chhitmahal issue was not just a geographical or border problem; it had a strong, multi-layered impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations. The ongoing unresolved status of this issue has created significant barriers to administrative efficiency, security, humanitarian efforts, and diplomatic trust (Whyte, 2009; Mandal, 2013). From an administrative perspective, the enclaves have become nearly ungoverned zones because geographical isolation has made it impossible for the concerned state to maintain a consistent administrative presence there (Barman, 2014). This has resulted in weaknesses in law and order, public service delivery, and local governance, thereby weakening state authority.

The issue has also significantly impacted security. The absence of administrative oversight and the intricate border layout make the enclaves vulnerable to illegal activities (Barman, 2023). The risks of smuggling, uncontrolled crossings, and other cross-border crimes are increasing, posing security challenges for both countries and fuelling mutual suspicion. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the region remains dire. The enclaves have long been deprived of basic civic amenities, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, and legal protections (Barman, 2023). Due to uncertainty about citizenship, they are seldom recognised as full members of any state, further marginalising their social and economic standing (Barman, 2014).

Taken together, the enclave issue has created a trust gap between the two countries, posing a major obstacle to bilateral relations. As the issue remained unresolved for a long time, it became a symbol of mutual distrust and remained a sensitive topic in diplomatic negotiations. Consequently, the enclave issue has caused a complex mix of administrative inefficiency, security threats, humanitarian crises, and political mistrust that has consistently hampered the normal development of Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Land Boundary Agreement (2015)

The Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 is seen as a historic and important solution to the long-standing enclave issue between India and Bangladesh. This complicated border issue, which remained unresolved for many years, was a major diplomatic obstacle to the relations between the two countries (Barman, 2023). After lengthy negotiations, mutual understanding, and political goodwill, the agreement was finally implemented, marking a significant achievement in South Asia's regional diplomacy.

The implementation of the LBA (2015) marks an important milestone in the history of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations in resolving territorial disputes. Under this agreement, both countries exchanged a total of 162 enclaves, thereby restoring their sovereign geographical integrity (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). One of the key aspects of this process was the residents' right in the enclaves to choose their citizenship, which is regarded as a rare example from a humanitarian perspective in International Law. Prioritising individual choice in determining citizenship reflects a humanitarian and rights-based approach rather than a state-centric border policy.

According to the 2011 Ministry of External Affairs, a total of 51,583 residents lived in these unsettled territories, which have long been de facto stateless. An important social trend in citizenship choice was observed after the exchange of enclaves. Of the 37,369 residents of the 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh, most obtained Bangladeshi citizenship through local social and cultural integration, while all 14,214 residents of the 51 Bangladeshi enclaves within India obtained Indian citizenship (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011; CONS, 2016). This trend indicates that the question of citizenship is not merely a legal or political issue; instead, it is closely tied to social relations, cultural identities, and local realities.

After nearly 68 years of legal isolation and deprivation of state services, the formalisation of citizenship for the enclave-dwellers marked a significant social and political shift. By acquiring citizenship, they not only gained legal identity but also gained access to local politics, voting rights, education, healthcare, and other state services. This process can be seen as an important step towards political empowerment and social inclusion.

The significance of this agreement goes beyond simply marking administrative boundaries or exchanging territory; it fosters a new environment of mutual trust and cooperation in India-Bangladesh relations by resolving a long-standing diplomatic issue. Defining clear boundaries improves border management and leads to major enhancements in law and order, border control, and administrative oversight, marking a significant change from the previous situation (Rabbani, 2024).

Furthermore, this agreement creates a new administrative and political environment for development activities in border areas. Administrative uncertainty has slowed infrastructure development, the expansion of public services, and the establishment of local governance structures in previously underdeveloped regions; however, the implementation of the agreement has opened opportunities for growth in these areas. This has increased the government's administrative presence and further strengthened efforts to ensure citizens' stability and security.

Overall, the 2015 LBA is a significant diplomatic milestone that has not only resolved a border dispute but also laid a new foundation for trust, cooperation, and regional stability in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The agreement shows that long-standing, complex border issues can be peacefully settled through mutual dialogue, diplomatic understanding, and political goodwill, and it also acts as a key example for resolving future border disputes.

Role in Strengthening Relations

The resolution of the enclave issue has had a significant, transformative impact on India-Bangladesh relations, strengthening the bilateral relationship in many ways. The peaceful and diplomatic settlement of a long-standing complex border dispute has played a key role in rebuilding mutual trust between the two countries (Nayar, 2020). Previously, this border issue was a major source of distrust, political tension, and diplomatic stalemate between the two countries. However, its successful resolution has demonstrated that even complex geopolitical problems can be solved peacefully through mutual dialogue, compromise, and political goodwill. This has enhanced the credibility of bilateral relations and established a positive, stable environment for future diplomatic cooperation.

At the same time, resolving the enclave issue is essential for improving border security and administrative efficiency. The border demarcation has led to better administrative control and more effective border management. In the past, the administrative isolation of the enclaves caused complications in border control, creating a favourable environment for illegal infiltration, smuggling, and other cross-border crimes. The re-demarcation of the border and administrative unification have considerably reduced these problems and strengthened coordination and cooperation between security agencies. As a result, the bilateral security relationship between the two countries has overall been reinforced.

Furthermore, border stability significantly boosts economic cooperation and regional connectivity. Previously, border uncertainty and administrative hurdles hampered trade, transport, and communication. With the resolution of the enclave issue, stability in border regions improved, fostering growth in commercial activities, border markets, transport routes, and regional communication networks between the two countries. This development provides a strong foundation for increased regional economic collaboration and connectivity.

The most important aspect is human development and social inclusion. The residents of the enclaves are formally recognised by the state as citizens and are included in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and administrative services (Barman, 2023; Nayar, 2020). After a long period of marginalisation, legal uncertainty, and exclusion from state services, they can participate in mainstream social and economic life. This process is an important step toward social inclusion, political participation, and human development.

Therefore, the resolution of the enclave issue is not merely a settlement of the border dispute; rather, it is a multidimensional diplomatic, administrative, economic, and humanitarian transformation process that has made Indo-Bangladesh relations more stable, cooperative, and trust-based. This resolution can also be regarded as an important paradigm for regional cooperation and border management in South Asia.

Critical Assessment

While the 2015 LBA is undoubtedly a historic step forward in Indo-Bangladesh relations, its implementation has encountered specific challenges. Although the agreement officially resolved a long-standing border dispute, some practical limitations have slightly diminished its effectiveness. In particular, the slow pace of the resettlement process remains a major obstacle. Issues such as granting citizenship to the enclaves, land transfer, and administrative integration have taken time to address, leading to prolonged uncertainty for the affected communities.

Significant deficiencies were also seen in infrastructure development. Due to long-term administrative isolation, these areas lacked basic facilities such as roads, electricity, education, and healthcare. Although rapid development was anticipated after the agreement, progress has been slow in reality, delaying improvements in residents' living standards. As a result, despite gaining citizenship, the expected social and economic changes have not been immediately visible in many cases (Bhattacharya, 2018).

Additionally, administrative coordination remains a major obstacle. Some initial inconsistencies have been observed in establishing effective governance in the newly integrated areas, developing local administrative capacity, and ensuring policy coordination (Bhattacharya, 2018). This has led to slow administrative procedures and delays in service delivery.

Another important question is whether all enclaves have benefited equally from the agreement. In reality, development activities have progressed rapidly in some areas, while in others they have moved more slowly. This disparity remains a challenge in ensuring fairness in development (Ferdoush, 2019). Overall, although the agreement is a significant diplomatic achievement, more targeted and effective efforts are needed in rehabilitation, infrastructure development, and administrative capacity building to realise its full potential.

Discussion

The discursive analysis of this study suggests that resolving the Chhitmahal issue has led to a multidimensional transformation in Indo-Bangladesh relations. Interpreting this resolution as merely solving a border dispute does not fully capture its true significance; rather, it signifies a fundamental shift in the nature, structure, and mutual understanding of bilateral relations. Specifically, this resolution indicates a “relational transformation,” where previous mistrust, border tensions, and administrative complexities have been replaced by a relationship based on cooperation, coordination, and mutual trust. The peaceful resolution of a long-standing and complex border issue reflects the diplomatic maturity, political will, and commitment to regional cooperation of both countries, setting a positive precedent for future bilateral collaboration.

From a theoretical perspective, this transformation can be explained through various theories of international relations. From a constructivist perspective, this change is especially significant because state behaviour is not solely driven by power or security; instead, shifts in concepts, identities, mutual understanding, and diplomatic mindsets play a crucial role. Granting citizenship to enclave-dwellers and integrating them into the state structure is not merely an administrative or legal act; it is a social and political process that redefines the relationship between the state and its citizens, with the state recognising its responsibility toward its border communities.

Conversely, this solution can also be viewed from a liberal perspective. According to liberal theory, states can reduce conflicts and increase cooperation through mutual efforts, economic interdependence, and institutional collaboration. Addressing the enclave issue improves border stability, which in turn creates opportunities for trade, communication, regional connectivity, and economic partnership. From this perspective, the LBA (2015) is not just a border agreement; rather, it provides an institutional foundation for expanding regional cooperation and economic integration.

However, it is also possible to analyse this solution from a realist perspective. According to realist theory, states primarily make decisions to ensure security, control borders, and protect strategic interests. From this perspective, the solution to the enclave problem can also be viewed as a strategic move to strengthen border control, reduce illegal activities, and enhance border security. In other words, this agreement has simultaneously served the state’s interests in three areas: humanitarian, economic, and security.

However, the long-term sustainability of this achievement cannot be guaranteed, especially given the political changes in Bangladesh in 2024. After the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government, there were signs of diplomatic tensions and policy uncertainties in Indo-Bangladesh relations during the interim government led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus. A change in government may lead to shifts in policy priorities, diplomatic stances, and the dynamics of bilateral relations, which could impact the pace and effectiveness of implementing initiatives from the previous government (Alam, 2024; Paul, 2024). Although international agreements are made between states and are not nullified by changes in government, political goodwill, mutual trust, and warm diplomatic relations are crucial to ensuring their continued implementation. Therefore, while resolving the enclave issue is an important milestone in Indo-Bangladesh relations, its long-term impact largely depends on the political situation and the continuity of bilateral relations.

This discussion demonstrates that Indo-Bangladesh relations depend not only on treaties or institutional frameworks but also on political realities, the leadership’s diplomatic vision, regional geopolitics, and mutual strategic interests. Therefore, while resolving the Chhitmahal issue is an important diplomatic milestone, ongoing diplomatic dialogue, mutual trust, regional cooperation, and political stability are essential for maintaining its long-term positive effects.

Conclusion

The analysis of this study shows that resolving the Chhitmahal issue marks a major diplomatic and political milestone in Indo-Bangladesh relations. It is not just about settling a longstanding border dispute; it also indicates a significant shift in bilateral relations, mutual understanding, and regional cooperation. By exchanging enclaves and granting citizenship, the two countries have provided a humanitarian, administrative, and diplomatic solution to the border problem, helping to build mutual trust and strengthen cooperative ties. Analysing this transformation from a theoretical perspective, it is clear that the constructivist view explains it most effectively, as a state’s behaviour is not driven solely by security or power concerns. Instead, changes in identity, ideas, mutual understanding, and diplomatic attitudes play a crucial role. From a liberal perspective, this can be seen as an example of cooperation, border stability, and enhanced regional economic connectivity. Conversely, a pragmatic view considers it a strategic move to ensure border control, security, and territorial integrity. Therefore, it is most reasonable to analyse this phenomenon within a multidimensional theoretical framework. Despite this progress, some limitations remain, including slow rehabilitation, inadequate infrastructure development, and administrative coordination challenges, indicating that the

implementation of the agreement still needs improvement. Additionally, political changes can affect the continuity of bilateral relations and policy stability. Overall, resolving the enclave issue has transformed Indo-Bangladesh relations from confrontational border politics to cooperative regional engagement; however, sustained diplomatic dialogue, mutual trust, and effective policy enforcement are essential for maintaining this progress over the long term.

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