

# **NEPAL-BANGLADESH RELATIONSHIP: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION**

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## **Introduction**

Nepal and Bangladesh have been members of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) and South Asian Sub Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) and have enjoyed a bilateral relation since 8th April 1972. The pillars of this relationship are mostly based on cordiality, goodwill, mutual respect, mutual understanding and cooperation. The physical distance between two countries is approximately around 23 kilometers. They are separated by the Indian Territory known as Siliguri Corridor. The relationship between these countries is strong due to a shared culture, visits and interactions between government agencies and the mutual trust between people of both the countries. The countries are closer in terms of proximity but the economic relationship between both the countries are not as strong as expected. The government policy makers and private sector entrepreneurs of both countries largely believe that the enhanced economic relation between Nepal and Bangladesh may have considerable contribution in terms of economic development of both the countries.

The economic cooperation between two countries is presently narrow, and the trade of goods and services is limited, but the reality is that both the countries have enough potential to exploit each other's resources for mutual benefit, the power sector, but also from the possibilities of trade of goods and services. The economic cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh is

mostly affected by their national policies supporting trade and commerce, infrastructure development, regional agreements and geopolitical set-up. So, it is very important to diagram the various dimensions of the Nepal-Bangladesh relationship, and find the prospects and challenges for better economic cooperation, so that both the countries experience enhanced economic relation to support national economic development efforts, considering the increasing trends in present days. In this research paper, the researcher puts his efforts in identifying the various dynamics of the Nepal-Bangladesh relationship, and the probable role of external factors to facilitate trade and commerce. At the same time, the researcher analyzes the prospects and challenges of the Nepal-Bangladesh relationship for better economic cooperation.

### **Objectives of the Study and Hypothesis**

The broad objective of this research paper is to study the present state of the Nepal- Bangladesh relationship and identify various prospects and challenges associated with it for the better economic cooperation. The specific objectives of this research paper are to examine present state of Nepal-Bangladesh relationship, to identify a major area of economic interest for better economic cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh and to analyze major prospects and challenges for better economic cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh.

### **Theoretical/Analytical Framework**

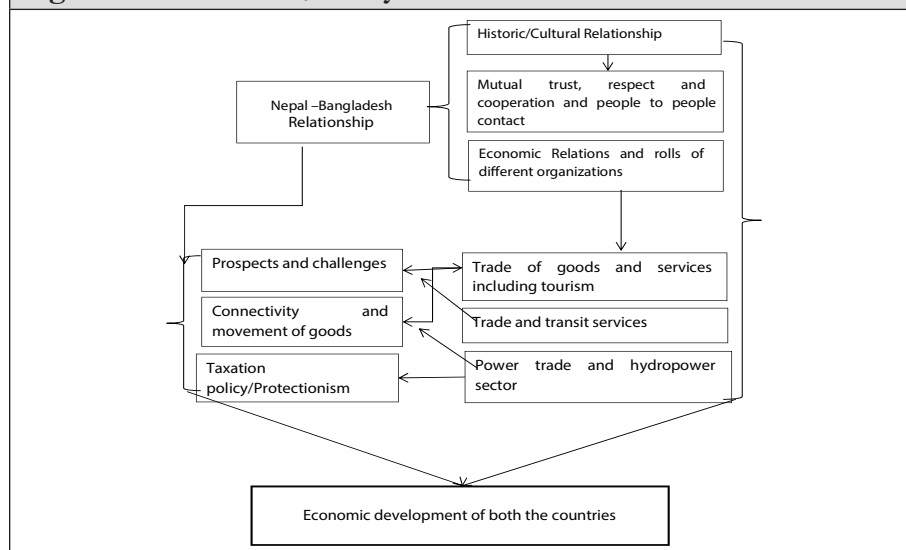
The theoretical/analytical framework used in this research paper will give an overview on the sequential development of this paper. To logically and sequentially develop this research paper the researcher has followed the following theoretical/analytical framework.

The framework is conceptualized for analytical assessment of different perspective of Nepal-Bangladesh relationship in Figure 1. The bilateral

relationship between Nepal and Bangladesh stands at the solid foundation of historical and cultural linkage between people of both the countries since long time. The relationship is more strengthen by the mutual trust, respect and people to people contact.

The framework begins by first analyzing the relationship between Nepal and Bangladesh which is more strengthen by the mutual trust, respect and people to people contact. Next, the mutual personal cooperation between the countries is also looked at, because people in the countries share a lot of personal bonds. Now, the trade and transit is a major part of this co-operation, be it the trade of goods and services, or trade of other resources like hydroelectricity and ports. This is connected to how much of the trade is facilitated by the policies present, and what the major hindrances are to the conduct of such trades. Both countries also share a vast tourist population, so it is also important to take them into account. The prospects and challenges of these trades is then identified so that efficiency is given priority. Policies that present roadblocks to this agenda must be eliminated, and policies that show promise should be brought forward to accelerate the movement of goods and strengthen the present connectivity.

**Figure 1: Theoretical/Analytical Framework**



## **Research Methodology**

This research paper is qualitative in nature and is prepared by collecting relevant information/data from various secondary sources such as books, articles, news, on-line documents different article reviews and information. Efforts have also been made to include information collected through consultation with some key personalities of both the government and private interpreter and descriptive analytical method with adequate content analysis was used to address the core objective of this research paper.

## **Nepal-Bangladesh Relationship: A Historical Perspective**

The People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal are two sovereign and friendly countries that have been progressing since the founding of Bangladesh in 1971. The historical relations that the countries have enjoyed begins with the visit to Nepal of Atish Dipankar, a Buddhist scholar from Bikrampur (Bangladesh) in the 12th century. Since the history, the Bengal Delta was integrated into a network of long distance trade, cultural exchange and travel from Tibet and Nepal in the north before the battle of Plessey in 1757. But, it was stopped by the British colonial rule and not fully functional afterwards. Also, after the division of east and west Bengal, new taxation and land reform in 1905 and Hindu and Muslim division strategy of British had led to a growing relationship gaps between these two countries.

The Kingdom of Nepal became one of the first nations to recognize Bangladesh as a sovereign nation on January 16, 1972 and established a bilateral trade relation on 8th April 1972. Earlier, in 1963, Nepal and Pakistan had signed agreements to recognize each other in the "Most Favored Nation" status of importance for developing trade and cooperation. This was the first initiative taken by both governments to connect two countries since the British rule.

Even though relations had improved considerably after the signing of the agreements to develop trade, transit, and civil aviation after independence of Bangladesh in 1976, it was not followed up with considerable effort because of the political situation of both the countries at that time and inefficiency of bureaucracy in both the governments. The highlight of the problem was that the two nations are separated by the “Siliguri Corridor” - a small stretch of territory between southern Nepal and northern Bangladesh of physical distance of only 23 kilometers (third closest neighbor), which, however, belongs to India, and the friction and misunderstanding between the India-Nepal-Bangladesh relations and big brothers attitude particularly in the Indian bureaucracy, frequently has posed problems in developing this trade route.

### **Status of Bangladesh and Nepal**

Nepal and Bangladesh have shared similar views on international communities such as the UN, NAM, SAARC, because of common interests, reflected by the fact that the frequency of visits at various levels in the field of trade, joint-industrial projects, science and technology exchange programs, cultural exchange visits etc. are common and build better relations within these communities. However, it has come into view that Nepal-Bangladesh must shift more focus in building relations regarding socio-economic activities to benefit each other. One key issue that Nepal faces - its land-locked geographic situation - has always asked for facilitation and generosity from its friendly neighbor, India. Bangladesh has free access to the sea, and therefore socio-economic relations must be built to solve this issue in particular so that Nepal has better access to sea trade routes and can create better bonds with both India and Bangladesh.

The transit facilities to erstwhile East Pakistan via Radhikapur in India, was not complied with until after the emergence of Bangladesh, even though Nepal had repeatedly requested for the required provisions to be made. Also, trade agreements signed in 1978 and 1996 between Nepal and India

as well as trade agreements signed in 1998 and 2010 between Bangladesh and India have tried to rationalize the problems inherent in Bangladesh-Nepali trade.

Recently, the bilateral relations between Nepal and Bangladesh have seen a slight increase. Increased numbers of air-flights, the Nepal-Bangladesh youth conference, Rope4 for the aim of “Mission Himalaya”, the trail run of a Bangladesh-India-Nepal bus service, agreement on receiving of 500 MW electricity from Nepal and numbers of trade fairs are the witnesses of strengthening bilateral relation. However, the commercial trade route that includes Kakarbhitta (Nepal), Siliguri (India) and Bangabandhu (Bangladesh) as the border points is still not fully functional, even though all these three nations are the members of the SAARC and BIMSTEC as well as BBIN.

A unique feature of South Asian politics is that the countries have not been able to establish well-made government treaties, however, the personal bond between members of these countries is particularly strong. Nepal and Bangladesh have porous borders with India due to strong people-to-people, cultural, and socio-economic bonds. In the end, the more responsibility lies on India to ensure the trilateral relation. However, Nepal-Bangladesh relations have always been in priority for both the countries.

### **Key Areas of Economic Cooperation**

Nepal and Bangladesh can generate strong development synergy through effective cooperation in electricity, tourism, trade, transportation, investment and finance. Since Asia-Pacific is becoming the hub of global economic and strategic entrepreneurship, economic integration and acquisition of strategic resources - primarily energy - is raising powers in the region. South Asia has largely experienced recent rapid growth of world trade the past few years which has still not caught up to globalization. Conscious efforts are to be undertaken to deepen and broaden the existing intraregional economic relations. In this regard, exploitation of Nepal's

hydroelectricity, tourism, and water resources and Bangladesh's land, port facilities, and connectivity with other part of the region, will play the vibrant role to boost the economy of both the countries including India.

The 7th five years plan of the Bangladesh concentrates on international transport, infrastructure, tourism, and information technology with the exploitation of private investment of the country and abroad. At present, Nepal's government initiatives focus on the establishment of connectivity between India and China specially to maintain access to the Bay of Bengal through road and rail. Similarly recent deal of Nepal with China for allowing the Chinese sea port for Nepal is the great hope for the better future. This endeavor has seen the future prosperity of economic cooperation between two countries. The objective is to significantly increase both labor productivity and sectorial productivity which will prepare the countries to compete in the global market, ultimately making long-term economic development easy.

Socio-economically, Nepal and Bangladesh share many characteristics and can learn from each other. Some shared issues and concerns include the rush to urbanization, information revolution, unemployment, low level of tax revenue, lack of infrastructure, quality and range of education, skill manpower, and fight against corruption, perception on good governance, natural disaster and climate change. Now, Bangladesh is in the process of developing nation, which has resulted in economic transformation through social change and has significantly progressed life expectancy.

**Key Areas for Economic Cooperation:** Nepal and Bangladesh have plenty of common areas for economic cooperation. However, these areas have not been exploited, and are in dire need of diversification of traded products. Nepal is known to have a comparative advantage in products like handmade woolen carpets, Pashmina products, handicrafts, gold and silver jewelry, tourism, hydro-electricity, and agro-processing industries. Similarly, Bangladesh presently exports pharmaceuticals, ceramics, light engineering, leather goods, jute products, and ICT and sea foods.

Bangladesh is also famous for Jamdane saree, and chemical fertilizer, which are high demand area of Nepal. There are some key areas where Nepal and Bangladesh reap up further.

**Agriculture Base Equipment and Products:** Due to proximity of culture and same food habits, a lot of primary agricultural products can be exchanged in between Nepal and Bangladesh. It is important that a joint institutional mechanism be restored, as the current mechanism is inadequate to strengthen this sector

**Animal Proteins:** Bangladesh has achieved self-sufficiency in animal protein like fish and meat productions. Bangladesh can export animal protein product to other countries including Nepal.

**Herbal and Herbal Products:** A lot of medical herbs found in the wild are recognized in the international arena as cures to various diseases and deficiency. Bangladeshi tradition is also rooted in herbs and homeopathic medicines, all of which can be exported from Nepal.

**Travel and Tourism Services:** Nepal is also a gateway to Tibet for South Asia. Local and foreign investments in the tourism sector are soaring in Nepal, including many new foreign hotel chains, foreign restaurant chains, and resorts/guest houses, as well as accommodation, tourism services and skills development. Opportunities on hotel and tourism consulting services, sharing of tourists, hotel management and tourism technology applications, skills training and development and hospitality business have seen significantly.

**Medical Tourism:** Nepal and Bangladesh can work on joint venture for a medical city, because Nepal has a very good climatic condition for medical cities and varieties of treatments.

**Information and Communication Technology:** Nepal definitely can seek Bangladesh expertise in this sector if initiative is taken from both the governments.



**Hydroelectricity:** Nepal and Bangladesh can work together for power production and utilization of hydroelectricity to fulfil Bangladesh's demand.

**Climate Change Issues:** There is a strong case for regional forestry action program for the entire Himalayan region starting from the mountain range in Nepal through Terai plains of Nepal and India and ending with the whole catchment area of Ganga and Brahmaputra. Implementation of this action plan may mitigate the bad effect of climate change into whole region.

**Pharmaceutical Sector:** Nepal can provide raw materials for these drug factories in Bangladesh and bring cheap refined drugs from Bangladesh

**Educational Cooperation:** Every year hundreds of Nepalese students come to Bangladesh to study medicine, nursing, dentistry, engineering and other courses. This can be made more planned and regulated.

Although there are lots of areas have identified and observed, Nepal and Bangladesh present economic cooperation is very narrow and negligible; however, both the countries have their own and combined potentialities to exploit and transfer. High growth is required to create enough employment, quality education, reduce inequality etc. It is only possible when country can exploit the economical key areas rightly within the country and abroad and create opportunities. But currently in both the countries, optimum key areas are neglected, so it needs to bring them into the right path.

### **Prospects and Challenges for Economic Cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh**

Trade of Goods and Services Nepal has emerged as a potential export destination for Bangladeshi products. According to Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh data, exports to Nepal stood at \$47.4 million in FY2016-17, up by 165%, from the last fiscal year. If both the governments addressed major challenges mainly like reducing import duty, non-tariff

barriers and the shipment process, the export to Nepal will rise dramatically. In the meantime, there will be lots of product familiarization program required to operate in Nepal for branding Bangladeshi product.

**Figure 2: Bangladesh and Nepal Trade over the Years**



It is reality that Nepal's import and export with Bangladesh totally dominated very few products relating to agriculture. This shows it is very essential to diversify the trade into other many prosperous areas. If the special look in the Figure 2 is given, Bangladesh had overcome the trade deficit with Nepal from 2013 and continuing it till date. This clearly indicated that the trade of goods and services are not exploited as much what level should be. For example, the business community reported that the export potential of the selected food items to Nepal can be triple of the actual volume presently.

### Trade and Transit Services

Nepal has agreed on trade treaties with 17 countries and transit treaties with three countries, namely India, Bangladesh, and China because of its landlocked status. The trade treaty mainly provides reciprocal arrangement on primary and agricultural commodities, rule of origin criteria, additional preference to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) product, specified trade corridors and provision of Duty Refund Procedure (DRP). Similarly transit treaty provides lease condition for land and infrastructure, arrangement

of custom clearance and condition for ware house management. In this regards our level is to be improved accordingly.

## **Power and Hydropower Sector**

Bangladesh is a nation that requires a lot of electricity in South Asia. Presently Bangladesh generates 88 percent of electricity by natural gas and due to the huge population but limited gas and coal resources, is not the solution for long term. Bangladesh also has no minerals except for large reserve of natural gas, and some interior coal at great deposits. So, Bangladesh has to invest Nepal's hydro project without delay.

## **Taxation and other Arrangements**

Nepal and Bangladesh have worked on the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA), a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the ratification to BBIN- MVA and benefits from these agreements can be taken by both the countries, but yet to be exploited as leveled.

The current trade barriers included a very large sensitive list under SAFTA which meant that those items included under the list cannot be traded duty-free. At present, SAFTA remains the only agreement under which Nepal and Bangladesh trade takes place, additionally, a bilateral FTA needs to be signed to ease the tariff barriers between two countries like with India. Among non-tariff barriers to trade, Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) and Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT) were the predominant ones and there is no agreement currently that covers adequately these issue areas, so the protocols need to be crafted carefully in this regards, taking care of trade and transit facilitation.

## **India Factor**

Nepal's dependency on India has overshadowed significance of Bangladesh in terms of sea trade for Nepal. During the 1990's, Nepal used Chittagong port to transport goods even though the Mongla port was even closer to Nepal, because it did not have enough infrastructure. Presently, India has had a keen interest in developing existing and new ports in Bangladesh and investing in hydropower of Nepal to boost development in its landlocked north-east and north India including Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to support the 'Act East Policy'. Now, both the countries are required to more proactive to balance the India Further initiations at high level institutions both in Nepal and Bangladesh while ensuring the support from India are needed.

## **China Factor**

Present continuous growth and economic relation of China and India, economically, Nepal can be the gate way to South Asia for China, geographically, Nepal can be the bridge for China-India-Bangladesh economic relation who leads to enhance the tripartite relation between not only Bangladesh-India-China, but also can bring Pakistan into the economic umbrella to make prosperity into whole region.

China is developing port facilities in Bangladesh and rail road infrastructure in Nepal and India's 'Act East policy' basically to develop own north east region, cooperation with neighbor especially ground connectivity with Bangladesh and power supply from Nepal. In this regards, both the countries want to invest more money in Bangladesh and Nepal to take resources and do partnership in their own favor.

Many smaller countries thought that Chinese presence is an opportunity, but the countries like Nepal and Bangladesh surrounded economically and socially with big neighbor India would not be the favorable for them in every aspects. It can be an asset for neighbors like Nepal and Bangladesh

if they are able to exploit the opportunity for mutually beneficial economic partnerships. As an attached neighbor of China, Nepal can take more advantages and can transfer to Bangladesh through sharing on the numbers of trades.

Primary goal of china's South Asia policy is to steadily expand its economic influence in the region; checking India's progress without diverting the normal course of Sino-India relation. In addition, economic nature of strategic location of Nepal and Bangladesh, connection with its two problematic Xinjiang and Tibet region and OBOR are the few factors which direct the Chinese policy towards Nepal and Bangladesh.

But including above mentioned fact China has special views towards Bangladesh and Nepal for expansion of economic periphery to trade with North and North East Indian states having population about 600 million. So, Nepal and Bangladesh are not only valuable for China but also similar importance for India for their own developments.

## **Prosperities and Challenges**

Geographically, Nepal is crucial for security perspective of Beijing and meantime good hub for hydro power. The main interest of China in Bangladesh is to use its natural resources in her favor. However, for Nepal, present continuous economic growth and economic relation of China and India and lying between them, can "attract attrition" economically. In the meantime, now a days Nepal and Bangladesh both are the reliable partners of China relating to the economic activities and OBOR.

However, activities on youth conferences, trial bus service, frequent high level visits etc are the prosperity and sea trade through Bangladesh to Nepal, connectivity, supply of hydroelectricity etc are the challenges for prosperity. So, the inclusive equal participatory approach and without doubting and dominating each other is paramount important, however, China's positive perception and good relation between India and China

will make conducive environment for Bangladesh and Nepal in this regard. It is important not only for Bangladesh and Nepal but also for India and China to join ventures for development of the whole region as well. However, China and India had been using Nepal and Bangladesh for their own interests since the long time but time has come to seek more economic benefits ourselves.

## **Way Forward**

### **India and China**

Nepal can be the bridge for China-India economic relations and can lead to enhance the tripartite relation between not only Bangladesh-India-Nepal, but also bring Pakistan and India into the common economic umbrella to make prosperity in the whole SAARC region. In this regards, Nepal and Bangladesh should play the proactive roles rather reactive presently.

Since the ancient history, SAARC people could freely move across the region for their trade, investment and exchange of culture. Our proximity and similarity in literature, social, cultural behavioral and ritual values distinctly prove the close bond. The restriction on such movement is hindering our regional and individual nation's developments.

If India is apprehensive of being encircled by China's OBOR program, China is also suspicious about involvement of India in alternative quadrilateral forum with USA, Australia, and Japan for the interest of Indo pacific region. Chinese Dragon and Indian elephant must not fight but dance together, so that Nepal and Bangladesh can also join and entertain.

### **Economy**

The parallel swift on economic growth and political development is needed for Bangladesh and Nepal for sustainable development. Because both the countries enjoyed major political change but could not match

with economic growth and did not satisfy the aspiration of the people. Any temporary success in the economic field without parallel political development may, in fact, frustrate sustainable long-term development.

So coordinated planning of energy development and supply and holistic approach on forest, land and water resources management is extremely essential. In this regards, the joint initiative and role of Bangladesh and Nepal is paramount important. In the meantime, the foreign corporate sector investors face difficulties on legal framework for setting up of power projects in Nepal mainly during license granting procedure including those from Bangladesh

The joint river commission is an appropriate tool if there is political understanding among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal if possible China can be included for sustainable, trustworthy and fast progress.

The MoU between India and Bangladesh is essential to allow Nepal to use the railway routes between Biraul-Radhikapur and Rohangpur-Singabad. There is also a discrepancy of the gauge between these two railways that needs to be fixed. Presently only one route exists between Nepal and Bangladesh the Kakarbitta-Phulbari-Banglabandh land route. It has been operational since 1998 but there are many problems with the system, and it demands scientific execution; a procedure on the ground as well as good coordination and cooperation among the bureaucratic peoples of respected countries who are facing issues regarding hegemony.

## **Infrastructure and Trade**

There needs to be an improvement in hard infrastructure as well as development of soft infrastructure if the current situation is to be improved. International Banks including Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank can be one of the potential avenues for raising the finance and capital in order to do this. Development of soft infrastructure between Nepal and Bangladesh can include more institutional and direct investment in each

other's countries, enhanced trade in services, exchange of ICT, tourism and easing of visa procedures and tariff hurdles.

## **Recommendations**

### **Solution to SAARC Problem**

Address the common problem of SAARC and develop energy trade and cooperation with establishing SAARC electric highway by harmonizing legal and regulatory frameworks and carry out complete studies and prepare comprehensive energy database. We also need to address the technical, financial, economic and institutional issues relevant to SAARC and search for opportunity for private sector.

## **Research**

Any denial of conclusions from research on economics and trade must be dealt with accordingly. Such actions have led to a poor development of relations due to the bull-headed nature of politics, and scientific research has frequently been ignored for the sake of party or personal benefit.

## **Good Policies**

Nepal and Bangladesh should concentrate to make viable and workable laws, rules and policies, compatible with national and international rules and regulation, which support to boost trade and investment including people's free movements and protection of their investments.

## **Trade through Partnerships**

Nepal and Bangladesh require to pursue a strategic trade scheme that will enable them to take advantage of emerging opportunities



through partnerships. It needs the trilateral investment mechanism to ensure the development of all the sectors. Both should have proactive partnership in sub- regional initiatives such as SAARC, BBIN-MVA and BIMISTEC.

### **Investment Friendly Environment**

Nepal and Bangladesh should work to decrease the amount and layers of tariffs to make it convenient for trading partners. We should motivate entrepreneurs by expanding existing production capacity to stimulate growth in the economy. Bilateral agreements in the potential gray areas with complementary approach to exploit the neglected fields and tripartite agreements with India is needed.

### **Strengthen Ethos**

Inadequate institutional capacity, trust deficit and traditional mindset have led to the weakening of Nepal-Bangladesh relations even though the countries have close bonds and share support of their people. So, it needs to reinstate without delay to fight for common agendas and strengthen the economic cooperation.

### **Indian Co-operation**

Last but not least, no plan can be set forward without India coming forward and helping form policies and show interest in development. The physical land that separates Nepal and Bangladesh remains in Indian possession, making it crucial for India to show support for any sort of trade that is supposed to be developed between these countries. Our political will and level of diplomacy really needs to be high standard and all possible common forum should be put in the place when as required.

## Conclusion

A unique feature of South Asian politics is that the countries have not been able to establish well-made government treaties, however the personal bond between members of these countries is particularly strong. Nepal and Bangladesh have porous borders with India due to strong people-to-people, cultural, and socio-economic bonds. In the end, the responsibility also lies on India to ensure the trilateral investment proposal.

South Asia has a number of economic forum like SAARC, SASEC, BBIN, BIMSTEC, SAFTA etc, but growth of intra-regional trade has been negligible. In this context, Nepal and Bangladesh should concentrate their efforts and take initiative for preparing comprehensive strategy to enhance and stimulate intra-region cooperation and investment. Bangladesh and Nepal can play a coordinating and leading role for promoting more effective cooperation under SAARC for the potential areas of cooperation and collaboration of tourism, transport, energy, environment, and trade and investment.

The role of China and India for the economic prosperity of Nepal and Bangladesh is vital because the small economic policies and trade activities of these two countries have severely affected the economic prosperity of Nepal and Bangladesh. So, our leaders, planners, as well as bureaucrats should more cautious when balancing relations such that this economic co-operation can exploit India and China through lessons learned from the past.

There are a lots of productive economic key areas are seen in between Nepal and Bangladesh, but they are not exploited as well as they could be up to a required level. In this regards, all levels from the government, bureaucrats, businessmen, to personal relations need to be approached seriously, so that we can develop connectivity for movement of goods and services, ease trade and transit services, make simple taxation policy as level as possible, and ensure freedom of movement to find out the possible arrangements to strengthen the economic cooperation with the consideration of the geo-political location Nepal as well as Bangladesh.

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