**Fifty Years of Japan-Bangladesh Relations**

[Mehjabin Banu](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/mehjabin-banu/)

February 10, 2022

Today, February 10, marks the 5oth anniversary of the establishment of Bangladesh-Japan diplomatic relations. Despite the huge differences in economic positions, the strong desire to strengthen the existing good relations and the close cooperation between the governments and peoples of the two Asian countries is reflected in the various arrangements for the celebration of the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Japan’s friendly state relations with Bangladesh began with the recognition of Bangladesh on February 10, 1972, but it began almost a hundred years ago. Japan has had very good relations with the Bengalis since before the formation of independent Bangladesh. At one time many people from this part of India used to go to Japan for technical education and that trend continues to this day.

Even during the liberation war of Bangladesh, the friendly attitude of Japan has played a very helpful role. To help Bangladesh, the Japanese students stood by Bangladesh at that time, saving their tiffin money. And soon after independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman paid a fruitful visit to Japan to keep this relationship beautiful in 1973 which laid the rock-solid foundation of the bilateral relations between the two countries. Subsequently, during the tenure of different governments, the Government of Bangladesh maintained good relations with Japan. Even after independence, every head of government who came to power in Bangladesh visited Japan.

The Bangladesh Bank (Central Bank of Bangladesh) has already introduced a number of Tk50 commemorative silver coins marking a half-century of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Japan, and sell each coin at a Tk5,000 rate.

The Japanese embassy in Dhaka has published a commemorative photo book on the historic visit of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Japan on the auspicious occasion of the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations between the two countries.

At present, the investment of Japanese companies in Bangladesh is increasing. Along with various types of investments, Bangladesh is also receiving a lot of direct assistance from the Japanese government. Just as various products are imported from Japan, the export of Bangladeshi products to Japan has also increased. An analysis of the economy and trade shows that this type of Bangladesh-Japan relationship has reached a new level in investment and trade.

Although economic cooperation and bilateral trade interests predominate in the modern stage of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the foundations of the present relationship are deeply rooted. Among the OECD member countries, industrialized Japan was the first to recognize Bangladesh.

Prime Minister of Bangladesh paid a visit to Japan in 2019. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reached Japan last May 28 in the first leg of her 12-day tour of Japan, Saudi Arabia and Finland. The object of her Japan visit was to join the summit of Future Asia, but in a real sense, it was a bilateral tour.  During this visit, Japan has agreed to invest heavily in the communication and power sectors of Bangladesh. Among these, Bangladesh has signed agreements with Japan for several other projects including Matarbari and Seaport Development Project, Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Line-1. Work on several projects has already begun. Notable among them is the construction of a 1200 MW power project in Cox’s Bazar area with the help of Japan. In addition to these, there are indications that a number of larger investments have been made by Japan.

As a potential hub of the regional economy, Matarbari Port would connect South Asia and South-East Asia. In other words, it could re-shape Bangladesh as a trading nation deeply incorporated in the inter-regional and global value chains.

Whereas in 2008, 2010 about 70 and 83 Japanese companies respectively were operating in different types of business and trade in Bangladesh, this number has increased at a huge rate till last 2021. At present, about 321 Japanese companies are working in Bangladesh.

Popular Japanese motorcycle brand Honda has set up its motorcycle factory in Bangladesh. At the same time, another Japanese brand Yamaha factory is being built by a group called ACI. Yamaha Corporation is collaborating with ACI Group to build this factory.

On the other hand, Japan Tobacco, a national tobacco producer, bought Akij Group, a very old tobacco business in Bangladesh. In this tobacco project, Japan Tobacco has invested about 147.6 million US dollars in Bangladesh. In addition, Nippon Ispat, a steel producer, is setting up a joint venture with McDonald’s Steel Building Products, a local company. According to the data of Japan, in the last 2018, various Japanese companies have invested about one thousand seven hundred and fifty crore Japanese Yen in Bangladesh.

Just as the Japanese have a strong role to play in the development of Thailand and Malaysia, it is hoped that the Japanese will continue to be interested in investing in Bangladesh. This investment and trade of Japan and Bangladesh is not only one-sided. According to the data, in 2018, Bangladesh exported goods worth about 117 million US dollars to Japan and this number is about 23 per cent more than the previous year. On the other hand, about 187 million dollars worth of goods were imported to Bangladesh from Japan at the same time.

Since its independence, Bangladesh has become the largest recipient of Japan’s official development assistance (ODA). The construction of the Kanchpur, Meghna, and Gumti second bridges and the rehabilitation of the existing bridge project are excellent examples of the Japanese ODA. Those bridges have significantly reduced the travel time between Dhaka and Chattogram.

Bangladesh earns a large amount of foreign exchange by exporting manpower. However, in this regard, Bangladesh’s manpower export to Japan is quite disappointing. The number of Bangladeshis in Japan is very low where many people from other countries are constantly going to Japan. However, one of the main reasons is the lack of skilled workers. Most people in Japan who go to work from different countries have a lot of skills in that particular job. Since then, the Bangladeshi manpower has not yet acquired such skills. Also learning Japanese is very difficult for Bengalis.

According to the media report, in the Japanese FY2020, the government of Japan provided 373.2 billion Japanese yen ($3.423 billion) to Bangladesh as project loans and financial assistance for Covid-19 countermeasures. This amount means that Bangladesh has become the largest recipient, overtaking India, on a single Japanese fiscal year basis for the first time in the history of the yen loan.

The Japanese government has decided to provide US$ 9 million to assist WFP and IOM for their operations in support of Bangladesh. Among the assistance, approximately US$ 4.55 million will be provided to WFP to develop agricultural infrastructure, strengthen market linkage with rural farmers and improve the food value chain in Cox’s Bazar, Ishwardi, and Patuakahali districts

The government of Japan and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have contributed to the development of Bangladesh through loans, grant aid, and dispatch of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in various fields, including education, health, water/sanitation, and agriculture.

Japan is the largest export market for Bangladesh in Asia. Over the last 10 years, the export figures have doubled and reached $1.2 billion. The main export items are textile, ready-made garments, and leather products. These sectors will continue to secure a significant position, and the key is to establish the brand image by increasing productivity and assuring better quality.

Pharmaceuticals, agricultural and fishery products, and the food industry have high potential. Bangladesh’s marvellous mangoes are yet to enter the Japanese market. Once exported, Bangladesh’s mangoes and lychees will undoubtedly be popular among Japan’s consumers. Japan and Bangladesh can work together in the sectors of Rohingya refugee crisis solution, expanding of blue economy, countering terrorism etc. The government of Japan has decided to extend an emergency aid grant of $2M for the support of the displaced “Rohingya” in Bhasan Char. Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina on February 08, sought Japan’s support for an early voluntary and sustainable repatriation of forcibly displaced Rohingyas to their homeland Myanmar as Dhaka and Tokyo share common views on resolving the crisis. One day, the bilateral cooperation would turn into bilateral strategic ties. Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina said already that the solid foundation of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Japan is poised to be raised from ‘comprehensive partnership’ to ‘strategic partnership’ in the near future.

*The writer is a teacher.*