

State Governments and Foreign Policy: The Contribution of the Left Front in West Bengal to India–Bangladesh Cooperation

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Abstract

In India, foreign policy is mainly the responsibility of the central government. However, state governments located near international borders also play an important role in maintaining relations with neighbouring countries. West Bengal shares a long border with Bangladesh and has deep historical, cultural and economic connections with the country. During the long rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)–led Left Front government (1977–2011), the state government made several efforts that indirectly helped improve relations between India and Bangladesh. The Left Front government supported policies that encouraged cross-border trade, cultural exchange and people-to-people contact. Because of the close cultural and linguistic ties between West Bengal and Bangladesh, the state government often promoted cooperation in areas such as education, literature and cultural programs. These activities helped create goodwill and mutual understanding between people on both sides of the border. The government also played a role in managing border-related issues such as migration, refugee settlement and local economic development in border districts. By improving rural development, local administration and border infrastructure, the state helped maintain stability in the region. This stability was important for maintaining peaceful relations between the two countries.

In some cases, the state government also expressed its views on major bilateral issues such as river water sharing and border management. Although the final decisions were taken by the central government, the opinions of the West Bengal government were important because the outcomes directly affected the people of the state. Overall, the experience of the Left Front government in West Bengal shows that state governments can influence foreign relations in indirect but meaningful ways. Through regional cooperation, cultural exchange and border management, the state government contributed to strengthening cooperation and understanding between India and Bangladesh. This case highlights the growing importance of subnational actors in shaping international relations in a federal country like India.

Keywords: *Border Management, Cultural Exchange, Cross-Border Cooperation, Regional Trade, Subnational Diplomacy*

Date of Submission: 22-03-2026

Date of acceptance: 04-04-2026

I. Introduction

Relations between India and Bangladesh are very important in South Asia. The two countries share a long border, historical connections, and strong cultural ties. Many political, economic, and social issues between the two countries are connected to the border region. Because of this, the Indian state of West Bengal plays an important role in shaping practical aspects of India–Bangladesh relations. Although the central government mainly controls foreign policy in India, state governments located near international borders often influence cross-border cooperation. From 1977 to 2011, West Bengal was governed by the Left Front. During this long period, the state government developed many policies that affected relations with Bangladesh. Issues such as border management, trade, migration, cultural exchange, and regional connectivity require coordination between the state and national governments. The Left Front leadership believed that peaceful cooperation with neighbouring countries was important for economic development and regional stability.

Leaders like Jyoti Basu often emphasized the importance of friendly relations with Bangladesh. The government encouraged cross-border trade, cultural interaction, and communication between people on both sides of the border. These initiatives helped improve understanding and cooperation between the two regions. This article examines how the Left Front government of West Bengal contributed to India–Bangladesh relations. It focuses on the role of the state government in promoting border stability, economic cooperation, cultural

exchange, and regional connectivity. The discussion shows that state governments can play a supportive role in foreign policy through regional initiatives and cooperation with the central government.

The Contribution of the Left Front in West Bengal to India–Bangladesh Cooperation

1. Role of State Governments in Foreign Policy

In India, foreign policy is mainly controlled by the central government. However, state governments located along international borders often play an important supporting role. West Bengal shares a long border with Bangladesh, and therefore, many issues such as trade, migration, border management, and cultural exchange directly affect the state. Because of these geographical and social connections, the government of West Bengal has historically had an indirect influence on India's relations with Bangladesh. During the rule of the Left Front, this influence became more visible. The Left Front government governed West Bengal from 1977 to 2011 and developed strong administrative and political networks in border districts. These districts frequently faced cross-border issues such as movement of people, trade activities, and security concerns. The state government regularly communicated with the central government to address these matters. In many situations, the state administration provided information, recommendations, and local perspectives to the national government. This helped policymakers in New Delhi understand the practical realities of the border region.

The Left Front government also believed that cooperation with Bangladesh was important for peace and economic development in eastern India. Therefore, it often supported friendly relations between the two countries. Through policy discussions, official visits, and communication with central authorities, the state government encouraged policies that promoted cooperation rather than conflict. This process is often described as subnational diplomacy, where regional governments influence international relations in indirect ways. Another important role of the state government was the management of local development in border areas. Roads, markets, transport facilities, and communication systems were improved in several border districts. These developments supported trade and social interaction between communities on both sides of the border. By improving infrastructure and administrative coordination, the Left Front government helped create conditions that encouraged better relations between India and Bangladesh. Thus, although foreign policy remained a central subject, the experience of West Bengal shows that state governments can contribute meaningfully to international cooperation. The Left Front government's policies and administrative initiatives helped strengthen regional stability and promoted positive engagement between India and Bangladesh.

2. Political Leadership and Regional Diplomacy

Political leadership played an important role in shaping relations between India and Bangladesh at the regional level. One of the most influential leaders during the Left Front period in West Bengal was Jyoti Basu, who served as Chief Minister from 1977 to 2000. Basu believed that friendly relations with neighboring countries were essential for regional development, peace, and economic cooperation. His political vision encouraged constructive engagement with Bangladesh. Basu's government often emphasized the importance of cooperation in areas such as trade, culture, transport, and border management. Because West Bengal shares historical and cultural ties with Bangladesh, the Chief Minister believed that maintaining positive relations would benefit people on both sides of the border. Through public speeches, meetings with national leaders, and participation in policy discussions, Basu regularly highlighted the importance of strengthening relations with Bangladesh. Another important aspect of Basu's leadership was his communication with the central government of India. While foreign policy decisions were taken in New Delhi, Basu frequently expressed the concerns and interests of West Bengal regarding cross-border issues. For example, matters such as border trade, migration, and security required coordination between the state and central governments. Basu's government provided valuable insights about these issues because it had direct experience with the border regions.

The Left Front leadership also supported diplomatic dialogue between India and Bangladesh. Instead of focusing only on security concerns, the government emphasized economic cooperation and cultural interaction. This balanced approach helped create a more positive atmosphere in bilateral relations. The government believed that development and cooperation would reduce tensions and promote stability in the region. In addition, Basu's leadership helped establish informal channels of communication with political leaders and intellectual communities in Bangladesh. These interactions encouraged mutual understanding and strengthened trust between the two societies. By supporting dialogue and cooperation, the Left Front leadership demonstrated that regional governments can contribute to international relations. Therefore, the political leadership of Jyoti Basu and the Left Front played a significant role in encouraging cooperation between India and Bangladesh.

Their approach highlighted the importance of regional diplomacy and showed how state-level leadership can support national foreign policy objectives.

3. Support for Border Peace and Stability

Maintaining peace and stability along the border between India and Bangladesh has always been an important challenge. West Bengal shares a long international boundary with Bangladesh, and many communities live very close to this border. Issues such as illegal trade, migration, and security incidents can create tension if they are not managed carefully. During the rule of the Left Front, the state government made significant efforts to maintain stability in the border regions. The Left Front government worked closely with the central government and border security forces to ensure that the border remained peaceful. Local administrations in border districts were encouraged to maintain strong communication with security agencies and community leaders. This coordination helped identify problems early and allowed authorities to respond quickly. As a result, many local disputes were resolved before they could become major conflicts.

Another important strategy was the promotion of cooperation rather than confrontation. The state government believed that improving economic and social conditions in border areas would reduce illegal activities and tensions. Therefore, development programs were introduced in several districts near the border. These programs included improvements in roads, markets, schools, and health services. By strengthening local communities, the government aimed to create a stable and secure environment.

The government also supported dialogue between India and Bangladesh on border-related issues. Whenever tensions arose, the state government emphasized the need for peaceful negotiation. This approach helped create an atmosphere of trust between the two countries. Local administrative officials sometimes participated in coordination meetings and discussions that aimed to solve practical problems along the border. In addition, the Left Front government recognized that many people living near the border share cultural and family connections across the boundary. Instead of treating the border only as a security zone, the government understood it as a region of social interaction. By respecting these social realities, the state government helped reduce conflict and promote peaceful coexistence. Overall, the policies of the Left Front government contributed to a more stable border environment between India and Bangladesh. By combining security coordination with development initiatives and diplomatic support, the government played a constructive role in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

4. Promotion of Cross-Border Trade

Economic cooperation has been an important factor in strengthening relations between India and Bangladesh. Because West Bengal shares a long border with Bangladesh, it plays a key role in facilitating cross-border trade. During the rule of the Left Front, the state government supported the development of trade infrastructure and commercial activities between the two countries. One of the most significant trade points between India and Bangladesh is the border crossing between Petrapole in West Bengal and Benapole in Bangladesh. This border point gradually became one of the busiest land ports in South Asia. The Left Front government recognized the importance of this trade route and encouraged the expansion of facilities in the region. Improvements were made in transport systems, customs facilities, and storage areas to support growing trade activities. The state government also worked with the central government to simplify administrative procedures related to cross-border trade. Traders often faced problems such as delays in customs clearance, lack of infrastructure, and limited market facilities. By raising these issues with national authorities, the state government helped promote reforms that made trade more efficient.

Cross-border trade created many economic benefits for both countries. For West Bengal, it generated employment in transportation, logistics, warehousing, and small businesses. Many local traders and entrepreneurs benefited from increased commercial activity along the border. At the same time, Bangladesh gained access to Indian goods and markets, which supported its own economic development. The Left Front government believed that stronger economic ties would also improve political relations. When businesses and communities benefit from cooperation, they are more likely to support peaceful relations between countries. Therefore, the promotion of trade was seen not only as an economic policy but also as a diplomatic strategy. In this way, the efforts of the Left Front government helped strengthen economic connections between India and Bangladesh. By supporting infrastructure development, administrative coordination, and commercial exchange, the state played an important role in building a foundation for long-term economic cooperation between the two neighboring countries.

5. Cultural and People-to-People Contacts

Cultural relations between West Bengal and Bangladesh have always been strong because the people of both regions share language, literature, traditions, and historical experiences. Both sides are deeply connected through the Bengali language and cultural heritage. During the rule of the Left Front, the state government encouraged cultural exchange as an important way to strengthen relations between India and Bangladesh.

The Left Front government believed that cultural interaction could build friendship and trust among ordinary people. Therefore, it supported programs that promoted exchange between artists, writers, scholars, and students from both sides of the border. Cultural festivals, literary meetings, and academic seminars were organized where participants from Bangladesh and West Bengal could interact with each other. These events helped people understand each other's society and traditions more closely.

Another important area of cultural cooperation was literature and education. Universities and cultural institutions in West Bengal often invited scholars and writers from Bangladesh to participate in academic discussions. Such exchanges helped build intellectual cooperation between the two regions. Students and researchers also benefited from these opportunities because they could learn about shared cultural history and social issues.

The Left Front government also recognized the importance of common historical figures and cultural icons such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. These personalities are respected in both India and Bangladesh and represent a shared cultural identity. Cultural events related to these figures were often used as platforms to promote friendship between the two societies. People-to-people contact also increased through tourism and social visits. Families living near the border often had relatives across the boundary. The government supported policies that made such interactions easier within the legal framework. These social connections helped reduce misunderstandings and promoted goodwill. Overall, cultural diplomacy played an important role in improving India-Bangladesh relations. By encouraging cultural exchange and people-to-people interaction, the Left Front government helped strengthen social ties between West Bengal and Bangladesh. These cultural links contributed to a more positive and cooperative relationship between the two countries.

6. Cooperation on Refugee and Migration Issues

Migration and refugee movements have been important issues in the relationship between India and Bangladesh. Because West Bengal shares a long border with Bangladesh, the state has experienced migration flows for many decades. Historical events such as the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 led to large movements of people across the border. Managing these movements required careful cooperation between the central government and the state government.

During the rule of the Left Front, the state government played an important role in dealing with refugee and migration issues. The government tried to balance humanitarian concerns with administrative responsibilities. Many refugees who entered West Bengal needed shelter, food, and employment opportunities. The state administration worked with national authorities to arrange relief and rehabilitation programs. The government also understood that migration could create social and political tensions if it was not handled carefully. Therefore, the Left Front government supported policies that aimed to manage migration in a stable and peaceful manner. Local administrations in border districts were asked to monitor population movements and maintain communication with central agencies responsible for border management.

At the same time, the government emphasized the importance of maintaining good relations with Bangladesh while addressing migration concerns. Instead of treating the issue only as a security problem, the Left Front leadership often discussed the economic and social causes of migration. Poverty, lack of employment, and environmental problems were recognized as important factors behind cross-border movement. The state government also participated in discussions with the central government about policies related to border management and refugee settlement. Because West Bengal had direct experience with these issues, its administrative insights were valuable for national policymakers. This cooperation helped develop practical strategies to deal with migration challenges. In this way, the Left Front government contributed to the management of refugee and migration issues in a responsible and balanced manner. Its policies helped reduce tensions and supported a cooperative approach between India and Bangladesh. By addressing humanitarian needs while maintaining administrative order, the state government played an important role in regional stability.

7. Role in Regional Connectivity

Regional connectivity is an important factor in improving relations between neighboring countries. Better transport and communication links help increase trade, tourism, and social interaction. Because West Bengal is geographically located between mainland India and Bangladesh, it plays a key role in regional connectivity between the two countries. During the period of the Left Front, the state government supported several initiatives aimed at improving transport and communication links with Bangladesh. Roads, railway networks, and border infrastructure were gradually improved to make travel and trade easier. These developments were important for both economic and diplomatic cooperation.

One example of connectivity improvement was the strengthening of railway and road links between India and Bangladesh through West Bengal. Such connections allowed goods and passengers to move more easily across the border. These transportation networks also helped connect Bangladesh with other parts of India through West Bengal. As a result, regional trade and economic interaction increased significantly. The Left Front government also supported discussions on reopening historical transport routes that existed before the partition of India. Many railway lines and river routes had connected the two regions for centuries. Restoring these links was seen as an important step toward regional integration. The government believed that improved connectivity would benefit both countries economically and socially.

Improved connectivity also helped border communities. Farmers, traders, and small businesses in border districts gained better access to markets and transportation facilities. This increased economic opportunities and improved the standard of living for many people in these areas. From a diplomatic perspective, stronger connectivity helped build trust between India and Bangladesh. When communication and transportation links improve, cooperation becomes easier and misunderstandings decrease. The policies supported by the Left Front government therefore contributed to long-term regional cooperation. Overall, the promotion of regional connectivity by the West Bengal government played a constructive role in strengthening India–Bangladesh relations. By encouraging infrastructure development and transport cooperation, the state government helped create a foundation for greater regional integration.

8. Contribution to Subnational Diplomacy

The experience of West Bengal during the rule of the Left Front shows how state governments can contribute to international relations through subnational diplomacy. Subnational diplomacy refers to the involvement of regional or state governments in activities that influence foreign relations. Although the national government is responsible for official foreign policy, regional governments can support diplomatic cooperation through economic, cultural, and administrative initiatives. West Bengal's geographical location made it an important participant in India's relations with Bangladesh. Many issues related to trade, migration, border security, and cultural exchange directly affected the state. Because of this, the West Bengal government often interacted with the central government to discuss policies concerning Bangladesh. These discussions helped national policymakers understand local realities in the border region. The Left Front government also demonstrated that economic and cultural cooperation at the regional level could strengthen diplomatic relations between countries. By encouraging border trade, cultural exchanges, and infrastructure development, the state government helped create stronger connections between communities on both sides of the border. These activities supported the broader goals of India's foreign policy toward Bangladesh.

Another important contribution of the Left Front government was its emphasis on peaceful cooperation. The leadership believed that regional stability could be achieved through dialogue, development, and mutual understanding. This approach encouraged a positive environment for India–Bangladesh relations and reduced tensions in border areas. The example of West Bengal also shows how federal systems allow different levels of government to participate in international cooperation. State governments have better knowledge of local conditions and social realities. Their experiences can therefore help shape practical policies for managing cross-border relations.

II. Conclusion:

The discussion above shows that the government of West Bengal under the rule of the Left Front made several important contributions to improving relations between India and Bangladesh. Although foreign policy in India is mainly handled by the central government, the experience of West Bengal proves that state governments can also play a meaningful supporting role in international relations, especially when they share borders with neighboring countries. The Left Front government understood that the people of West Bengal and Bangladesh have strong historical, cultural, and social connections. Because of these shared ties, the government encouraged cooperation instead of conflict. It supported cultural exchanges, academic discussions, and people-

to-people contact so that communities on both sides of the border could build friendship and understanding. These activities helped strengthen social and cultural relations between the two regions. Economic cooperation was another important area of contribution. The government promoted cross-border trade and supported the development of important border trade points. Increased trade created economic benefits for local communities and also strengthened the economic relationship between the two countries. When economic cooperation grows, it often creates a positive environment for political relations as well.

The Left Front government also contributed to managing border issues such as migration, security, and development in border districts. By working closely with the central government and local administrations, it helped maintain stability along the border. Development programs in border areas improved the lives of local people and reduced tensions. In addition, the government supported better transportation and communication links between India and Bangladesh. Improved connectivity helped increase trade, travel, and cooperation between the two countries. Finally, the experience of West Bengal during the Left Front period demonstrates the importance of subnational diplomacy. Through cultural exchange, economic cooperation, border management, and regional connectivity, the state government played a constructive role in strengthening India–Bangladesh relations. This example highlights how state governments can support national foreign policy and contribute to peaceful regional cooperation.

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