

India, Bangladesh to conduct study on economic partnership pact

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India and Bangladesh have agreed to conduct a joint study on Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) at a commerce secretary level talk on Friday, according to an official statement.

The two countries have been making endeavours to deepen trade ties after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bangladesh visit in March last year, and they are eager to negotiate a CEPA for mutual benefit, one official said, requesting anonymity. Modi had paid a state visit to Bangladesh in March 2021 and agreed to enhance bilateral trade.

On Friday, the two sides also discussed other issues of mutual interest, including development of railway and port infrastructure, border *haats* (markets), regional connectivity through multimodal transportation and harmonization of standards, the commerce ministry statement said on Saturday.

The Indian delegation led by commerce secretary B.V.R. Subrahmanyam and the Bangladesh delegation under senior secretary Tapan Kanti Ghosh appreciated stronger bilateral ties between the two countries. They noted significant growth in the bilateral trade between the two countries in recent years, the statement said.

Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia, according to the foreign ministry. "Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh has grown steadily over the last decade and the exports of Bangladesh have tripled over the last decade to cross \$1 billion in 2018-19," a note prepared by the ministry said. "In the FY 2019-20, India's exports to Bangladesh were \$8.2 billion and imports were \$1.26 billion."

To facilitate trade between India and Bangladesh through railways, the two partners on Friday agreed to develop a container handling facility at Sirajganj Bazar, the commerce ministry statement said. For running freight trains between India and Bangladesh, a 900m new siding line is being constructed at Benapole, it added.

The two nations have approved a detailed project proposal (DPP) for development of rail and road based inland container depot at Ishwardi and plan to open border markets that were closed due to Covid restrictions, it said.

To boost trade, the two partners have agreed to launch the first meeting of the CEO forum soon, it said.

Bangladesh, which has a key place in India's Neighbourhood First policy, had invited Modi last year for celebrations marking three key events – the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 50 years of diplomatic ties, and 50 years of Bangladesh's war of liberation.