

BANGLADESH IN 2020

Where are we now after 25 years?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I was the winter of 1995, or maybe 1996. Let me only say that it was a memorable moment for me, a quarter of a century ago in the city of Dhaka. I was staying with my mother in her apartment in Indira Road and can vividly remember that Bangladesh had been caught up in the midst of great expectations as it got all hyped-up for the second post-Ershad parliamentary elections. With Y2K, the much-anticipated revolution, only a few years away, the country had been full of discussions as well as visions for the Third Millennium.

At that time, I had come across a report commissioned by the World Bank published later as “Bangladesh 2020. A Long-Run Perspective Study” (LPS) by University Press Limited. As the title implies, the document had predictions for 2020, and the Foreword was written jointly by A Z M Obaidullah Khan, Chairman, Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies, and Pierre Lendall-Mills, Chief of the World Bank Resident Mission in Dhaka.

As I was reading the perspective plan and dreaming of the Bangladesh in 2020, I fell asleep one lazy afternoon in my mother’s apartment. It was a long sleep, quite like the character Rip Van Winkle, who fell into a 20-year slumber, except that I woke up after 25 years, on January 1, 2020.

I couldn’t recognise the country, even the Farmgate area where I used to go for

my groceries. I picked up the LPS again and started looking for clues for where we are today, and how we stack up against the goals set out in 1995. I read the Foreword again, and the second paragraph still appears so prophetic to me. “The year 2020 is an important milestone for Bangladesh. It will mark the completion of one-half century of the young country’s existence. By then it would have become all too clear whether this nation of 170 million (in 2020) people will have grasped the abundant opportunities it has to progress and achieve a place among the middle-income countries-or whether it will have shunned reforms and remained among the poorest countries in the world.”

I read along, and zoomed in on the three key economic goals set out by LPS: substantial improvement in the quality of life (including reduction of poverty, availability of universal healthcare, and jobs for everybody), diversification of our exports, and annual flows of foreign direct investment amounting at least to USD eight billion. Today, as we round the corners and step into the third decade of this millennium, one does wonder where are we? Also, how much further do we have to go before we reach these targets?

To my pleasant surprise, the Rip Van Winkle in me was amazed by the progress we have made in the last quarter of a century, since the LPS was published. But, it is also clear that for the next quarter-century, in addition to economic progress, we should concurrently focus on three pillars of inclusive growth, namely, maximising economic opportunities, ensuring equal access for including women, and guarantees of economic well-being

for all citizens. As we look ahead and gear up for the fiftieth-anniversary celebrations of independence, there are other goals that we also cherish and still remain unfulfilled.

There were several other studies, both official and by NGOs, since then which came up with alternative variations of “Vision 2020”. Notable among them, one that came out of a conference of visionaries gathered

by 2020? iii) Will Bangladesh join the group of middle-ranking industrialised nations in 2020? iv) Can democracy survive? v) What institutions will be needed to satisfy the vision 2020 goals?

In a keynote paper presented at this conference, Dr Mohammed Farashuddin, MP and former Governor of Bangladesh Bank, outlined the challenges we were facing at the beginning of this century. The 10

and environmental preservation in a vulnerable region of the globe”. The overall theme at this conference was very similar to LPS except for the fact that the former emphasised democratic values whereas the latter stressed the importance of environmental sustainability.

Let us take up the areas where Bangladesh has met up to the expectations of LPS. First of all, our population growth has been in a secular decline since 1996, from 2.17 to 1.08 percent per annum. Our total population in 2020 is expected to be less than the 171 million projected in LPS. Secondly, our per capita income, USD 1698.3 in nominal terms in 2019, exceeds the target for 2020. LPS used three different growth scenarios, moderate (4 percent), business as usual (6 percent) and high (8 percent), and in recent years we have, according to government statistics, reached high growth. But, we have not been able to generate employment for the additional 50 million people who entered the labour force since then, nor foster equality in income distribution. We have even more work to do in the areas of export diversification, FDI growth, and infrastructure development. The five challenges listed in LPS are still there, particularly, incomplete policy reforms and a weak financial sector. And last but not the least, there are signs that we are backsliding on the path to building an inclusive society, and might have morphed into a “hybrid democracy”. The Rip Van Winkle in me hopes that these are but small bumps along the road.

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If Bangladesh wants to be an influential economic and geo-political player in the region, it must develop its maritime infrastructure.

PHOTO: STAR

at a conference in Dhaka in 2001, was published by Dhaka University Press under the title, “Bangladesh’s Development Agenda and Vision 2020”. By then, the New Millennium was well underway, and the conferees asked five questions: i) Can Bangladesh achieve its development goals by 2020? ii) Can poverty be eliminated in Bangladesh

challenges were: “poverty alleviation; human resource constraints; infrastructure bottlenecks; financial intermediation; export diversification; higher value-added exports; polices to control financial corruption; political stability and institution-building; keeping pace with IT and global telecommunications developments;

Bursting our bubble



RUBAIYA MURSHED

As we bade farewell to the teens of this century, most of us—if not all of us—must have been looking back on our changes, gains and losses as a person, as a society and as a nation. While there will be many memories to fondly remember and many achievements to proudly celebrate on all three fronts, I cannot help but think that how we have felt about the ending decade will ascertain our aspirations for the next. As an economist, I’m supposed to now be quoting statistics and figures to make a point on how developed we have become as a nation, and I’m meant to draw a conclusion from the numbers on what have been our accomplishments and what have been our shortcomings. Ideally, I am supposed to talk about factors like GDP growth, per capita income, poverty rate, investment, labour force participation rate. But I don’t feel like being “ideal”, there are many qualified people to do that. Today, I am writing not only as an economist, but as an educator, a female, a youth, a citizen and as a hopeless dreamer of a Bangladesh that will be fair, just, equitable and safe. Yes, our statistics do tell a tale of glory and perhaps they are the bricks that are paving our path towards becoming a middle-income country in 2024. However, at the brink between these two eras, I could not help but ask myself some questions to which the answers that automatically came to my mind contradict the high aspirations of development that we are dreaming of.

If we really have made so much progress, why can’t I—as a woman of this city—feel safe and comfortable to walk in the city at night? Why can’t girls safely and comfortably use public transport? I had restrictions on going out alone when I was a college student in 2009, and much hasn’t changed now that I am an educator 10 years later. The only difference is that it’s not my mother restricting me now, it is my own fear of what

might happen and what I might face if I do. Why do our students still need to be scared in their own dormitories and have to be weary of getting beaten up on their own university campus? Why does it feel like we’re breathing in toxicity—both literally and figuratively—when we’re meant to be breathing in fresh air? Why is it that more and more of us are getting increasingly comfortable with remaining silent in the face of wrongdoing? Can a person with lesser mobility function independently, comfortably and safely in Dhaka? Has life changed for a rickshaw-puller who in 2009 had to struggle to feed his family and consider sending all his children to school at the same time?

Whether we live in an apartment in Gulshan or in a slum in Mirpur, why can we not sleep without a mosquito net at night in fear of dengue? Why is it that we cannot put our faith in a glass of drinking water in a public place unless it is a sealed water bottle? How can we think of ourselves as living in a developing or developed nation when if in the case of emergency, there is no

guarantee that we will get the proper medical care? At this point in time, why is it that we still haven’t been able to bring in life-saving drugs? How come it is still unthinkable to use public restrooms, or most restrooms, for that matter in Bangladesh? Most of our people still do not know the basic etiquette or common sense in using restrooms in public places. For example, in aeroplanes. Then when it comes to flights, it’s desperately sad that the migrant workers working so hard abroad to bring remittance into this country still have to ask others desperately to fill in their embarkation forms and are misbehaved with?

So many more questions come to my mind, and in fact, these questions are important ones to ponder if we want to prioritise inclusive development and not just development and also if we want our development to be simultaneous with improvement in standard of living and quality of life. Our women are having to migrate abroad for work and then they return in tears after being abused and tortured.

Anyone anywhere with some power is using the power to trap someone—who crossed them—in lawsuits with false claims. Families are being torn apart in continuous road accidents. Corruption is rising at all levels and ethics are at a demise. A talented but simple boy from a village doesn’t turn up in the scholarship viva because he has no “connections” and knows he will never get the respect his qualifications deserve. Farmers cry in their prayers for better crops while the rest of us race on with our lives of restaurant food and luxuries. Our students are kept up all night to participate in political activities, yet we expect them to pass in their exams at 8 the next morning. Domestic help are beaten up while we bask in the drama of our Hindi serials. And our children—privileged and underprivileged—lose a bit of their childhood every day as we fail to set our priorities right and chase after the illusions of development.

No matter how much someone harps on about the beautiful economic indicators and rising figures of progress, we cannot and should not ignore the fact that this country has become unliveable and even more so if you are poor, if you are marginalised, if you are different. Rich people at least have money, hence choices, but poor people have their hands tied and are forsaken to accept whatever fate comes their way—be it medical catastrophe, natural disaster, abuse or rape. Amidst all these questions without satisfactory answers, how can we still be daydreaming of graduation “with distinction” if we haven’t even reached a pass mark yet on so many fronts?

If we truly love this country and its people, we cannot just keep praising ourselves and patting ourselves on the back for our triumphs. We have far to go, but only if we prioritise the questions asked above. We have got to set our standards properly. Do we want development without well-being, progress without quality? If other countries, like Bhutan, can set their standards and achieve them, why can’t we? Isn’t it time we get our priorities straight? Are we so divided in what we want? Has it become our social norm to be indifferent, to be silent?

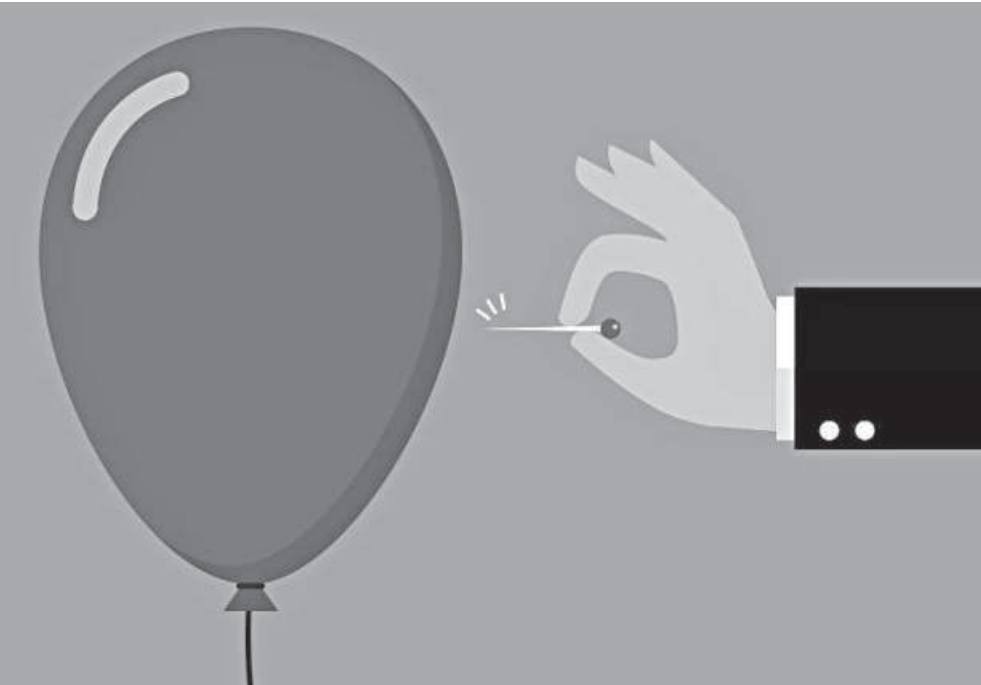
In his new book “How change happens”,

Cass R Sunstein talks about social norms and how they can shape a society and affect social change. In answer to the question, “How does social change happen?”, Sunstein postulates that “One day, someone challenges the norm. After that small challenge, others may begin to say what they think. Once that happens, a drip can become a flood.” In this regard, the consequent question for us becomes, do we care enough for the future of our society and nation to challenge the norms that are pulling us behind as we strive to move forward? How will our social change happen—the social change that will help us set our standards?

On one hand, we need to be able to call a spade a spade. That doesn’t seem possible until someone or something breaks our existing social norm of indifference and silence. So, in the meantime? Research, it all comes down to research. We need answers to our questions and we need valid and reliable ways of finding the answers. We need to understand and realise what steps we should take. We also need to develop an attitude to accept what the results of our research end up to be. That means that our well-being should always be the main priority, not business and commercialisation. But is that the case?

Sorry to burst our bubble, but are we ready for the status we are yearning to attain? Do we want to continue as it is with improving statistics of growth and prosperity, or do we want the stories to matter too? For now, I for one am tired of feeling helpless and I want to do my part in bringing about social change. Let me appeal to the policymakers and the powerful on behalf of the cohorts I represent: teachers and researchers—forsaken academicians. You know, the future of this country may just lie in our classrooms and in our research. We have the expertise and the zeal, but we need the incentives—the funds—to survive and to be able to pursue original thinking. So, if you’re looking for somewhere to spend, pour the funds into our institutions. Give us the backing we need, and we will lead this nation out of danger. At least give us the chance to try.

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QUOTABLE Quote



MILAN KUNDERA
(Born: April 1929)
Czech-French writer

Two people in love, alone, isolated from the world, that's beautiful.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Jumbles of noise
5 Cracked
9 Basic belief
10 Suffering ennui
12 Arm bones
13 Biscotti flavor
14 Paging gizmos
16 Heir, at times
17 Had dinner
18 Eyes, slangily
20 Grassy plants
22 Player's fee
23 Shenanigan
25 Hangs low
28 "Be right with you"
32 Finders, they say
34 Pitching stat

35 Travel stop
36 "Golly!"
38 Door holder's words
40 Pond growth
41 Sachet scent
42 Convenes
43 Car scar
44 Mystery writer
Woods

DOWN

1 Take out
2 Wanting
3 Tide type
4 Increase, as an incline
5 Humiliate
6 Singer Bon Jovi

7 Out of bed
8 Vacation spot
9 Brass band members
11 None too smart
15 Do museum work
19 Tempo
21 Shocked sound
24 Pants measures
25 Aptitude
26 Virgil work
27 Moderate
29 Folk's Pete
30 Book goofs
31 Docket listings
33 VCR button
37 Entreaty
39 "Oh, wow!"


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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	T	H	S	B	A	T	H	
A	C	H	E	S	U	S	H	E	R
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

