and inhibitions, against the backdrop of history: Are we still the intellectual giants we once thought ourselves to be, or vestiges of a wistful wisdom feverishly improvising an evolving Bengali nationalism -- a nationalism bereft of at least half its "legitimate" natives -- half Bengali, half Indian!

Are we merely medieval Muslims or sophisticated secularists? Are we truly the children of freedom, or simply slave labour, bought and sold by the gangsters of political propaganda? Is Bangladesh arguably only an overloaded ark on the high seas of history, with no dearth of self-acclaimed captains, but without a star to steer her by? Are we, the Bengali people, a failed nation-state, and, if so, where lies the redemption?

In our quest for clues and lost opportunities dare we delve into the faded memory of undivided Bengal, and the still-birth of a broader vision which might have fathered richer, more versatile demographics? Be that as it may, despite the historic betrayal and even in the absence of residual Bengal, the questions posed remain valid and relevant in the context of free Bangladesh. Many eagerly await the demise of our dreams.

A Bangladesh consigned to the dust would justify a wealth of war crimes, discrimination, and historic abuses. It would amount to a grotesque reversal of history, and the triumph of injustice on a grand scale. A failed state, therefore, is not an option. Quite the contrary, it is a luxury which no one deserves, neither the "losers," nor the onlookers, who will ultimately be obliged to pick up the pieces. More importantly, the imagined scenario of the imminent collapse of the entire edifice of Bengali society, culture and economy, is as removed from reality as are the far-fetched visions of a "Switzerland of the East."

If I sound cynical, perhaps even a little pessimistic, permit me to contradict myself. A dispassionate appraisal of Bangladesh's performance on the world stage is sure to surprise those already conditioned to the much publicised image of a destitute "basket case." In fact, it will reveal a nation in ascent which has outstripped even the most extravagant predictions of her potential. Let us count our blessings:



- Bangladesh is the first and only country in the world to completely eradicate polio.
- Bangladesh has achieved the fastest reduction in child and infant mortality among all the developing countries of the world.
- Infant mortality has been reduced from 144 per 1,000 live births to only 69.
- Bangladesh has the highest rate of child immunization.
- Bangladesh has the lowest maternal mortality rate in South Asia
- And the fastest decrease in fertility in the whole world.
- The proportion of women in the labour force of Bangladesh is the highest in South Asia.
- During the 1990s the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh declined one percentage point per year -- a record throughout the developing world.
- Bangladesh is one of the most rapidly growing economies among developing countries with a population of more than twenty million.
- Public expenditure in education is 15.5% of total government expenditure, which is the highest in South Asia.
- Primary school enrolment is nearly 100%, which is the highest in the developing world.
- Despite the menace of arsenic poisoning, 95% of the population of Bangladesh has access to bacteria-free safe drinking water, which is the highest in South Asia.
- Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia that has not defaulted on any IPP contract.
- The economy continues to grow at a healthy rate, while exports increase annually.

This splendid showcase of successes is simply the prelude to the continuing chronicle of our humble achievements.

But, above all, Bangladesh is the birthplace of micro-credit, the home of the largest and most productive NGO in the world, and the initiator of South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation. Its successes touch every facet of development, from agriculture, industry, commerce and banking to human resources. Bangladesh has distinguished itself in the field of non-traditional exports, such as ceramics, garments, leather goods, sea- food, etc.

Bangladeshi white and blue-collar workers are to be found on every continent. Bangladeshi diplomats have made valuable and significant contribution to the United Nations, NAM, the OIC, and the Commonwealth. Bangladeshi troops have kept the peace in 26 countries