

Bangladesh's two decades: Out of the basket into the Future

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WILLIAM MILAM

Prothom Alo has asked me to help mark its 12th anniversary by contributing a short essay on how I view the last two decades in Bangladesh, from the time I came to know the country well, to the present. During these two decades, of course, one of the more impressive successes in Bangladesh has been *Prothom Alo* itself.

Its phenomenal growth in those 12 years has led to a general maturing and sharpening of the press in the country and contributed mightily to a much better informed public, and an electorate that is primed and prepared for a deepening of democracy and public service accountability. I commence this essay by offering my sincere and profound congratulations to Prothom Alo for helping to create some of the conditions I will write about below.

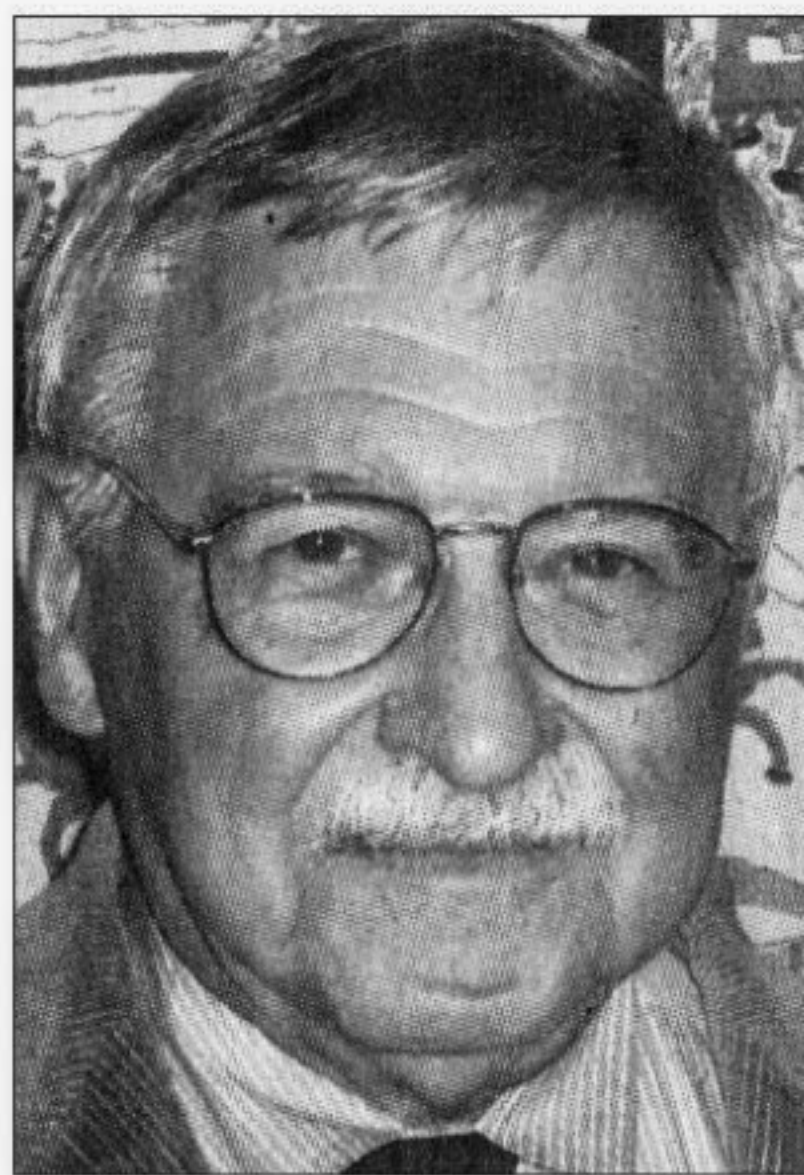
I don't believe that Bangladesh was ever a "basket case." But when I arrived in Dhaka in August 1990 it was a different city in many ways than it is today, and Bangladesh was a country that seemed to have lost its political direction. It was my good luck to arrive at a time when great change was just over the horizon, and to be witness to a political breakthrough that should have resonated throughout the third world.

I presented my credentials to a president named Ershad. As Chief of Staff of the Bangladesh Army, General Ershad had

seized power from a democratically elected government 8 years earlier. He had spent most of the time since trying to find political legitimacy, using the government to curry favour with interest groups, playing on the hostility between the two main political parties to keep the opposition divided, and even shedding his uniform and becoming a civilian politician with his own political party. But by mid-year 1990, time was running out on Ershad, as it had, or would, in those years on an array of non-democratic regimes around the world.

By 1990, democracy seemed to be breaking out all over. The Philippines led the march in 1985. Pakistan's military dictator died in 1988 and was succeeded by a democratically elected government. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe broke apart like a shattered glass. A year later the Soviet Union, itself, came tumbling down. Everywhere, autocracy seemed to be on the way out, and democracy on the way in. Democracy was "The End of History" wrote the scholar Francis Fukuyama, an automatic outcome of the dynamic forces of history that were coming together in the late 20th century.

Certainly Bangladesh would join that parade. And it did so, with a typically Bangladeshi twist on the usual pattern. In the summer of 1990, the political parties (except for Ershad's) stopped their quarrelling for a change and launched a move-



William B. Milam

ment against Ershad that soon had him and his government on the ropes.

They agreed on a two point agenda: 1) Ershad must go; and 2) a neutral caretaker government led by a respected and neutral president would oversee a free and fair election. The concept of a neutral caretaker government to oversee an election was one of the unique aspects of the Bangladesh democratic revolution. It is, to my knowledge, the only country in which that concept has been incorporated into the constitution.

A second unique aspect was that that Ershad, a former army leader who had based his claim to power on the support of the army, fell quickly and without much bloodshed because the army refused to back him when he called on it to do so. The army didn't just eschew power (which armies elsewhere had done before, and have done since), but it refused to use force against its fellow citizens to save its former commander.

In a sense, the Bangladesh army has followed this path twice in the past two decades, once when it refused to intervene to save Ershad, and once, at the beginning of 2007, when it did intervene rather than face the prospect of either disobeying an order from its constitutional commander in chief or putting down with force the certain mass rising against a rigged election. (As we know, it gave up power on schedule, after two years.)

The elation we all felt in those halcyon days of late 1990 and early 1991 was soon deflated as Bangladesh democracy in action soon proved that it takes more than hope, enthusiasm, and an army that doesn't want to be involved in politics, to build a sustainable democracy. It takes history -- a history of creating strong institutions that deepen with time and sustenance, institutions that provide a check on government power and accountability for its actions; an independent judiciary that is intent on protecting democratic structures and institutions is one example. It takes a culture of openness and tolerance that provides the give and take of democratic discourse and of compromise.

I have watched Bangladesh closely since, and with most of its foreign friends, have hoped in vain that the institutions and habits of mind that sustain real democracy would grow with the experience of democracy -- in other words, that the political culture in a democratic setting would cleanse and reform itself. It has not.

Describing the political culture or explaining why it does not change is, I think, beyond my powers of articulation. Its essence is that it is characterized by an unadulterated drive for power, both for the parties in power, and those that are not, that overrides all the cultural inhibitions and formal constraints that temper

life in a truly democratic structure. Nothing, not violence, not corruption, not cheating, not lying, is ruled out in the effort to retain or gain power. In political terms, Bangladesh has gone in circles since the election of 1991.

And the circles have, unfortunately, wound downward in an ever-tightening spiral. The nadir was reached in early 2007 when the sitting government's intention to rig the upcoming election was so blatant that mass violence, and much bloodshed, was a certainty. Even that prospect did not deter the government from its plans.

The army intervened again after a 17-year hiatus to save lives and property, but promising political reform in a two-year period of military/technocratic rule. It kept to the time frame it promised. But reform was beyond its power -- in two years or twenty. Now, almost two years after power was returned to civilian authority, the political circles are wider, but their direction is anything but linear. The best that can be said is that, politically, Bangladesh is back where it started almost 20 years ago.

I believe, however, that Bangladesh has the opportunity to be one of the success stories of the future because, while going in circles politically, it has set a course economically and socially that will lay the foundation for a straighter, and more democratic, political culture. It is no secret that, primarily through the diligent work of NGOs, Bangladesh has probably been more successful in overall human development than almost any other third world country, and certainly than any of the South Asian countries.

Bangladeshis have a right to be very proud of the progress the country has made in education, health, gender parity, literacy, and in the innovative programmes of the world-famous NGOs. Micro-credit originated in Bangladesh,

and has spread around the world. Brac now operates programmes in almost every aspect of social development, and has taken its operations abroad to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and as far away as East and West Africa. There are hundreds more.

It is this spirit of independence and self-sufficiency that gives me confidence about Bangladesh's future. In each of the last three decades, the Bangladesh economy has gained more and more strength as the private sector gains more and more confidence. Its gains derive totally from the private sector, although I have to give credit to a series of economic policy makers who saw a good thing and simply stayed out of its way.

As garment exports have grown and new export products have come to market, not only do the economy and the foreign trade balance benefit, but these industries employ millions of women, who become the primary income earners of their families. In the end, the enormous gains in female education and literacy, as well as in women's employment and income, mark Bangladesh as special in the third world and certainly in South Asia. Surely, its empowered women are the key to its enhanced future.

It is this human infrastructure of educated, literate, healthy, ambitious, and energetic women and men that gives me hope of political progress that will, someday, match the socio-economic progress the country continues to make. In time, they will demand of their leaders better and more democratic governance. This is the real "Bangladesh Option" that other South Asians sometimes talk about with envy.

COURTESY: PROTHOMALO

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Integrating population into development planning

The need for integration is based on the recognition that demographic variables influence development variables and are also influenced by them, and that demographic policies are integral parts of the social and economic development policies aimed to improve levels of living and raise the quality of life.

MOHAMMED ABDUL KAMAL

IN the integration of population and development in the formulation of plans and policies, population is generally considered as a factor of an exogenous variable than as a factor that can be influenced by socio-economic development. It is suggested that the neglect of the population-planning concept in the process of socio-economic planning has led to its neglect at the operational level.

We observe that the first step in the integration of population and development variables is the recognition by planners that rapid population growth is a development problem. Once that is recognised, a variety of public policies are available to reduce population growth. These include, in addition to family planning services, the provision of social security for the elderly, reducing infant mortality, and compensating who are willing to limit family size.

The scope for integrating demographic

variables into planning, a variety of demographic projections is needed, including total population, the agricultural population, the school-age population and the elderly. It also requires women's status in society and the effectiveness of alternative programmes for improving that status.

Others needed areas include strategies for achieving an equitable distribution of resources and ways of dealing with the rapid growth of population in urban areas. The integration of population and development at the operational level requires identification of sectors and core programmes of sectors to incorporate population reduction objectives.

The crucial factors for the successful implementation of a population and development planning project are an appreciation by and sustained support of policymakers and planners for utilising population variables to influence sectoral policies and programmes and the creation of a group of scientifically oriented, professionally qualified senior and mid-level

demographers having a broad understanding of the social sciences and the planning process.

In the case of Bangladesh, it is observed that familiarity with either population or development dynamics does not necessarily mean that planners are familiar with the process of integration. The important dimension in integrated planning is the understanding of the interaction between population and development factors.

Moreover, while commitment to integration at the top planning level is a must, it is equally important to generate a similar commitment at the local or lower planning levels. In generating such a commitment, it is suggested that emphasis should be placed on the role of integration in improving planning.

Population measures and programmes should be integrated in comprehensive social and economic plans and programmes, and this integration should be reflected in the goals, instrumentalities and organisations for planning within the country. An integrated approach should be evolved and followed in regard to population and related programs of economic and social development.

The basis for these assumptions is the recognition that population and development are inter-related, population variables affect, and are affected by, socio-economic development variables, and population goals and policies are integral aspects of social and economic development aimed at improving levels of living

and the quality of life of a country's population.

Integration involves considering, and taking into account in the planning process, population factors as they significantly influence or are influenced by other variables relevant to development plans.

The objectives of integration are two-fold: (a) to improve the general quality of development planning; and (b) to promote awareness among both planners and policymakers about the need to adopt population policies consistent with development objectives.

Strategies are needed to deal with problems of data analysis and synthesis. Perhaps most importantly there is a need for new organisational structure to ensure the integration of population planning in the development process. A unit dealing with population aspects should be created and placed at a high level of national administrative structure, and should be staffed with qualified persons from the relevant disciplines.

In Bangladesh, the necessary technical competence is likely to be lacking, responsibility may be diffused and the incorporation of demographic factors into planning may result in little more than general statements in the planning document. Population policy and development planning units are, therefore, required to be advocates of a particular and novel perspective on national development planning, but cannot exercise the traditionally most effective bureaucratic lever -- access



Population and development are interlinked.

to or control over budgetary resources.

The integration of population and development planning simply means the explicit consideration of socio-economic and demographic inter-relationship in the formulation of development policies and programmes aimed at achieving the country's development objectives. The need for integration is based on the recognition that demographic variables influence

development variables and are also influenced by them, and that demographic policies are integral parts of the social and economic development policies aimed to improve levels of living and raise the quality of life.

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Tribute

An intrepid pioneer

MOHAMMAD MURAD LATIF

THE first Bengalee Muslim lady doctor of the then undivided Bengal Professor Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi was born on October 15th, 1912, at Ranjangaon, Madya Pradesh, India. Her father late Dr. Kazi Abdus Sattar was also a renowned physician and a political personality of the sub-continent, who hailed from the famous Kazi family of Gopalpur village under Kalkini upazilla of Madaripur district.

Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi was married to late Riazuddin Bhuiyan, MLC and MP, the only son of the zamindar of Hiatirdia under Raipur upazilla of Narsingdhi district. He was also a dedicated social worker and a renowned politician.

She had her early education from different places of the then undivided India. She matriculated with distinction from Muslim Girls Collegiate High School, Aligarh in 1928. After passing Intermediate with distinction from



Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi

Aligarh Muslim University and College in 1930 she obtained MBBS degree in 1935 from Lady Harding Medical College for Women, Delhi. She stood First Class

First and was awarded the Viceroy's Medal for her meritorious achievement in MBBS final examination.

Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi served in different hospitals of British India as assistant surgeon for thirteen years. After the partition in 1947 she came back to her ancestral home and joined Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) in 1948 as resident surgeon. She was a cyclist, and table tennis and badminton player. Other than her mother tongue, she could also read, write and speak Hindi, Urdu, Arabic and English fluently.

She was a brilliant student, and received stipends and full scholarships throughout her educational career up to post graduate studies in the UK. She was awarded scholarship in 1955 and successfully obtained DRCOG degree from London and completed her FCPS. Prof. Dr Zohra Begum Kazi also successfully obtained FRCOG & MRCOG degrees from London, and joined Dhaka Medical College and Hospital as

Professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

During her long and illustrious career she served the noble profession as Senior Consultant of Holy Family Red Crescent Hospital, CMH, Dhaka Cantonment (with the rank of Honourary Colonel) and as Honourary Professor, Bangladesh Medical College.

When she was at DMCH, she was shocked and disturbed at the plight and sufferings of female patients who were ignorant of modern allopathic medicine and treatment. They were usually very shy and not accustomed to seeking medical assistance in male dominated hospitals. The mortality rate amongst female patients was extremely high during that time.

To mitigate their sufferings she often visited female patients door to door to motivate them to leave behind age-old rites, beliefs and superstitious and encourage them to come out of their house to seek medical treatment and assistance to save both mother and child.

This eventually yielded positive response from the long neglected women folk of the then backward society. She was a pioneer in women's education and emancipation, and played a pivotal role in imparting education to women in medical science, which substantially increased the number of enrollment of girl students in MBBS course.

Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi was a dedicated physician who attained the highest degree of professional excellence. She was honest, sincere and devoted to her sacred duties and was punctual in her noble profession. Her philosophy was humane behaviour, benevolent approach, patience, friendly caring, devotion and dedicated service to mankind, which she professed, taught and maintained throughout her long professional life.

She was awarded "Taghma-e-Pakistan" in 1964. In her honour, different socio-cultural organisations, like the National Museum, Gynecology Society, Nagorik Shambardhana Parishad,

Rotaract Club of Buriganga, Aligarh Old Boy's Association and Madaripur District Association awarded her reception. She was also awarded the "Begum Rokeya Padak," "Ekushay Padak," and "BMA Sharnoo Padak."

A social reformer like Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi does not come often. She came like a ray of light to enlighten the backward Bengali nation in those dark days. By dint of her selfless devotion, and dedicated and relentless efforts she reached the pinnacle of her profession. She never ran after wealth, name and fame. She used to say to her medical pupils: "Don't run after money, money will run after you, and be sincere to your noble profession." She will be remembered by the nation for her unforgettable contribution. For her selfless and dedicated service to humanity she ought to have been called the "Florence Nightangle" of Bangladesh.

Murad Latif is an IT professional.