

Bangladesh: The Journey towards a Middle Income Country

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By 2021, Bangladesh was able to accelerate her GDP growth from under four per cent per year to over six per cent within a span of two decades; the per capita national income has increased at even higher rate thanks to robust flow of remittance sent by our migrant workers and the diaspora; percentage of population living below the poverty line has almost halved to about 31 per cent compared to the early 1990s with the pace of poverty reduction doubling in recent years; our country has been able to make commendable transition from a predominantly aid-dependent economy to a trading nation, with the share of aid as a percentage of GDP coming down from about 6 per cent in the 1980s to less than 2 per cent in recent times; Bangladesh has been able to take advantage of opportunities originating from globalisation through increased earnings from export of goods and services - the combined net foreign exchange earnings from export of goods and remittance are at present about fifteen times more than the aid we receive annually; Bangladesh has established herself as the second largest exporter of apparels in the world, after China; our shipbuilding, footwear, pharmaceuticals and other non-traditional exports are showing encouraging signs; our farmers have increased food grains production by more than three-fold since independence enabling Bangladesh to move towards food security; our economy has been able to demonstrate impressive resilience in the face of multiple global and financial crises. Bangladesh's track record in attaining key Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) including in the areas of poverty alleviation, gender parity, and access to health and education has received high global acclaim; indeed Bangladesh has been making impressive progress in terms of attaining most of the MDG targets by 2015.

These aforesaid achievements were possible through a combination of factors: supportive government policies and targeted resource allocation; the hard work of our farmers and workers - both at home and abroad; contribution of the private sector and our vibrant entrepreneurial class; proactive role of our non-government actors including in areas of disbursement of micro-credit, development of micro-enterprises and raising consciousness about economic and social issues; targeted support provided by development partners. There is widespread confidence among our citizens that Bangladesh 'can', that 'her time has come', but also that the 'window of opportunity' is narrow and that we will need to move really fast. The next few years will thus be critically important if the goal of middle income country status is to be realised by the time Bangladesh turns fifty.

Going Ahead: The Challenges and Attendant Tasks

Continuation of our past successes and acceleration of the growth process in future which will be needed to attain the goal of middle income status will hinge crucially on our ability to identify and make work the drivers of future growth and on creating conducive and supportive environment for businesses to work, commerce to take place and economic activities to flourish. Undertaking the needed reform measures, strengthening development administration and building the capacity of relevant institutions of economic governance must be given highest priority by the policymakers if the pace of development is to be accelerated.

As is well-known, the threshold for middle-income country status is a moving goal post. The present benchmark of per capita income of USD 1026 for (low) middle income status (according to 2011 benchmark which is revised annually) will undergo multiple upward revision as we move towards 2021 (incidentally, the upper middle class threshold at present is USD 4036). So, in a way we shall be in a race against time where our journey and progress towards the goal of middle-income status will need to be non-linear, robust and more strategic over the coming years. Moving forward will be more challenging than had been in the past,

for several reasons - in alleviating poverty we will need to focus more on dealing with the issues of hard-core poverty; in addressing literacy we will need to tackle more effectively the issues of quality; in accelerating growth we will need to put more emphasis on raising labour and capital productivity through upgradation of skills and technological endowments. The adverse impacts of climate change are likely to become more visible in the coming years requiring significant reallocation of resources. Raising annual GDP growth rate to double-digit and creating employment opportunities for the two million additional people joining the country's labour market each year will be crucially important to achieve the middle income country status.

The coming years will also offer us opportunities to reap the benefits of the 'demographic dividend'. It will thus be important to make the needed investments for translating this demographic dynamics into human resources capable of contributing to our transformational journey in the coming years and decades. This will call for significant structural changes in our economy which will necessitate a blending of the advantages of ICT, human resource development, productivity gains and the opportunities of the knowledge economy. Public sector will need to play a strategic role in all of these, with the private sector taking the lead role to ensure that the investment - GDP ratio is raised to more than 32 per cent from the current rate of about 25 per cent. Of critical importance here will be our ability to undertake the huge investments required for infrastructure development, greater connectivity and new power generation. Ensuring higher domestic investment, attracting more FDI, getting our diaspora involved in Bangladesh's development, developing public-private partnerships and giving opportunities to our young generation of entrepreneurs and innovators to deploy their creativity and talent will be important in this context. We will need to come out of the business as usual mode and think strategically if we are to generate the needed momentum to be a middle income country by 2021.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gives oral vaccine to a child on the National Immunization Day.

Status change in terms of income will call for important structural changes in our economy. And we have to be mindful that the expected outcomes will need to be delivered in an environment of heightened global competition. If we walk and others run, we will fall behind; we will need to run at the same speed as the front-runners if we are to remain ahead of the curve.

Concluding Remarks

When we talk about being a middle income country we should not limit our thinking to only economic well-being, but also keep in mind other aspirations of our people which will make achievements in terms of improving standard of living more meaningful and more fulfilling to the citizens of the country. Recalling the spirit of our liberation struggle, we must not lose sight of the fact that our ambition to be a middle income country ought to also reflect the aspiration of our people for a pattern of growth which will be inclusive in nature, based on distributive justice, sense of fair play, compassionate, and opportunities for upward social mobility.

Thus, as we strive to attain the goal of middle income status, we will need to give equal emphasis and attention to issues of establishing good governance, eliminating corruption, enhancing transparency, ensuring distributive justice, strengthening our

Victory is Different This Time

Nasir Ahmed

Victory processions still appear inside memory
Leaves fall with the tumultuous sound of joy.
Even then a sombre grief hangs from mother's chin
Torn by recollections, a mother was on the mouth of fire
Seventh of March came with the gale of people's tide.

The golden land was in flames, in revolt and resistance
War spread, vengeance burnt with crimson rage.
A voice echoed the sounds of millions
From racecourse it rattled the whole of Bangla.

From fields to pitches, woods to forests, on sky and air
Shouts of victory - 'Joy Bangla' - come floating even today.
The killer vulture spread huge darkness with her wings
It rekindles blood and fire in our memory even today.

The stream of blood flows from March to December
How can I forget the pains of three million kin!
Victory was celebrated with sounds of joy that December
But the mind gets heavy with melancholia this December.

The killer vulture is once again flying in our free land
Dark clouds gather in the north-east corner as if a stormy claw,
That terrible cruelty of Seventy-one once again beckons
Traacherous enemy within us, repel his advance.

There is a different kind of war-tune this time on the occasion of victory
Build up resistance, prepare yourselves, there are monsters ahead.

Translation: Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed

democracy and our institutions of check and balance, promoting rule of law and encouraging a culture of tolerance and respect. A Bangladesh which is a middle income country will become meaningful to the common people if these other variables also receive equal attention and importance as we move towards 2021. Indeed, the very realisation of the ambition of middle income country status will, to a great extent, hinge on our ability to also adequately address these aspirations and our capacity to make commensurate progress on these other fronts. Only then can Bangladesh aspire to be not only merely a middle income country, but also an inclusive middle income country. Indeed, it is that particular type of a middle income country which will reflect the true spirit of our independence and embody the vision of the Sonar Bangla of Bangabandhu's dream.

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Dream of a Digital Bangladesh

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digital government, digital lifestyle, digital education system and universal connectivity.

Digital Bangladesh: Trends: For justifiable reasons, a question may be raised naturally; what has been the trend of Sheikh Hasina's government in the movement for building a Digital Bangladesh during the last four years?

A. On the Path of Building a People's State: The government could link up the country's constitution with its roots during the past four years in order to transform the country into a people's state. A courageous move to digitalise the elections was made during the period by utilising EVM and voter list with photographs. Stride towards a digital age was bolstered by extending the services related to basic needs to the doorsteps of the common people. Economic growth rate of the country has been raised to almost 7 percent, jobs were provided to 400 thousand people and employment opportunities were created for 6.8 million individuals; infrastructures were developed at various levels and living standard of the citizens has been improved. This endeavour to build a happy, prosperous and developed 'Golden Bangla' is being made during a golden era.

B. On the Steps of a Digital Government:

During this period, advances have been made from placement of budgets to digitalisation of MPs and parliament secretariat. Interactions between the MPs and politicians with the citizens have already commenced. Many MPs are exchanging views with the citizens by creating their own web-pages or Facebook page. They have their own email accounts so that people can send in their opinions. Gradually, the political parties have started practicing politics through digital methods. The tendency of setting up websites by political parties including the Awami League and the use of internet in other areas is on the rise. Some political parties including the Awami League and the BNP are making arrangements for online broadcast of their programmes, gatherings and public rallies. A digital voter list with photographs was prepared even before the holding of last national election; elections are now being held by updating that list. This endeavour has been converted into a project for National ID cards. It may be mentioned that the task of providing machine readable passports is not only being done properly, the programme is being expanded all over and even outside the country. The task of providing visa has also been made digital.

a) Legal and Policy Aspects: The government has already constituted a separate ministry called Information and Communication Technology. It was initially a division and now a full-fledged ministry. The government formulated the Information and Communication Technology Policy 2009 within 100 days of its assumption of office. The ICT Act 2006 was amended in 2009. That amendment has facilitated establishment of a digital signature authority in the country. The process of issuing 3G/4G licences is at a final stage alongside renewal of 2G licence, issuance of licences for call centers, preparation of guidelines and issuance of licences for internet gateway and internet exchange. 3-G has already been launched on an experimental basis. In the meantime, two enterprises have widened their Wi-max service coverage in the country in accordance with Wi-max services guidelines and the licences issued. E-commerce and mobile banking have been introduced by legitimising e-commerce and online payment system. Policies on online banking including cheque clearance have been framed and made effective. A committee is working to standardise, develop and undertake research on Bangla. Bangla encoding called BDS 1520: 2011 has been standardised. Mobile keypad called BDS 1834: 2011 has also been standardised. Bangla keyboard for mobile phones has been made compulsory in accordance with this standardised keyboard. Bangla domain name for the internet has been approved. On the other hand, the age of digital signatures started in the country on 18 April 2012. Emails are being used now in official work in accordance with Secretariat Instructions. Instructions have been issued for providing email and internet facilities in all government colleges.

b) Infrastructure Development: Besides enhancing the internet bandwidth, its price has been brought down from Taka 27 thousand to Taka 8 thousand. Whereas the bandwidth was 44.4 GB in 2008, it is now 144.6 GB. It is expected to increase to 160 GB very soon and even higher later on. Alongside raising the bandwidth, alternative international connection has also been arranged. A number of terrestrial licences have been issued. Besides, decision has been taken to link up with another submarine cable connection. Work on sending the country's own satellite to space has already started. A National Data Centre has been set up for the first time in the country. It is the first 3-tier certified data centre, which can store all digital data of the government.

Work has started on setting up more than one network infrastructure in the country. The government is implementing a Taka 675 crore network project called Bangladesh Educational Network. It can be a carrier for the digital age of higher education. The government has started work on Bangladesh Government Network project. Another network project named 'Info-bahan' is also being implemented by the government. All areas of governance will come under the purview of fibre optics network if these two projects are implemented. Work on launching an STP in the Janata Tower of Dhaka is progressing. Work on the hi-tech park at Kaliakoir is also advancing, which may start operations in the middle of next year. Besides, initiative has been taken to set up hi-tech parks at the divisional level.

c) Reaching Services to People's Doorsteps: A notable achievement has been the ranking of Bangladesh as the second country in the world in providing information technology services. This service sector has undergone such expansion since 2009 that we have been honoured and awarded prizes at international level. This kind of achievement is a milestone for a country like Bangladesh.

Since 2009, the government has been striving relentlessly to reach services to the doorsteps of the people. The government has on the one hand

digitalised the delivery and payment (purji) system of sugarcane growers, on the other hand different services like agricultural information, health information, educational information, admission and examination results of educational institutions are being rendered up to the union and individual levels. Union Information Service Centers have been established in 4,598 unions of the country. The government is supplying ICT equipment to these institutions where employments are being generated for 1 male and 1 female sponsor as well as 2 alternate sponsors. If their average number is 4, then around 18 thousand employments have been generated in this sector. Some of them are not only rendering services inside the country, they are also engaged in outsourcing for foreign countries. District information portals and one-stop service centres have also been established. Land related services are being provided without any delay or harassment from these one-stop service centres. Mobile and internet connections have been given to 800 health centres at district and upazila levels. The post offices have also been transformed into digital service centres.

The government has started to digitalise the existing land records in the country. At the same time, work on digital land survey has also

started with Korean assistance. Steps have also been taken to digitalise land registration. The results of SSC examination are being disseminated via mobile, internet and email since 2009. Arrangement has been made to pay electricity, gas and phone bills through mobile phone. Railway time-table can be obtained via mobile. Railway tickets can also be purchased through mobile phone. E-tendering has been launched. Banking services have been made fully digital. At the same time, cheque clearances of banks have been made digital. Bangladesh Bank is serving as the payment gateway. Credit reports of banks are being sent online.

Digital edition of the Holy Quran has been prepared. As a result, just as the Holy Quran is available in digital format, its Bangla and English editions as well as pronunciations can be obtained in digital format.

d) Digital Education: Apart from launching public examinations at primary and junior secondary levels, the decision of the government to distribute free text books has been lauded by the countrymen. The government has formulated a set of policies and action-plans on information technology education and application of information technology in education; massive programmes have been undertaken for their implementation.

The biggest project of the government focuses on building smart classrooms in 20 thousand 5 hundred educational institutions by providing laptops and projectors. This project is now under implementation at a cost of Taka 3 thousand 56 crore. The government has already started work on preliminary application of this concept. Trainings are being imparted on preparation of interactive and digital educational contents in all teachers' training centres. The teachers are preparing digital contents which are open to all. Digital education is being imparted in a number of educational institutions. Digital classrooms have been started in many educational institutions and plans have been formulated to digitalise all classrooms of educational institutes in phases. An enterprise named 'Bijoy Digital' has converted the pre-school curriculum text materials into digital contents. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board has prepared software for primary level text books.

It is expected that text-books of all levels including primary and secondary will be converted into digital forms once the curricula undergo change in 2013. The government has already established computer laboratories in over 3 thousand educational institutions. This effort has been ongoing during the past four years. The government has made computer education compulsory in class six from 2012. The subject will be made compulsory in class seven from 2013. Initiative has been taken to set up a Digital University at Gazipur near Dhaka. Wi-max has been introduced on a limited scale at Shahjalal University, TSC of Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar and Chittagong University. All textbooks published by NCTB are available on the internet since 2011. Alongside digitalisation of library management in different educational institutes and public cum private entities, digital libraries and e-information portals are being built. These are aiding acquisition of knowledge by the students.

C. Start of Digital Lifestyle: Digital devices are reaching our people at a very fast rate. Half of the country's population now own mobile phones. Internet and digital technologies are also in vogue everywhere. Now, communication over the internet exceeds paper

correspondences. Video conferencing or conversing with the help of applications like 'Skype' has become an ordinary affair. Social communication networks like 'Facebook' is now hugely popular in Bangladesh. We have already entered the age of e-commerce, mobile commerce and mobile banking.

D. Proliferation of Universal Connectivity: The country now has 4th generation internet services or 'Wi-max'. At least two organizations are providing this service in Dhaka, divisional cities and some district towns. Use of internet via mobile phone has increased tremendously. Almost 30 million people in the country now use internet. But this usage will increase manifold when we enter the age of 3-G or 4-G mobiles.

There are hopes that we may not have to wait up to 2021; Digital Bangladesh may be achieved even before that.

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Multimedia Classroom



The sugarcane farmers of the country now get Purji through SMS very easily.