

IN CONVERSATION WITH H.E. MR. SHIRO SADOSHIMA

the outgoing Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to the People's Republic of Bangladesh



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

In an exclusive interview the Punjabi-clad diplomat with a sharp sense of humour shares with Aasha Mehreen Amin and Amitava Kar of this paper Japan's vision for Bangladesh and on a lighter note, how he wanted to become an actor but ended up being a diplomat.

A CANDID DIPLOMAT

AMITAVA KAR

The Daily Star (TDS): Please tell us a little bit about the city you were born in, your education and family.
H.E. Mr. Shiro Sadoshima (HE SS): I was born in 1953 in a town called Fukuoka which is on the northern tip of the southernmost island of Japan. I studied Law in the Tokyo University. Later on, I obtained an MA in Chinese Politics from Stanford University, US. My wife stays back in Japan with my kids, a boy and a girl. While in college, I wanted to become an actor. I organised a theatrical troupe. It was 1972. We were trying to put a drama on stage and a group of radical students did not like it. They tried to stop us from putting it on stage. At one point they resorted to violence. The police arrived. I was innocent but they took me to the police station and interrogated me for long hours. After that I suspended all my activities. Soon after, a senior friend organised another troupe and coincidentally, he was trying to put on the same drama. I could not help joining them. One day while I was acting there, I found a small article in the back page of a TV magazine. A famous TV company was going to throw an audition for some new faces for season two of a very popular series. I went to Osaka for the interview. I thought it went well. Just when I was about to stand up, an old gentleman who was taking a nap during the interview woke up and said, "Have you ever seen the drama?" I decided not to lie. So I said, "No, Sir, I haven't." He was upset. Then I remembered I once caught a glimpse of the series while flipping channels. When I mentioned this, he said, "Get out of here." The old gentleman was the chairman of the TV Company and that was the end of my dream to become an actor.

TDS: How did you get interested in the diplomatic service?
HE SS: Then I heard about the diplomatic exam. The eligibility for the exam was that you just had to pass college. For qualifying in other branches of the public service, you had to graduate. There was a good chance that I was not going to graduate. I had skipped a lot of classes. I thought if I cleared the qualifying exam I would at least have

a job. I tried it the first time in 1976. I hadn't studied much. I failed. The next year I made it. That was the start of my diplomatic career. I tried to be an actor. And sometimes diplomats act. I got the right job in the end, after all (laughter). I have enjoyed my career all the way—particularly this assignment here in Bangladesh, the most exciting and impressive tour I ever had. I have served, in order of appointment, in China, the US, Vietnam, Australia,

time being in 1998. I thought I had some idea about what Bangladesh is like. But visiting and living are totally two different things. I was overwhelmed by the vibrant colours all around and the arts. People are happy. They care. I have never seen a country like this. TDS: Have you found any similarities between the two people?
HE SS: Like Bangladesh, Japan is also prone to various kinds of natural disasters, typhoons, floods

and how you took up painting.
HE SS: I am a weekend painter. While a sophomore, I used to go into the mountains with watercolours in my backpack. Once I had a near-death experience in the autumn fog. I never thought I would paint again. But within one year of my arrival in this country, I found myself painting again. I was amazed by the people and colours. This country has given me some inspiration for which I am very grateful.

Japanese painting, and they later became top artists in Japan. TDS: You wear traditional Bangladeshi clothes like the Punjabi. Are you breaking away from any diplomatic norms?
HE SS: They are very comfortable. The fun part is the sandals. You don't have to wear socks and shoes. When our Prime Minister came to Dhaka in 2014, I went into the special plane to receive our PM, I opened the door and the PM was surprised to see me in this attire. Friends in the entourage were looking for me saying, "Where is our Ambassador?" They thought I was not there. But I was there, wearing a Punjabi. It has become sort of a brand of myself. If I go to a social occasion not wearing it, people ask me, what happened to your Punjabi? But when friends in Japan saw pictures of me wearing one, they said I looked like a Kung Fu teacher.

recommendations?
HE SS: This country occupies a lynchpin position between Southeast Asia and India to both of which we have large investment stakes. We want Bangladesh to become a hub of production and supplier of quality parts to our production lines in Southeast Asia, for example, Malaysia, Thailand, or towards west, India. The line workers of this country are hardworking and efficient. And you also have some efficient engineers. You have to take advantage of these merits. Your RMG has been very successful in penetrating markets in North America and Europe but in the Japanese market not so much. You could do better. Production costs in Japan are high. The costs in China are also becoming higher. Many Japanese companies are going to Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. Myanmar has got only 20 million people. I am always encouraging my staff to beat our embassy in Yangon. I tell Japanese visitors, "BTM"—better than Myanmar.



My Memory of Dhaka by H.E. Mr. Shiro Sadoshima

PHOTO: SPBA/ MOHIDUL HAQUE

and Hong Kong. TDS: How did you prepare for the ambassadorship to Bangladesh?
HE SS: The second half of my career has been development assistance oriented. Immediately before coming here, I was the DG of International Corporation Bureau which is in charge of Japanese government's Official Development Assistance operations. During this time, I visited Bangladesh several times, the first

and earthquakes. We have to stay alert against these forces. And here, people unite to fight against rivers and cyclones. When I go to the countryside I am reminded of my own country. Japanese people like it here, they keep coming back. The Japanese TV series Oshin was very popular here. Our two people share common sentiments and values. TDS: You are also an artist. Please tell

TDS: What's your impression about the Bangladeshi art scene?
HE SS: I am impressed with the fact that there are so many established painters here who studied in Japan—Jamal Ahmed, Sheikh Afzal, Dr Kibria and so on. I knew that Tagore visited Japan more than once and made friends with a then-famous curator, or at critic, Mr. Tenshin Okakura who sent some teachers to Shantiniketan to teach

the future of Bangladesh-Japan bilateral relationship.
HE SS: The relationship came to a new height through the exchanges between the Prime Ministers of our two countries. Bangladesh is turning to a very important strategic corner for its future development. Our bilateral relation is also coming closer to a very strategic moment. Despite the political turmoil and the difficulties, your economy is growing. And if you look at the demography there are so many young people. That's a big plus. But to continue your nation building you will need energy. The natural gas will come to an end someday. You have a huge reserve of coal but you need time and technology to turn it into energy. So you will have to import it. How are you going to pay for them? Now you are classified as an LDC so you have a good handicap. But when you graduate from the LDC status, you are going to have to compete on a level ground. You have developed some very good light industries, particularly RMG and pharmaceuticals. You are going to have to diversify and add value to your industries in order to finance those imports. We believe you can do it. Japan is ready to help. TDS: What are your

TDS: What do our businessmen need to do to make our products more attractive to the Japanese market?
HE SS: We are now proposing the establishment of an industrial belt called the Bay of Bengal Industry Growth Belt. Our Prime Minister has said that if you comply with a set of policies towards that orientation, we are ready to offer all sorts of help including financial. The two governments have embarked upon this exercise. We hope this will take our relations to another height. We are ready. You should find markets in the vicinity first. We advised your government, particularly the Foreign Office to establish links with RCEP-Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership promoted by ASEAN countries. TDS: What thoughts are going to take with you when you leave?
HE SS: Bangladeshis are a happy people. They are also very caring. Your approach to life—that's something I would like to share with my friends back home. That's why I am taking my paintings with me to Bangkok, Thailand, my next assignment.

JAPAN | An all-weather friend of Bangladesh

Japan recognised the People's Republic of Bangladesh on February 10th, 1972, soon after its independence. Japan was thus one of the earliest countries to officially recognise Bangladesh. Warm friendship has been fostered between the people of the two countries since then and Japan is historically the biggest bilateral development partner of Bangladesh.

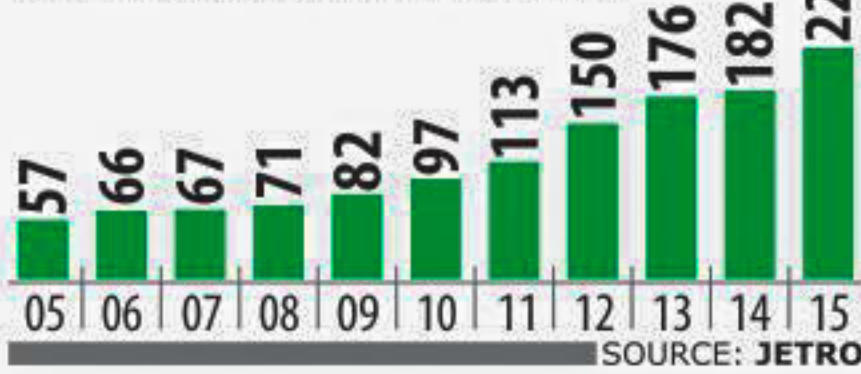
Every year, more than a hundred Bangladeshi students receive Japanese Government Scholarships to study in Japan, and Bangladesh is one of the largest recipient countries of these scholarships in recent times. So far 3430 Bangladeshi students have been to Japan under the scholarship since

FACTS: TRADE AND INVESTMENT

- The number of Japanese companies doing business in Bangladesh increased by 2.7 times in the last 6 years. In 2014 the Prime Ministers of the two countries mutually visited.
- Export Increased by 2.9 times since 2008.
- RMG export: increased by 7.7 times in last 5 years.
- Total number of Japanese living in Bangladesh: 908 increased by 1.6 times in last 3 years (as of 2013 source: MOFA in Japan)

1955. As one of the development partners of Bangladesh, Japan has extended support to its effort for economic and social development for the past 43 years since its independence. Japan's basic principles of the assistance towards Bangladesh are accelerating

NUMBER OF JAPANESE COMPANIES INVESTING IN BANGLADESH



sustainable economic growth with equity and bringing people out of poverty towards becoming a middle-income country. In order to accelerate an inclusive economic growth, Japan helps develop communication-transportation infrastructures, promote efficient

transportation of people and goods and contribute to the mitigation of regional disparities.

To resolve the serious power shortage, which is the greatest impediment for the country's economic development, Japan makes efforts to increase electricity supply through the development of power plants and transmission and distribution grids.

Japan has contributed to Bangladesh's efforts to realise MDGs in such areas as poverty reduction, primary and professional education, maternal and child health, and supply of safe water. For example, maternal and neonatal health, improvement of countermeasure against infectious

diseases and the strengthening of health system including enhancement of basic health service quality and quantity are carried out.

In addition, Japan supports Bangladesh to mainstream disaster management and climate change focusing on disaster warning, earthquake countermeasures, and river management.

Economic relations between the two countries are growing. Japanese companies investing in Bangladesh as well as the amount of export (garments, shoes, leather products, etc.) to Japan is increasing. Japan supports Bangladesh's efforts to develop more export oriented industries.