

What's all this about nation branding?



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I was standing at the immigration cue at Hamburg Airport watching their highly efficient system. No matter how many people appeared in the lines it moved very fast. The process seemed very smooth—they just looked at the passport, used the seal and off you went. When my turn came, I walked up to the immigration officer, waiting to complete the process like so many before me. The officer saw my passport and gave me a much closer look. Then he started asking questions, which he hadn't asked anyone before (I am assuming based on their time spent). Which places do you want to go to? Do

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you have confirmed tickets and hotels for the entire travel? Can I take a look at them? How much money do you have? Can I take a look at the money? Do you have a credit card? As I showed him everything he asked for, the instinctive reaction, like many Bangladeshis who went through similar experiences, was anger and frustration.

While I waited at the carousel for my luggage to arrive, I kept thinking about the episode, trying to find the reason that made the officer grill me. I felt the answer lay with my country of origin. Every day many Bangladeshis receive advantages or face additional challenges simply because of the country

where they are from, and the same goes for every citizen of the world. And that's where nation branding/image of a nation comes into play.

Simon Anholt first came up with the concept of nation brands. You combine the words nation and brand and it is likely to create mixed reactions. The concept of branding has evolved in recent times, representing the face of capitalism. The concept worked very well for commercial products. In fact, it worked so well that it began to be applied to not-for-profit organisations as well as nations.

But how did a concept which essentially helped sell products and services become relevant for a nation? The answer lies in the context within which nations operate in today's globalised world. Nations are making increasingly conscious efforts to hone their country branding/image in recognition of the need to fulfill three major objectives: to attract tourists, to stimulate inward investment, and to boost exports. A further objective of nation branding is talent attraction, whereby countries compete to attract students with higher education and skilled workers. Some experts suggest additional goals of nation branding, such as as increasing currency stability, restoring international credibility and investor confidence, reverse international rating downgrades, creating international influence, and stimulating stronger international partnerships. And most importantly, to promote nation building by nurturing confidence, pride, harmony, ambition, and resolve.

When applying the concept of a brand to nations rather than to mere products, there is an ethical obligation to do so in an honest, respectful manner, and to acknowledge the limits of how appropriate it is to treat nations as brands. After all, nations do not belong to brand managers or corporations. Indeed, they do not belong to anyone, they belong to the nations' people. Today every country wants to man-

age its reputation. But a significant gap exists between what it really means and how far commercial approaches can really apply to the government. I will not delve much into nation branding practices and how the concept is applied. Rather I would like to explore how relevant the concept is for Bangladesh. But before we explore that issue, we need to be aware of two big shifts that are taking place globally: authenticity and transparency. The more we go global, the more we look for authenticity. Righteousness and justness are becoming the in-things. We are searching for the pure, the honest, the sustainable. People are beginning to reject excess—too much sugar, too much salt, too much waste, too much consumerism and too much pretense. This trend has been driven by the ubiquitous presence of technology and use of social media. Suddenly, we are witnessing a massive influx of information, content, products and services. As technology becomes omnipresent and becomes the dominant force in our lives, our search for the authentic and pure grows stronger.

If we bring all these together with nation branding and Bangladesh, a couple of themes emerges. The first and most obvious one: how can it help transform Bangladesh as a nation, as we strive to change the lives of millions of people? Here we need to relook at what end goal we are pursuing. It should be more than just some number reflected by our GDP. Mere focus on financial numbers misses the true quality of life—at the end of the day, the journey should be for individuals to pursue happiness and be content with their lives. As for the second aspect: how do we achieve that goal, it is critical to have a clear idea of what that end goal so that it can work as a compass for the government to decide what approach to take and which areas to focus on.

And in that journey, there are enough reasons for the government to

harness its national image. Firstly, we need to seriously consider how our key external stakeholders perceive Bangladesh. We know that the government of Bangladesh hasn't started a nation branding campaign yet. In absence of any such conscious branding initiative, the question arises how come we have an image that is more negative than the reality. The reason is simple: our external stakeholders have received news/stories, read about the country, and experienced Bangladesh in different ways, which has formed their narrative.

The first such communication took place at the Concert for Bangladesh. The image of hungry kids coupled with Henry Kissinger's infamous epithet for Bangladesh—the bottomless basket—strongly associated poverty with the country. Sadly, the poster didn't show any images of spirited people fighting a much stronger opposition. That would have given a more accurate image of our people—the spirited people with a 'never say never' attitude.

But that negative narrative only received confirmation in the years to come, with stray stories of poverty, flood and natural calamities. In absence of any other narratives, these negative aspects of the country began to define Bangladesh. Till only recently, there was only one perception regarding Bangladesh. In such a scenario, how does a country change its image? How do you tell a different story?

Doing a traditional promotional campaign for a nation hardly works. Word of mouth or messages from influencers are what drives today's authenticity. We search for stories. Stories of glory, discovery, excellence, innovation and achievement. These stories slowly begin to shape how we perceive a nation, its people and its culture. While we cannot force someone to tell our version, we can surely influence them by presenting the facts in an interesting and creative. For example, the apparels sector is one of the

most glorious episodes of Bangladeshi history. Starting with almost nothing in the 1980s, through pure ingenuity, passion, dedication and hard work, our entrepreneurs have built the world's second largest apparel sector. The journey was not smooth and like any other sector, there were slips and there were challenges. But the positives far outweigh the negatives. Interestingly, if you ask a random foreign individual who is not directly linked to apparels how they would define the sector, they would most likely describe it from its challenge viewpoint as that's the only angle they have ever come across. They most likely wouldn't be able to explain how much the sector has contributed to the nation, which is far beyond just some numbers—over USD 25 billion in exports, over 2,000 crore in salaries delivered per month, supporting 16 million people directly, reducing poverty by 9%. The real impact of the sector is helping a girl from a small village to dream the dream that she can one day earn, fulfill her wishes, lead her life the way she wants. But this side of story is usually missed and absence of such a positive narrative influences people to believe a version far removed from reality.

But there are many such amazing stories in Bangladesh—stories of vibrancy, of spirited enthusiasm which is pushing Bangladesh forward. From agriculture to remittance to business, it is the spirited people of Bangladesh who with little steps every day are slowly realising the potential of the nation. And as a nation branding strategy we need to find creative ways of sharing these stories, sharing that passion which defines the soul of the nation. Somehow I feel that is an untold story worth sharing.

The key responsibility of shaping a nation's image lies with the government. Other governments view a nation's