

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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Branding Bangladesh: The 'identity' challenge

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Identity matters. It matters most amid flux, which the 21st Century is riddled with. Compromising the past and adding "new" components always knock on identity doors. Distinguishing the non-negotiable identity components from the negotiable gives us a head start. Our non-negotiable component remains Sonar Bangla, and all that that entails. We directly draw that term's romantic tones and drawn-out hues from Rabindranath Tagore, indirectly from others in our cultural pantheon. Their political manifestation was Bangladesh's 1971 birth. Ever since, negotiable components stole the limelight, exposing how mobile empathy is part of our tapestry.

No country can escape identity mobility. The Statue of Liberty, whose "huddled masses" tag (which invited the "tired," "poor," and those "breathing to be free" from the late 19th Century to a "land of opportunity"), can barely be whispered today: still a louder "Make America great again" voice of a less welcoming country has not tarnished its "land/s of opportunity" niche.

Great Britain's "ruling the waves" once emitted shivers down the spine of many 18th and 19th Century European empires, yet today, when that navy is far

more advanced than ever before, that maritime identity punch has weakened. Likewise, for Japan, whose economic 20th Century miracles blended so nicely with the unique "land of the rising sun" sobriquet, yet Japan's sharp 21st Century demographic bite softens the "rising" identity.

"Branding" captures such nuances and gives identity the needed breathing space to regroup. Any US "open-door" identity, for example, can serve a long innings, but how wide or narrow that open door,

determine how robust the identity.

Branding was popularised by the interdependent development of 19th Century Atlantic zone industrial revolutions and pedagogical expansiveness: the former supplied the subjects, Business Administration (particularly Marketing), the platform. Twentieth Century consumerism and personal income expanded wildly because of these, with technological changes as catalyst: since assembly-lines factory fixtures last more than a

or institutional construction or reconstruction. Economic, political, or social developmental lenses appear. We study them to build a shelter over our heads, put square-meals on the table, and push the intellectual buttons to materialise other dreams. They also enter our identity-building menu, thus creating identity high- and low-tides, with branding accenting the ascendant forces: some become developed countries, others remain underdeveloped (or traditional), while several occupy the space in between using different nomenclatures (less developed, emergent, frontier), and so forth.

"Countries" represent one key capstone identity unit (culture, race, religion are others): a passport identifying our citizenship (US/British/Japanese/Bangladeshi) gives us admission (which culture, race, and religion cannot, although each exert between-the-lines influence in getting a visa). Against our pivotal country-independence-identity nexus, Bangladeshis cannot take shifts, directions, and projections too lightly, not if we are to climb the development ladder. We have expressed our desire to become a developed country by the 2040s, and even the World Economic Forum estimates we could shed our least developed country identity by 2025.

Recalling how Joi Bangla transformed from a 1970 rally song into producing the country's first four principles (democracy, nationalism, secularism, and socialism), we also notice how some of those principles have changed over the 50-years of Bangladesh's existence. This is mobile empathy at play. Socially we notice a larger proportion of women donning hijabs, with the Muslim identity far more visible today than in 1971; but also, westernisation and secularism with

development: in our media, travel and tour destinations, and department store purchases.

Youthful outbursts/movements also bespeak the future. Cricket, for example, was hardly worshipped in the 1970s (when Abahani-Mohammedan Sporting Club football rivalry, for example, dominated sports news), but today it has become a culture-changing spark, with Mashrafe Juniors spearheading a fashion/activity movement, thus identity-shaping, movement. Our pluralistic education (in Bangla, English, madrasa, and so forth), and weather havocs (floods, cyclones) instilled adaptability into our DNA make-up. We inserted microfinance in the global vocabulary. It not only fed Bangladesh's economic take-off through Grameen Bank (originating in 1976; and earning a Nobel Prize, with founder, Mohammad Yunus, in 2006), but also nurtured an environment that would later, independently, produce the world's largest non-government organisation, mobilising Bangladeshi youth in giving money-making a social or human face: this was our Brac signature tune, spelled today as Bangladesh Resources Across Communities, but originally branded as Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance from 1972, then rebranded as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. Knighting its founder, Fazle Hasan Abed, only recognised his identity-asserting contributions for his country to flutter.

As we relish our current middle-income identity, like a new-born-baby moving through childhood into adulthood, so too must we hope Bangladesh's move from a

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Rabindra Sarobar, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

PHOTO: KAZI TAHMIN AGAZ APURBO

or how much more wider or narrower it is compared to another country's immigration door, is what drives longevity. Britain's naval supremacy once stoutly safeguarded an empire "where the sun would never set," but Boris Johnson's "Global Britain" today needs other critical instruments than a navy, when economic competitiveness, rather than military, leads the global charge. Platforms shift, but how seasonal variations fit glacially-moving cultures and fixed geographical endowments

generation, their structural hardware connotation contrasts with today's Internet-based software upgrades. As human digestion of changes gets more complicated and confusing, identity-moulding bears the brunt.

Creating independence for a country itself typically requires fire in the blood and mental energy; but once quenched (that is, independence is attained), practicalities shift the identity gravity-centre elsewhere, for example, to infrastructural

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