

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2021, FALGUN 6, 1427 BS

12

Branding Bangladesh: The 'identity' challenge

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

bottomless-pit (Henry Kissinger's unsavoury but spot-on 1971 characterisation), into the more sanctified development ballpark, will speak of our 21st Century identity.

One 1969 Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography sheds useful inspirational light. Writing about his US Secretary of State 1949-53 tenure, Dean Acheson's over-riding duty was to restore world order by a hitherto isolationist and global-rivalry newcomer. His appropriately entitled Present at the Creation volume elaborated how his country crossed that bridge. Similar Bangladeshi bells can ring today if leftover citizens from those blood-soaked 1971 days in Bangladesh can share their own present-at-the-creation mindset with today's social-media-savvy flocks, to whom the identity-baton must pass. Behind Sonar Bangla in our hearts, how we shifted from the world's lowest growth-rate (-14 percent), then faced the ferocious 1974 famine, before dominating 21st Century growth-rates (yes, all 20 years, among



The Mongol Shobhajatra at Pohela Boishakh has now become an integral part of celebrating our Bengali culture.

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the highest globally, including the pandemic-ravaged 2020) showed how our identity shifted the fulcrum from the heart and blood, that is, patriotism, to the stomach and savings, that is, realities, in stellar style. Harnessing adaptability will help us relish the luxury of speaking in developed country language. When other countries tip-toe our growth model, like we did

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the west's, then our identity-searching/changing brand elsewhere will have fully ripened our Sonar Bangla quest.

From our political spark, we now seek market appeal. Over 50 years, we have collected our fair share of other brand-names: an RMG (ready-made-garment) heavyweight; a low-income/low-wage producing country; a

value-chain climber (shifting from low-tech garments to somewhat higher-tech ship-building or auto-assembler, and eventually nearer the pinnacle, of hi-tech ICT [information communication technology] exporter). Multiple brands littering a Sonar Bangla today does not mean the bottomless-pit label has gone. Bangladesh remains a partially-covered pit even as it acquires mid-century developed country credentials, like ICT parks. Our fluctuating economic fortunes makes our identity more flexible now than ever before: we shift, for example, between barter, cash-exchanges, and plastic-card transactions, on the one hand, then pillow-under savings, banks, stocks, and bonds, on the other; and similarly permit kerosene, firewood, and solar energy to coexist, just like rickshaws, thayla-garis, and metro-trains, or even slums, repatriation camps, and posh neighbourhoods.

Behind the economic picture lies the social: the higher the development, the fewer the rickshaw-wallas we expect, and hopefully with them evaporating social stratification. A different political picture also emerges: more contested and flat electoral playing-fields, even as the nonchalant electorate grows, as software, sports, faith, and other engagements tax their individual time and attention for the first time. Our cultural tapestry similarly evolves: more technological gadgets spelling our daily activities than ever before, perhaps robots planting paddy on our rooftops instead of farmers crouching under the baked sun in the fields; and a vocabulary filled with more broken or alliterated English, given our deep Internet immerses, in turn, sputtering even our most fluent and dependable communication medium, Bangla, swaying to potentially distorting IT (information technology) grindstones. Identity-construction needs these. If tackled progressively, the more robust the emergent identity will be; but with every fickle or fiddle, cover-up or ho-hum, identity can also wear and tear, as New York's Statue of Liberty for the United States did, as too the ruling-waves for British identity.

Tough questions with no fixed answers dictate the future. Sociologically, for example, what must we teach our children: much more of patriotic anthropological/sociological/political courses (beyond the required ones in typical universities), or some ICT or profession-building counterparts, just to put breakfast on the table (requiring more sleepless nights today than ever before, just when students want to expend less relative time than ever)? Politically, will we continue to deploy heavily-armed police at every balloting station, or will laptop voting from home through an inevitably more safeguarded software link clear a major past hurdle? Economically, with newer Gulshans to live in, less emaciating workplaces than assembly-lines to work in, and more recreational spots, like Cox's Bazaar, St Martin's Island, and the Sunderbans Forests to travel to, we will be shifting to a service sector: growing software applications, media contraptions, wardrobe diversity and contents, upscale toiletries, fashion here and there (watch out designers), and so forth,

will only highlight a haphazard low-wage production/manufacturing identity of yester-years. Still, they become the cornerstones of a future identity.

Wholesale transformations cannot but threaten the uniqueness and sanctity of disciplines with fixed boundaries (like economics, politics, and sociology, among others), as the blueprints of future identities stem from those very overlaps. Clicking the switch button becomes the new survival key. Digital Bangladesh recognises that, as too those business schools embracing social responsibilities, and social science faculties themselves globalising more than remaining local.

Diversification and transformation also breed new and urgent considerations. Sonar Bangla will now have to become more environmentally sensitive, and ultimately place monetary/material priorities behind the aesthetic. China, India, and, before them, the United States allowed economic interests to over-ride environmental concerns until growth reversed the order, until high-mass consumption dominated the economy. Will that be our pathway?

High mass-consumption (HMC) concludes Walt Whitman Rostow's stage-based developmental thesis, a useful yardstick from the 1950s. Because they can be branded, those stages, from traditional through take-off and mature growth to the HMC plateau, supply identity thresholds. Whether any transformation is driven by developmental dynamics or climate-change (which is one "million-dollar question"), the original green behind our Sonar Bangla, now signals other purposes, shifting from political identification (reflecting birth-pangs and subsequent growth), or romantic escapades (as in the Tagore piece,

and our current status. These are unlikely to be the "clashes" feared in western countries, for example, against jihadis, or Africans in West Europe, or Latinos in the United States, but even softer types can modify ancient rituals with modern inputs, like arranged marriages squaring off against love-marriage, the larger proportion of hijabs being worn now, as compared to the 1970s, that too, for more social and protective purposes than scriptural; and, of course, softer calls for women empowerment against sterner defence of prohibitive traditions.

Clearly whether a developed Bangladesh becomes constitutionally Islamic or secular will give us a better sense of the identity trajectory. The absence of clear-cut answers streamlines the ambiguities of economic development portrayed: both low- and hi-tech production and employment will coexist with strong and weak Muslim aficionados.

Our identity will no longer be monolithic; but it is this multifaceted future that deserves as much classroom cultivation as it has been venerated on factory assembly-lines, with our businessmen, even external cultural/technological appeals. On the bright side is the diversity it exposes of our capacities and capabilities, epitomising the cliché, "When in Rome, live like the Romans," in spite of unstoppable long-term and inevitable identity dilution. Crying louder is the dark side: as family-size narrows (extended families have begun dissolving), competition cannot but displace loyalty, patronisation, and other value-laden traits, and with them a sizable chunk of tradition; governmental agencies will have to be disaggregated to the minutiae-sized high mass-consumption



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

like in its national anthem, of a sedate river-dominated country), to the economic and social (converting pits into sona) realities, to environmental, health, intellectual, and other more through innovative than consumptive prisms.

Two forces will meet: endogenous (preserving environmental facilitators, like the respect our traditional farming peers have for "nature"), and exogenous (largely market-penetrating economic thrusts). Whether collision or adaptation triumphs, our identity for another eon will be determined accordingly. When endogenous dynamics, such as the 1950s pro-Bangla street protests, buckle under exogenous forces, cultural, political, or sociological anchors weaken, which only the strength of emergent forces can correct. Enter our non-negotiable component: how it reaffirms or loosens that boundary line will ultimately speak of our aggregated preferences.

No future identity projections can avoid "clashes of civilisations" during fluxes. In our case, a dramatic one could be between Islamic and modernising forces, although subtler forms prevail: the unavoidable mixing/mingling of a million Rohingyas into our population; our bulging expatriate population versus native-born-and-bred; and the worsening class inequality (Gini Index), which, in the 1970s, depicted a more symmetrical Bangladesh than many countries

problems to make cumulative policy-making sense; online education got an impetus under the pandemic, but how it diluted the classroom-and-campus playgrounds (where lifelong friendships used to be made, anchors were laid, and futures were prayed for), may breed in dissimilar socialising trajectories: we already have begun not talking to our neighbours (even getting to know them), something unheard of at the time of independence.

How we stem unwanted tides and fast-paced changes depends on how well we see the big identity picture: it threatens to grow, but perhaps too fast for absorption. Constantly building grassroots responses to comprehensive demands partly helps cultivate our future identity.

From a bottomless pit to a developed country, Bangladesh has come a long way. But missing any beat in the belief that the best is yet to come jolts the "worthy mindset" journey. Rising to the occasion is the difference between preserving what we had in our acceptable mode (adjustability), and reacting to what we cannot change with fewer cutting-edge tools. We have the option to choose, but since only an unknown future will pass the verdict, we should think twice.

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