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Much to celebrate on Bangladesh's 50th

Success must be sustainable through inclusive growth and democratic practice

FOR Bangladesh to be celebrating its golden jubilee at a time when it has achieved remarkable economic growth, despite all the hurdles and challenges of the first few decades of its existence, is no mean feat. After gaining independence at the cost of millions of lives and the trauma of unbelievable violence, Bangladesh had to rise up from the ashes of a ravaging war. Despite the formidable obstacles in its path to progress—the assassination of Bangabandhu along with most of his family members, the killing of the four great leaders, and the subsequent series of military coups and military rule—Bangladesh was able to pull through and restore democracy in 1991, through which we were able to put a representative government back into the driver's seat.

The aspiration of the people to have a healthy democracy, however, was repeatedly challenged by the acrimonious politics of the two major parties resulting in hartals, parliamentary boycott and violent confrontations on the streets.

However, in the last decade, despite the bottlenecks, economic growth has been robust leading to our graduation from an LDC to a developing country. Our perseverance during the catastrophic pandemic, which began last year and continues to wreak havoc even now, has been commendable. The resilience of Bangladeshis, especially during crisis situations, has brought about this remarkable success. This includes the toil of our people—our farmers, migrant workers and garment workers who have steered our nation into an ascending path.

There are, of course, many challenges in our journey to further progress. In order to take advantage of the momentum, we must establish greater democratic practices in line with Bangabandhu's vision for an equitable, egalitarian, free nation released from the shackles of discrimination and oppression. This was also the dream of our freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives for such a motherland.

Thus, for us to move forward on this trajectory of growth, we must make all efforts to make this economic growth more inclusive by reducing the rising gap between the rich and the poor and removing all kinds of discrimination against those who are marginalised and voiceless. Women who have been at the forefront of our liberation movement, and instrumental in our development success, must be recognised for their contributions and freed from the discrimination, violence and deprivation imposed by a patriarchal system. Our developmental aspirations, moreover, must take into account the sustainability of the environment without which development will not reach the desired level and will be severely compromised in the long run. While we build our nation, we must also save our forests and rivers, and make our air breathable and our cities liveable. We must protect our natural resources so that our future generations can lead healthy, wholesome lives.

At 50, Bangladesh has belied many of its critics and become a symbol of success and resilience for many developing countries.

Attack on Hindu homes shameful

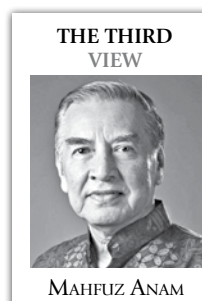
Punish the perpetrators and provide immediate support to the victims

WE strongly condemn the attack on at least 75 Hindu houses by several hundred Hefazat-e-Islam supporters in Sunamganj's Noagaon village on the morning of March 17. The attackers vandalised and looted the houses leaving 35 of them badly damaged and 40 more partially damaged. Carrying locally made weapons, Hefazat supporters from adjacent villages gathered at a bazar in Noagaon village around 9:00am, and launched the attack about an hour later. However, the mayhem then continued for an hour as the police did not reach the spot before 11am. Neither did they arrest anyone nor file any case over the attack.

The motive for the attack apparently was a Facebook post made by one of the village residents, who criticised one of the Hefazat leaders for condemning the celebration of Bangabandhu's birth centenary and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit. At this the Hefazat supporters got angry, and they even got the Noagaon villagers to hand the man over to the police the night before. Why then did they attack the entire Hindu community the next morning? What was their crime? This desire to hand out collective punishment on innocents who simply belong to a minority community shows a very disturbing and destructive mindset. It also demonstrates the dangers of intolerance that leads to such violence.

The fact that the Hefazat supporters felt so emboldened to launch the attack is also worrying. Naturally, they must have thought that their actions will not lead to any dire consequences for them, as violence carried out against minority groups often do get overlooked and ignored.

That is particularly why the authorities must arrest the attackers and punish them accordingly. There have been so many cases in the past where attackers of minority communities have been let off the hook for one reason or another, emboldening more and more such attacks. This cannot be allowed to continue. The authorities must not attempt to brush this incident under the rug as they have done on so many other occasions. They must bring the perpetrators to justice and provide immediate support to the victims.



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZZ ANAM

MY generation and others close to it formed the bulk of the Mukti Bahini in 1971. The majority of Dhaka University students of the time were an integral part of it, as it was my distinct privilege. Most joined in the field but many others played key roles while living where they could carry out courageous acts of collecting money, medicine and supplies for those taking up arms. Some from this group carried out dangerous sabotage operations that form part of the heroic tales that we are so proud to recount today. Every turn and twist of the war reverberated in our hearts at that time because someone amongst us—a Mukti Bahini member—were involved in it, either making that "supreme sacrifice" or suffering grievous injury or teaching the enemy a rare lesson in courage and determination.

One such case was of my close friend and neighbour Nizamuddin Azad, son of Kamruddin Ahmed, a politician, diplomat and author of the seminal book "Emergence of Bengali Middleclass". Azad was warm, generous and had a most disarming and hearty laugh, and was the epitome of sincerity and earnestness. We formed our local cricket club, played together and spent all our spare time together, as neighbourhood friends usually do.

I got him involved with the activities of East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU), popularly called Chhatra Union, the preeminent left-leaning student organisation at that time. We would attend all the EPSU activities, especially street processions. But soon, he became far more involved than me. His sterling qualities of feeling for the poor and the downtrodden surfaced brilliantly when, during the terrible cyclone of 1970, he fully immersed himself in the relief work. With time, he involved himself more and more with the underground work of EPSU.

When the genocide started after March 26, 1971, we lost touch with each other, and our joining the war took place at different times and through different routes. He joined the armed unit of Chhatra Union and was killed during an operation. He never received the recognition that he so richly deserved for his sacrifice.

There must be thousands of other similar cases of patriotism, determination, selflessness and supreme sacrifice remaining unsung. Maybe this could be a worthwhile project to be taken up by our Liberation War Ministry on the occasion of the golden jubilee of our independence. I recall Azad on this occasion for all his love for the country and his courage to take up arms and sacrifice his life so that we could all live with freedom and dignity.

Thus, the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's birth resonates with a far deeper meaning for our generation.

OLIVIA WHITE and ANU MADGAVKAR

EVEN before the passage of the latest stimulus bill in the United States, governments around the world have offered almost USD 12 trillion in financial aid to businesses and households affected by Covid-19, equivalent to 12 percent of global GDP. But how well have they delivered that unprecedented amount of assistance to the intended recipients? And what lessons do these efforts hold for the future?

Many are asking such questions, from policymakers and fintech innovators to economists and civil-society watchdogs. We recently sought answers by analysing 12 government pandemic-support programmes, for both individuals and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), in seven countries: Brazil, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Togo, the United Kingdom, and the US.

We assessed the ambition of each programme's design—its scope, scale, and specificity—and the effectiveness of delivery, measured by the speed and coverage of disbursements. The research, which built on our earlier work on digital identification and digital financial inclusion, considered both country- and programme-level financial infrastructure.

Our study revealed considerable variance. Some programmes combined ambitious design with effective delivery. But many fell short in one or both areas, with problems including slow rollout, failure to reach eligible beneficiaries, and in some cases fraud.

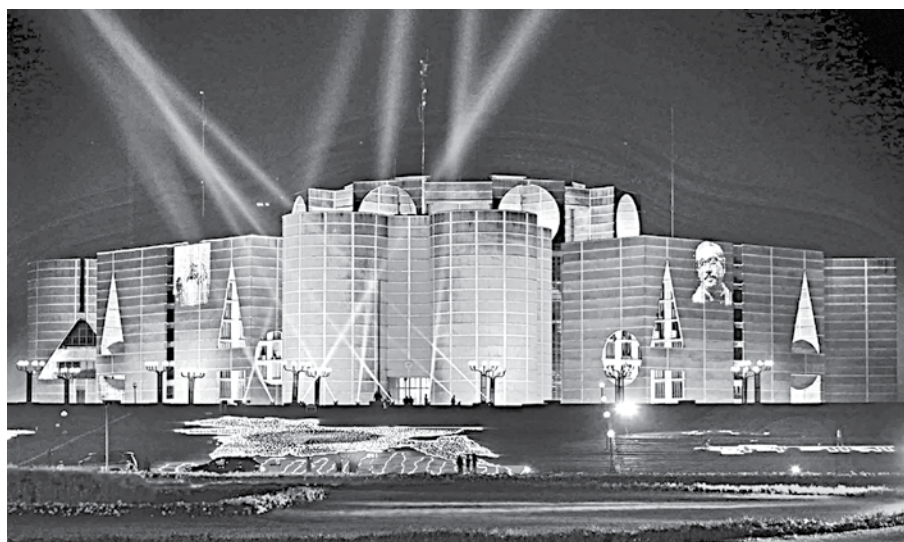
The key takeaway from our research is that large-scale, rapid, and targeted economic disbursements require robust digital financial infrastructure. Beyond helping provide support during crises, this infrastructure also fosters economic

50 YEARS OF BANGLADESH

What got us here will not take us there

We can personally relate to many events and have authentic accounts of many others. We were there at the time of the preparation, the unfolding, the cruelties inflicted by the enemy, and at the conclusion of our freedom struggle. It is also our privilege to have lived through the first half-century of independent Bangladesh—some of it tragic and heartrending, and others most exhilarating.

In these fifty years, we had very hopeful beginnings, like our constitution and first election. Then tragedy befell us through the most brutal and tragic assassination of the Father of the Nation along with his whole family save two daughters, the present PM and her sister Rehana. This was followed by two successive military-sponsored regimes accounting for a total of 16 years. These two regimes gave birth to two political parties—the BNP and JP—that have had their own impact on our political evolution.



The Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban illuminated and decorated as part of celebrations marking the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

The military interlude was followed by 30 years of democracy, triggered by the fall of the autocratic regime of Gen. Ershad. Though freer at first, our democracy became generally restricted to holding elections every five years with the latest ones becoming more and more questionable. This period can be divided into two parts: the first—from 1991 to 2009—during which the governments oscillated every five years between the two rival parties, BNP and AL, and politics was highly combative and mainly consisted of mutual vilification, destructive hartals and boycott of the parliament, making that central institution of democracy all but dysfunctional.

This brand of politics had a terrible impact on our economy with frequent interruptions to all sorts of production and transportation disrupting export, import, retail business and the service industry. It is to the credit of our workers, entrepreneurs and industry owners that they devised ways—like keeping factories open and transporting products at night during day-long hartals—to navigate through the political minefield and somehow keep the economy moving.

The second part—from 2008 to

present—saw the gradual demise of our highly acrimonious two-party system. A massive electoral loss by BNP in the 2008 election and its boycotting of the one held in 2014 literally gave the ruling Awami League a walkover, resulting in the latter having an iron grip over all types of political activities. In the following years, nearly all opposition activities became severely controlled and expression of dissent throttled, as aptly epitomised in the enactment of the Digital Security Act.

Contrary to its impact on politics and dissent, the economy told a remarkable story of success with all important indicators foretelling the emergence of Bangladesh as an inspiring case of struggling out of poverty. The graduation to the status of a developing country, though not unique among LDCs, is remarkable considering our large population, limited land and vulnerability to the vagaries of the nature. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina must be

credited for having inspired a "can-do" mindset—akin to Barack Obama's "Yes, we can" slogan—galvanising our people, especially women and youth, into an engine of advancement not before seen in post-independence Bangladesh.

However, now is the time to forge ahead and our golden jubilee provides the perfect occasion to think anew how best to move forward. So far, we have made a remarkable journey. The challenge now is to make the coming one more meaningful and more equitable. The future must be dedicated to greater freedom and democracy and also to building a more inclusive society with a far greater awareness of the environment. We cannot continue to destroy the environment for economic gains, which can be ephemeral as harming the nature always proves disastrous.

There is an interesting book titled "What Got You Here Won't Get You There", written by Marshall Goldsmith. It essentially makes the case that future successes cannot be achieved by replicating the thoughts, behaviour and mindset that brought the present ones. Though the book's focus is on individuals, I think it equally applies to

nations and countries. For Bangladesh to forge ahead, we must first start by changing our mindset and being fully aware that the global situation under which we developed in the last three decades has completely changed, and will further change in the coming decades in ways that will far outpace anything we can imagine now.

According to the historian Yuval Noah Harari, we have no idea what the job market will look like by 2040, a mere 19 years in the future. Consequently, we have no way of knowing what sort of education we will need to provide to our children so they can fit into that job market.

"The World in 2050", a publication by The Economist Newspaper, looks at the mega-changes that we should prepare for by the middle of this century. It also gives a good idea of which direction we should proceed in.

For us, the population, environment, economy and education should be the major areas to focus on. Population concerns us directly and immediately as we are among the most densely populated countries in the world. We may have managed our population so far but any lowering of guard on its future growth may prove extremely short-sighted. Hence population control, human resources development with a particular focus on women and youth, and health must form a far more urgent priority than it has been so far. The Covid-19 pandemic has made that message poignant and immediate.

We are among the few countries in the world at the frontline of climate change. Most scientific predictions say that 10-15 percent of our land areas will be directly affected by climate change with all its social, economic and human consequences, much of which is mostly unknown. We do not see the mobilisation of people and resources that is necessary to meet such challenges.

On the economy, the prediction is about the future being the "Asian Century", with China, India and Japan playing pivotal roles in it. Bangladesh is strategically placed between the two Asian giants—China and India—and with excellent relations with Japan, we are well-poised to gain from the shift in global economic power to the East.

On education, we have miles to go. Recently, we have fallen into the trap of promoting quantity at the cost of quality. This misconceived emphasis on numbers will prove extremely damaging for us as with the internet, information and communication technology making the world a global village, the standard of education too will become global (it already is in many senses). And the employability of our educated youth will more and more be determined on common and universal educational standards. We are not likely to fare well in that scenario.

While we celebrate our golden jubilee—and there is a lot to celebrate for—we must be fully aware of the arduous tasks that lie ahead. We must face those challenges, not with slogans or rhetoric, but with data-based analysis and well-calculated and sustainable options.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How to Spend \$12 Trillion

growth and resilience more generally. This is true for all countries, but emerging economies have more to gain than richer countries in economic value for every percentage point of GDP spent on incremental government disbursements. That may be because advanced economies already have more digital financial infrastructure in place.

In our study, Singapore's Job Support Scheme and the UK's Job Retention Scheme were among the best performers in terms of both design and delivery. But some emerging-economy schemes also scored well.

The key takeaway from our research is that large-scale, rapid, and targeted economic disbursements require robust digital financial infrastructure. Beyond helping provide support during crises, this infrastructure also fosters economic growth and resilience more generally.

Two Indian programmes—one targeted at women, and an emergency credit guarantee scheme that benefited more than three million SMEs and micro-businesses—were able to build on existing financial infrastructure to perform strongly. Togo, which has less developed financial infrastructure, was still able to make good use of what it has: its Novissi programme made fortnightly cash transfers to informal workers' mobile money wallets that amounted to 30 percent of the minimum monthly wage for the duration of local lockdowns.

One of our main conclusions is that effective government support programmes

have three critical features of financial infrastructure in common: digital payment channels, a basic digital ID system with broad population coverage (such as India's Aadhaar programme), and simple data on individuals and firms that are linked to the digital ID.

Countries whose financial infrastructure included these three features could design programmes optimally and deliver them quickly. Singapore's SME job-support programme, for example, transferred funds automatically to eligible businesses; amounts were calculated based on

the same amount, for example.

There were also delivery challenges in terms of both speed and coverage, owing to the programme's partial reliance on paper checks and incomplete list of eligible recipients. Although more than 160 million Americans ultimately received a payment under the scheme, only 90 million did so in the three weeks after it began on March 30, 2020.

A second significant finding is that building robust digital financial infrastructure can give the economy a larger boost than we had previously thought. Before the Covid-19 crisis, we estimated that applying basic and advanced digital ID to a wide range of interactions between individuals and institutions could deliver an economic gain by 2030 of between 3-13 percent of GDP, depending on the country. But we now estimate that the potential gain could be up to 20 percent higher.

The pandemic has served as a high-stakes stress test for many countries' financial systems, highlighting critical gaps and opportunities. At the same time, it provides valuable lessons about how to improve efficiency and resilience.

Our analysis covers only a subset of assistance programmes in a small number of countries. But it shows that strong financial infrastructure for SMEs and individuals is vital, not just for responding to unexpected and potentially catastrophic crises such as the coronavirus pandemic, but also for boosting financial resilience and economic growth.

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