

Bangladesh: A journey of ascendance

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Since Henry Kissinger famously branded Bangladesh as a “basket case,” (a remark for which he still owes an apology), the country has come a long way. From its fledgling footsteps, it has become a bold, confident, and creative nation as it continues to ascend its learning curve and improve overall well-being.

Poverty has been substantially reduced, health outcomes (infant mortality, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, cholera, life expectancy, etc.) are admirable, family planning has achieved wonders by reducing fertility rates and encouraging smaller families, self-sufficiency in food production has surpassed expectations, economic growth engendered by exports and the remittances of a toiling labour force is enviable, and the inclusion of women in education and their contributions to the economy (both formal and informal) has been transformative. An indomitable spirit and uncountable human contributions underlie the stellar achievements.

The country has stepped into the lower middle-income group of nations powered by its people, philosophy, policy, and platforms. Work is already underway on transforming Bangladesh by 2031 into an upper-middle-income country and by 2041 into a high-income and prosperous country.

What lies behind such phenomenal progress? In the confluence of many forces, a single explanation will perhaps never be adequate. What follows, thus, is a personal account.

Some History

Bangladesh emerged from the ashes of two dreadfully hostile situations that lit two separate and horrific bonfires: the partition of India in 1947, resulting from the discriminatory treatment of Muslims by the Hindus (inscribed in the Lahore Resolution of 1940), and the subsequent dissolution of Pakistan in 1971, animated by economic and cultural control of the eastern wing by its western wing elites. Both events materialised first into calls for redress but culminated in final separation.

The prelude to 1971, however, is inscribed

more deeply in the generation that suffered greatly, with voices surging in the aftermath of the language movement (1952). As repression continued, the mood became ominous as people became more vociferous in demanding justice. When the Agartala Conspiracy Case (1968) and the machinations behind it shook the nation, a wider movement ensued, energised by the spirit of the Six-Point Program. And when the results of the 1970 national elections were abruptly overturned, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s firebrand leadership and his eloquent and strident call on March 7th lit the raging fire.

The *mukti joddhas*, comprised of different segments of society, including Bengali officers and soldiers, responded to the call with unforgettable sacrifices, that culminated in the dismemberment of Pakistan. Bangladesh was born in blood and fire to shape its own identity and destiny. A new vitality infused the spirit of the people to craft the edifice of a hope-instilled and aspiring nation that had broken free from bondage and oppression.

Foundational Philosophy

With new-found freedom and a vibrant and pulsating young population, the quest to stand independently among the community of nations led Bangabandhu to proclaim four foundational philosophies to guide the nation: *nationalism, democracy, secularism, and socialism*. This was a visionary call to the people from all corners of the country to put country first, work collectively for a common purpose, shun division and communal sentiments, and reduce disparity with urgency. Although Bangabandhu’s leadership met a grotesquely tragic end in a few years, he left behind a powerful vision and framework that continues to invigorate national discourse; when fully imbued, it will surely power the nation to new heights.

Policy Interventions

At inception, political stability was fragile, shortages were everywhere, infrastructure was in shreds, and the many demands on the state made the task of rebuilding onerous.

State-owned enterprises – “created to reduce market risk, handle technological

complexities, address investment needs, and be sustained with subsidies” – began to lose steam as new policies began to explore market forces. Daewoo of South Korea established a joint venture in December 1977 with Desh Garments Ltd., and the first export oriented ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh took off with other entrepreneurs following suit. With determination and using its comparative advantage, the entrepreneurs of the RMG industry began to embed their own footprint in the global marketplace. Today, with management and modernisation, Bangladesh is the second largest RMG manufacturer in the world after China with a future that continues to unfold.

Agriculture also played a change-making role. From its social protection function (food sufficiency), it has diversified into producing higher-value products to improve the nation’s nutritional status and develop export markets. From farming and export of shrimps, Bangladesh is the world’s third largest inland water fish producer after China and India. Other products (strawberries, apples, and related exotic items) that are being experimented with foretells a potential that is yet to be unleashed.

The NGOs also played a crucial role while rehabilitating a war-ravaged country. Then they moved on to the important work of social and economic empowerment of the rural poor. Today, although their role is receding with the private sector gaining in strength, they continue to address important matters of poverty alleviation, rural development, non-formal education, gender equality, environmental protection, disaster management, human rights, and other vital challenges. Their contributions continue to make an impact.

Microfinance played its own significant role in the early days. Small loans to disadvantaged but enterprising people, especially women, morphed into a hunger for more credit, leading to the emergence of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Large-scale industry also began to appear, gingerly at first, with backward integration in the RMG sector.

Platforms for growth were provided and sustained by the government, with support from development agencies, in several critical areas including Human Capital Formation (education, nutrition, health), Financial Infrastructure (banking, insurance, taxation), Physical Infrastructure (roads, transportation, schools, ports, bridges, etc.). Energy (renewable and non-renewable), and the Food Chain (ensuring a basic source of sustenance). All of these were tied together by a shared governance structure involving public, private, and NGO partnerships that steadied the path of progress.

The Awami League government, led since 2009 by a determined Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who has resolutely faced many odds, brought a measure of stability and economic prosperity to the nation. Growing at about 7% per year for over a decade, Bangladesh is amongst the fastest growing countries in the world. Defined as a Lower Middle-Income Country (LMIC) today, being grouped by JP Morgan with the Next-11 (with BRICS-like potential), and deemed by Goldman Sachs as a Frontier-Five nation, Bangladesh’s confidence, pride, and innovative spirit has been surging. Its *can-do* spirit today is one of its greatest strengths.

A Promising Future

Infrastructure expansion of road networks and rural electrification continues unabated. The Bangabandhu Bridge over the river Jamuna, connecting the east and the west in 1998, has lifted the economy from its backwaters. The Padma Bridge, poised to connect the south, promises another fascinating growth era via further economic integration.

The construction industry is growing ever more sophisticated, industry diversification (pharmaceuticals, mid-size ship building, tea, leather goods, manpower exports, software, tourism) has picked up remarkably, transportation networks have gone deep into the nation, and the service industry is on the rise, surpassing agriculture and manufacturing. The growth of non-farm industries in the rural areas is very promising.

Cultural and social initiatives have also been

uplifting: our aspiring cricketers are displaying a flair in the international arena and our music, stories, art, and other cultural symbols are already tapping the diaspora and entering broader markets. Religious accommodation has just been exemplary. And the peace keeping work of the armed forces has given the country a respectable social standing.

The next frontier includes building technology hubs and high-speed internet connectivity. High tech parks for each of the 64 districts and 100 special economic zones are also being built. The 160 million strong mobile phone subscribers continue to accelerate internal market development and 4IR technology is making steady inroads.

To the credit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s genuine effort, more than 120 companies export ICT products worth several billion dollars (and growing) as Digital Bangladesh takes shape. Her government is investing in a skilled, equipped, and digital-ready pool of talents. Already 600,000 IT freelancers are bringing about a quiet commercial and technological revolution.

As a work-in-progress, however, the nation continues to face challenges – some as baggage from the distant past: inequality, low human capacity, lackluster education, press freedom, ability to attract investments, limited tax base, border and water issues, natural calamities, environmental degradation, and the need for more infrastructural platforms. Some of these conditions reflect the country’s stage of development, geographical situation, and cultural legacies – eventually they too will be converted into great opportunities!

Bangladesh has come a long way through patience, struggle, negotiation, creativity, cooperation, faith, and continuous learning. Endowed today with courage, conviction, and confidence, it is poised to craft an inevitably brighter future after a gritty half-century.

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