

Taking our 50-year old friendship to the next level

Teesta, trade imbalance, border killings should be in the pipeline

INDIAN Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh—the India premier's first ever foreign trip since the outbreak of the pandemic has been successful in demonstrating India's interest in deepening an already close friendship. Along with Bangladesh's golden jubilee of independence, it is also 50 years of diplomatic ties between the two countries which makes this relationship one of a kind. In a statement issued prior to his visit, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightfully said that the two countries share "deep cultural, linguistic and people-to-people ties". We greatly appreciate and welcome the warm words and friendly gesture of the Indian Prime Minister. We also reiterate our deep gratitude for India's invaluable support in our Liberation War during which many Indian soldiers laid down their lives and for generously accepting one crore of our people fleeing genocide by the Pakistani military in 1971.

While working on strengthening people-to-people, economic and trade ties, it is crucial that both countries must also try and resolve the deep-seated contentious issues that often have had a disenchanting effect on the India-Bangladesh relations.

The border situation between the two countries has remained tense over the years. Killing and abduction of Bangladeshi nationals at the border remains high. Thus the two countries must work together to deescalate the border situation. We sincerely hope India will agree to Bangladesh's request to use non-lethal weapons to bring down the border killings to zero.

Similarly, we urge India and Bangladesh to resolve the Teesta water sharing issue. The Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, in a visit earlier in March, reiterated that India's position on sharing the water of the Teesta with Bangladesh remains unchanged, and that official secretary level meetings will soon take place to discuss the issue in detail, but we are yet to hear anything positive from the West Bengal state that will have the ultimate say in this regard. We hope that the meetings between the India and Bangladeshi delegations to address the water-sharing issue will bear fruit and the people of Bangladesh will be spared the suffering due to lack of water in the dry season.

We also urge India to engage in more balanced trade with Bangladesh. While Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, and trading ties between the two countries have grown over the years, there is still room for a more balanced trade relationship between the two countries. In 2019-20 fiscal, Bangladesh's imports from India stood at USD 5.8 billion, while exports stood at USD 1.1 billion. We hope India and Bangladesh will explore more diversified options to boost bilateral trade.

We are thankful to India for standing beside Bangladesh during critical times, and appreciate India's friendly gesture of supporting us with additional doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. We genuinely hope that the two countries can overcome the outstanding issues that continue to leave a dark shadow over the bilateral relationship between the countries to forge even stronger bonds in the long run. Indeed, as the Indian premier said, "We have no time to lose, we must move forward for change, and we cannot delay any further." And we look forward to a more prosperous and harmonious friendship with India in the years and decades to come.

17 fall victim to yet another instance of reckless driving

How long will these crimes be tolerated?

WE are yet again bombarded with the horrific news of 17 people dying when a bus and microbus collided, head-on, on the Dhaka-Rajshahi highway on Friday afternoon. 11 people were burnt to death as the microbus involved went up in flames and kept burning for 10 minutes, until firefighters arrived on the scene. Of the eight who had been rescued from outside the charred vehicle, six (including two children and one woman) succumbed to their injuries at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

Although a case has been filed against the unidentified driver of the Hanif Enterprise bus (on grounds of reckless driving, endangering human life, hurting public safety, and for "culpable homicide"), we cannot help but wonder whether justice will be served given the track record of punishment meted out to such reckless drivers.

Sadly, this is far from being an isolated event. Earlier this month, on March 20, four people were killed when two buses collided head-on on the Dhaka-Rangpur highway in Sherpur upazila. The very next day, 11 people were killed in two separate incidents of head-on vehicle collisions, one in Majkandi area under Madhukhali upazila and another in Atadi of Bhanga upazila.

When the Road Transport Act 2018 was first passed, and then came into effect over a year later, it faced protests from transport workers. Unfortunately the law has still not been implemented when and where necessary, even though road accidents due to reckless driving keep piling up in numbers each month.

Most of these accidents occur on highways (specifically, 35.83 percent of all accidents in January of this year, according to the Road Safety Foundation), where driving carelessly seems to be the norm. The frequency of these accidents is such that we must urge the government to clamp down on reckless driving by strictly (and without favour) enforcing the relevant laws it has itself put in place. Not just drivers, but owners of vehicles causing such incidents need to also be held accountable under these laws. All victims and their families must be given proper compensation. This may also help to make transport owners more concerned about how fit their vehicles are and how responsibly their employees drive them.

Development in Bangladesh: A most pleasant surprise



AHRAR AHMAD

BANGLADESH illustrates a most intriguing and delightful puzzle in international development. After its independence in 1971, it was dismissed as the "international basket case", a bottomless pit of foreign aid and external dependence—disaster prone, resource scarce, war traumatised, poverty stricken, burdened with a huge and illiterate population, and lacking the basic "fundamentals" of economic growth. But, the country has defied that characterisation, overcome many of its challenges, and demonstrated a liveliness in its economic performance that has been as totally unanticipated as it has been genuinely impressive. This essay will briefly explore that paradox.

But first, some empirical substantiation of its economic progress may be relevant. According to the World Bank, the GDP of Bangladesh, in USD current prices, increased from USD 31.6b in 1990, to USD 115.3b in 2010, and USD 302.6b in 2019. In per capita terms, it went up from USD 306 in 1990, to USD 781 in 2010 and USD 1,855 in 2019, demonstrating a rate of economic growth over the last 20 years, that is better than its neighbours, and higher than most developing countries. Taking into account the variable pressures and dislocations caused by the corona pandemic, the IMF has estimated that Bangladesh GDP per capita in nominal terms could overtake that of India by 2021 (though in Purchasing Power Parity measures, India would still be higher).

From the "sick man" of South Asia, Bangladesh has emerged with a more muscular image. It met the World Bank threshold to graduate from Low Income Country to Low Middle Income Country by 2015, satisfied all the initial UN established criteria to move out of the Least Developed Country status by 2018, and was well on its way to completing the periodic review process and achieving both by 2024.

Admittedly, GDP measures are aggregated and may be misleading. However, in various social indicators Bangladesh has not performed too shabbily. World Bank estimates indicate that poverty rates have declined from about 48.9 percent in 2000 to 24.5 percent in 2016 with further reductions clearly in evidence later. Life expectancy increased from 48.31 years in 1975 to 72.3 in 2018. Literacy rates went up from 29.23 percent in 1981 to 74.61 percent in 2019, with almost 95 percent of children

currently enrolled in primary schools, 62 percent in secondary schools, with more girls than boys in both. How did all this come about?

Both external and internal factors contributed to this unprecedented growth spurt. Some "international" developments were fortuitous and transformational for Bangladesh. First, the steady increase of oil prices left many oil-rich countries in the Middle East with huge amounts of surplus capital and ambitious development projects that dramatically opened up their labour markets to foreign participation. Moreover, the loosening of stringent immigration policies in several countries such as US, UK, Italy, Malaysia, and elsewhere also allowed small but increasing settlements. Currently, there are almost 10m Bangladeshis abroad (mostly

accessible to Bangladeshi products.

Beginning with just 10,000 shirts exported to a French company in 1978, Bangladesh exported garments worth USD 869m in 1990-91, and USD 34.1b in 2018-19, comprising about 84 percent of its export earnings, contributing 11.1 percent to its GDP, and employing more than 4m workers, mostly women. The forward and backward linkages provided by this remarkable increase led to other various multiplier and ripple effects in the economy.

Internally, much of its success is derived from the incredible industry, imagination and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Bangladeshi agriculturists. They introduced new techniques of production, planted new varieties of rice, maximised the available land, developed

also contributed to this uplifting story. For example, government efforts, aided by many NGOs, reduced population growth rates from 2.8 percent in 1980 to about 1 percent in 2019. Similarly, though inadequate and somewhat inefficient, it has developed some social safety net programmes (cash/in-kind transfers, public works, income security, etc.) for vulnerable groups, and allocated almost 13.8 percent of its annual budget to this purpose in 2017-18. Since 2010, it has also provided free textbooks to all primary and secondary school students and, even in 2021, in the shadow of the pandemic, it distributed more than 343m books to almost 42m students throughout the country.

The government also created some enabling conditions for agricultural and manufacturing growth—the first through the relevant inputs it helped to introduce (fertilisers, insecticides, new varieties of seeds, irrigation, farm machinery, storage facilities and so on), and the second through the support it provided in opening up markets, providing credit lines, developing energy and communication facilities, and aiding the small and medium enterprises in various ways.

However, while there is much to be proud of, some concerns remain. In economic terms, more than 22m people still languish in poverty, inequality has increased in obvious and cruel ways, job creation sluggish, international investments shy, revenue generation weak (Tax/GDP ratio is low and declining), and trade imbalances persistent.

Politically, the democracy deficits are worrisome—elections may be mired in controversy, the rule of law could be shaky, executive dominance has jeopardised the principle of the separation of powers, and an aggressive impatience with any criticism, dissent or organised opposition has shrunk the space for public discourse and problematised human rights issues.

Other factors such as endemic corruption, stifling pollution and the growth of social pathologies such as drugs, pornography, violence (particularly against women), gang activity, and pockets of misguided fanaticism, have all affected the quality of life of the citizens in frustrating ways.

Thus, Bangladesh's journey has been heroic, and its accomplishments laudable. But, the way forward remains challenging and will clearly demand concerted action, wise leadership, and a fuller embrace of democratic ideals emphasising tolerance and justice.

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From the 'sick man' of South Asia, Bangladesh has emerged with a more muscular image. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

temporary workers in the Middle East), and total remittances from all countries have increased from USD 1.8b in 2000-01 to USD 10.9 b in 2009-10, to USD 18.2b in 2019-20.

Second, the ready-made garment (RMG) industries, which are the main drivers of the Bangladesh economic engine, also benefitted from external circumstances. Previously this was the domain of Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and so on. But in the 1970s and 80s, labour prices increased in these countries because both work-places and product lines changed radically. Thus, the relatively "primitive" (labour intensive) garment production was relocated to locales with very low overhead costs and an abundantly cheap workforce. Moreover, trade liberalisation regimes in the western countries, and easier communication and transportation facilities, made those markets increasingly

fish and poultry farms, and deftly used new resources and technologies, to treble agricultural production between 1972-73 and 2014-15, with food grains increasing from 9.8m tons to 36.3m in 2020-21. Agriculture has grown at almost 2.7 percent annually over the last 34 years, second only to that of China.

Non-Government Organisations also played a critical role in this dynamic. Bangladesh was the birthplace of internationally respected institutions such as Brac and Grameen Bank, as well as a host of other voluntary actors and change agents, which have transformed the economic and social landscape of the country through micro-credit programmes (which impacted the lives of millions of women), educational and health initiatives, and human rights-oriented organisation and advocacy.

And finally, the government, regardless of its political or ideological orientations,

Reforming education, keeping the promises

SHAHIDUL ISLAM

BANGLADESH is the youngest nation among its South Asian neighbours. Its war of independence against Pakistan started with a massive revolt by Bangladeshis from all walks of life—but without the necessary arms and trained soldiers to fight against Pakistan's professional military forces. Similarly, its journey toward economic growth started without any reparation from Pakistan. In effect, Bangladesh experienced an additional quarter century of colonial rule compared to Pakistan and India. Despite that, Bangladesh will celebrate higher per capita income than India and Pakistan on its 50th anniversary. Better health and education outcomes are two important factors that have contributed to this exemplary economic growth.

The economic growth could have been greater if we had been able to keep Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's promise to allocate 4 percent of GDP to education, a promise that he could not keep due to post-war reconstruction priorities. Formation of the Qudrat-i-Khuda education commission is one of the exemplary actions that I would like to recall on this auspicious golden jubilee occasion.

Bangabandhu also took full responsibility for over 36 thousand primary schools to offer universal and free primary education to all Bangladeshi children. Forty-two years later, his daughter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also took a bold step by nationalising another 26 thousand primary schools in 2013. Bangladesh now enjoys 98 percent enrolment rate in primary education. It has achieved gender parity both in terms of enrolment in primary and secondary education and teacher recruitment in primary schools, and 80 percent completion rate in primary education. Bangladesh is on track to reach the developed country status by 2041 when it will celebrate its 70th birthday, which Pakistan and India celebrated three years ago.

Since independence, education enjoyed the highest budgetary allocation, with only a few exceptions, by various governments. The general education project in the 80's and compulsory primary education programme in the 90's were two significant milestones that brought more children to

school. Female secondary school stipends had been a big encouragement for parents and their daughters that helped break many barriers and overcoming vicious cycles; thus girls outnumbered boys both in primary and secondary schools. Expansion of social safety net programme to schools in the form of stipend, food for education, and mid-day meals directly contributed to the quantitative achievements in primary and secondary education. At the policy advocacy level, special initiatives by the Prime Minister's daughter, Saima Wazed, will definitely help bring the last child to school who would otherwise be deprived of education due to disabilities; but, someone



Economic growth could have been greater if we had been able to keep Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's promise to allocate 4 percent of GDP to education. PHOTO: STAR

needs to translate policies into action

The critical question that we need to answer now is—should we feel complacent just by bringing children to school?

Government reports show that only one in every four children are able to read at their grade level competencies. Similar performance is seen in basic mathematical skills in primary school. With these weak foundational capabilities, it will be extremely difficult for Bangladesh to maintain a steady economic growth, let alone accelerating it to a level needed to reach a high-income status by 2041—from just over USD 2,000 to USD 12,000.

Had Bangladesh remained East Pakistan, the cost today would have been an additional four million child and maternal deaths—a higher number than the Pakistani militaries and their

collaborators killed during the Liberation War. This estimate is based on Bangladesh's under five mortality, which is 45 per 1,000 live birth and maternal death of 196 per 100,000 live births as opposed to Pakistan's 74 under five and 251 maternal death. The Demographic Health Survey and Maternal Mortality Survey in Bangladesh are the two most sophisticated studies conducted periodically by the government. These studies consistently revealed that investment in education results in significantly better health outcomes. Teenagers without primary education are twice as likely to begin childbearing, mothers with secondary or higher

as a subject to be studied in college i.e., at the undergraduate level along with other subjects like physics, math, Bangla, English, etc. The aspiring teachers then can begin to specialise in education at graduate level to choose teaching as their profession instead of considering it as the last option or as an after-thought.

In order to promote meritocracy in teaching, the entry level positions in primary school teaching should be equivalent to ninth grade in the civil service which is popularly known as first class officers in Bangladesh. Teachers as a second- or third-class employee of the republic cannot produce first class citizens. Our children deserve better.

In addition to lifting the status and income of teachers, we need to create a strong evidence base of success in primary and secondary education. Public and private universities can work hand-in-hand with the education ministries and line directorates to initiate rigorous research on nationally representative samples with district level disaggregation. This research will lead to evidence-based policy dialogue to determine the best options and interventions.

We should not forget that the Qudrat-i-Khuda commission report had recommended eight years of primary schooling and four years of secondary education. The founding father had endorsed this report. The education policy 2010 recommended the same two-tiered school system that his daughter, the prime minister of Bangladesh, had endorsed a decade ago. These promises need to be converted into action. The first 1,000 days in school (grades 1-3) are extremely crucial for a child to build foundational skills (reading and math) to excel in later grades as a student or as an adult to remain a lifelong learner. Similarly, special education for the children disabilities needs repositioning in policy priorities for Bangladesh to ensure that no child is left behind. Thus, the celebration of 50th birthday of Bangladesh will be truly meaningful.

These education reforms would make the 50th birthday of Bangladesh truly meaningful.

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