

50 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Swarno-Dashak: A foreigner's perspective



BANGLADESH is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its independence in 2021. An awe-inspiring story of a country born out of the language movement and its collective consciousness for preserving the culture of Bengal Delta after a tumultuous past of being East Pakistan for 24 years before gaining its freedom in 1971.

The power of compounding as it is called in the area of investing, is clearly visible in the way progress has helped this nation of 165 million people pull a large percentage of people out of abject poverty, improve the quality of their lives, become almost self-sufficient in food availability and deploy Ready-Made-Garments (RMG) as the most celebrated lever of economic and social transformation.

Having been in Bangladesh for the last four odd years and having travelled across the length and breadth of the country, I strongly believe that Bangladesh's time has come, and the next 10 years would be nothing like any of the past decades and will prove to be the "Swarno Dashak" in the glorious history of this proud nation.

and not affordability. I am reminded of an interesting book by the name Bridgital Nation: Solving Technology's People Problem, written by N Chandra (with Roopa Purushothaman), Chairman of Tata Sons. The book offers a brilliant, cutting-edge approach that can address Bangladesh's biggest challenges by bridging the chasm between rural and urban communities, the different levels of education and medical access, and between aspirations and achievement.

Infrastructure upgrade Over 165 million people live within approximately 148,000 square kms with

230 rivers criss-crossing the landmass, concentration of urban population (40 percent) in one megacity Dhaka and nine other large cities, absence of a deep seaport in a country that's known to be the world's second largest producer of ready-made-garments and is dependent on imports to bring most of the industrial raw material.

Modernising agriculture This has been a recurring theme not much

spoken about but abundantly experienced across the villages. Growing adoption of mechanisation is continuously improving the legacy methods to bring higher efficiency and yield. As per the World Bank, Bangladesh has one of the fastest rates of agriculture productivity growth in the world since 1995 (2.7 percent per year, second only to China).

Consumer confidence and sustained evolution This is a subject that marketers and business people like me watch very closely.

"Haves" and the "Have Nots", the reality is, only the Nordic countries have successfully combined features of capitalism, such as market economy and economic efficiency, with social benefits, such as state pensions and income distribution.

As we celebrate 50 years of independence of this dynamic and resilient country, one is reminded of the tasks ahead. Some of the key hurdles in the path of growth and social development would need to be addressed. Many of the luminaries of Bangladesh have summarised those challenges into four or five buckets; namely quality of primary and secondary education, developing vocational training to ensure high capability resources for the industry, or increased focus on healthcare—affordable and accessible healthcare for all, and rule of law and good governance, ranging from duties and taxes to safety and security for common men and women.

Kedar Lele is the Chairman and Managing Director of Unilever Bangladesh.



The human and economic toll of gas leaks



NARAYANGANJ has become a hotbed of gas explosions. According to a report published by The Daily Star on March 21, 2021, a total of 15 villages comprising of 2,000 families are using giant balloons

to preserve natural gas for household uses. Two underlying reasons related to our energy sector are acting as the driving forces behind this dangerous practice—the shortage in the gas supply during daytime and the inability of the people to report to the respective authorities due to the illegal nature of their gas connections.

Three of the largest gas providers in our country are—Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company Limited and Jalalabad Gas Transmission and Distribution System Limited. They are jointly responsible for supplying gas connections to Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet regions.

Riser is the connecting point which is set up at the opening of a gas pipeline, to bring buried natural gas piping above the ground to allow access to the gas flowing through the pipes.

most of these risers are situated either inside households or within storerooms of business entities, where blasts can happen through the accumulation of gas coming out of leakages. Most concerning is the fact that Titas has found a total of 1,622 leakages in its 12,514 kilometres-long gas distribution line surrounding Dhaka and its nearby areas.

The same report gives an idea of the number of fire incidents originating from gas

According to a research project carried out by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the Planning Ministry, the current rate of system loss by Titas is at 6 percent. In another report published on June 28, 2018, Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) had calculated that if Titas could perform only two percent reduction in its overall system loss, the government would be saving Tk 256 crores.

from their customers, most of which are failing to have an impact on our energy sector. More frustrating is the tendency to shift blame onto others by the high-ups of the organisation. A report published in The Daily Star on October 5, 2020 quoted the managing director of Titas who blamed other urban service providers, like the two city corporations and WASA, for damaging and cracking its underground pipelines

pay Tk 45,000 to a Titas official. Also, while Titas had claimed that the annual amount of gas supplied to households was around 103 billion cubic foot during 2015-16 period, only 88 billion cubic foot had been used.

In 2015, the government created the "Energy Efficiency and Conservation Master Plan up to 2030" with a view to saving 15 percent of our energy resources by 2020 and 20 percent of our energy resources by 2030. Though the plan is quite elaborate in its vision to maximise the government's economic gains regarding natural gas, it does not mention the risk of accidental deaths due to sudden gas explosions and thus was totally indifferent towards protecting the country's most significant asset, which is human lives.

Replacing dated gas distribution lines with new, updated ones and also, taking the dangerous gas risers out of congested, sealed places, can be good starting points for our concerned authorities to prevent the loss of human lives. Also, ACC had submitted its findings to the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources and had suggested a 12-point plan to deal with the anomalies in the energy sector.

Muhammad A Bashed is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

Despite being the country's biggest gas transmission and distribution company with 60 percent share of gas connections, Titas does not have any mechanism to identify any leakage from its vast network of underground pipelines.



The ground floor of the mosque in Narayanganj's Talla area littered with warped blades of ceiling fans, charred remains of human flesh and prayer rugs, shards of glass and debris.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

leakages—204 in the year 2018-19, which has increased to 306 in 2019-20. The yearly number of gas leakage related complaints received by Titas is currently 4,496. Within the January 2017 to January 2018 period, Titas had found leakages in a total of 35,101 risers of residential complexes.

The Financial Express on February, 2019 had pointed out that there were around one million illegal gas lines around the country, which causes great financial distress for the government in the form of "system loss".

talked about fund misappropriation and gas transmission strategy in our gas sector, which were eating up Tk 13,000 crore and Tk 5,467 crore respectively from the government's coffers during that time.

Despite being the country's biggest gas transmission and distribution company with 60 percent share of gas connections, Titas does not have any mechanism to identify any leakage from its vast network of underground pipelines. This government-owned company takes action only after getting complaints

blamed the Metro Rail project for causing gas leaks in their transmission area.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) had found a total of 22 sources of corruption inside Titas in its report that was published on April 17, 2019. The report had mentioned illegal connections, meter tampering and system loss as the primary reasons for graft at Titas. ACC had also analysed both the 2013-14 and 2015-16 audit reports of the aforementioned company and found that to get an illegal gas connection, one only has to

QUOTABLE Quote section featuring a portrait of Judith Martin and a quote: "It is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help."

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH section with ACROSS and DOWN clues and a list of YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS.

BEETLE BAILEY cartoon section by Mort Walker and BABY BLUES cartoon section by Kirkman & Scott.

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