

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. Ravaged by natural calamities, famine, floods, and military coups—today it can be safely said that Bangladesh has traversed well from a state of despair to reaching its own *tryst with destiny*.

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.

Technology step-up and digitalisation
Who could have predicted that penetration of mobile phone, the ubiquitous sign of digital adoption would reach 100 percent in Bangladesh, ahead of other South Asian countries? What is significant is more than 40 percent of those connections are now on a smart phone. And those who don't have a smart phone cite an interesting reason—absence of a need to own a smart phone

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. Look no further than millions of daily transactions moving thousands of crores of taka on Mobile-Wallets (bKash, Nagad, Rocket etc.) to appreciate this phenomenon. In simple language, think of it as an "app" (or a bunch of them) that lets people across all walks of life address their core concerns of livelihood, health, and education with speed and efficacy.

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. Tremendous amount of work has happened in the last decade to fix the issue of electricity generation and supply, widening of roads, completion of the most ambitious Padma bridge, expansion of port handling capacity and upgradation of inland waterways. Focus on building and maintaining infrastructure acts as the biggest factor for driving access and efficiency. Cost of goods sold comes down putting more money in the hands of the farmers and producers, reducing waste, and enhancing capability.

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). Access to agricultural management practices including fertiliser, pests and diseases control, quality seeds is improving. In fact, local financial institutions like BRAC, IPDC and others are using mobile technology and AI based solutions to make agricultural loans available to farmers. A further scaleup of this along with modernisation of Mandis (price discovery, quality assessment and logistics and storage solutions) will create sizeable surplus, bringing much awaited prosperity to rural Bangladesh.

Consumer confidence and sustained evolution

This is a subject that marketers and business people like me watch very closely. The degree of optimism that consumers feel about the overall state of the economy and their personal financial situation is very encouraging. The force of their confidence and aspiration can be experienced on a cricket field or amidst young entrepreneurs vying for global attention with their cutting-edge innovations, or on globally popular talent-on-demand platforms like Fiverr or Upwork where Bangladesh is one of the top 10 sources of talent, or in the buzzing marketplaces of Bangladeshi towns where consumers are demanding products and brands with higher order benefits and premium offerings. This sustained evolution of Bangladeshi consumer is not yet visible in consulting reports and hence is often missed.

The art of simultaneously driving a two-speed economy is truly that, an art. While the critics of capitalism or supporters of socialism would frown at this idea with concerns of growing class divide between the

"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. Developmental programme in Bangladesh running at massive scale have benefited millions of people across the length and breadth of the country, helped give birth to globally known concept of micro-finance, made health-care available, assisted education, empowered women and created a labour-intensive export-oriented economy that slowly and steadily alleviated poverty and brought prosperity. The challenge of urban and rural will exist, like it does in rest of the world. However, the development in infrastructure, technology, capability, and access will democratise the benefits across socio-economic groups.

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. I feel confident that with a clear strategy, great leadership, and brilliant execution, it is possible and attainable. History would be indebted to the current generation for building the foundation of a "Golden Decade" of transformation as Bangladesh upgrades to becoming a developing economy and a beacon of holistic progress globally.

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. These balloons have two leakage points, both of which are in the tubes that connect them with the gas pipelines and cooking stoves respectively. These balloons contain the inflammatory methane gas and pose high risks of suddenly bursting, which can in turn cause loss of valuable human lives. A few weeks ago, two members of a family, including a 12-year-old boy, died from a gas blast on March 9, while a total of 34 people had died from the same kind of tragedy while performing prayers at a local mosque on September 4, 2020. In both cases, the reason was similar—explosion created from gas leakage.

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. A report by *Prothom Alo*, on March 5, unearthed that most of the gas pipelines of Titas, Karnaphuli and Jalalabad are at least 30 years old. More than 500 leakages occur in Dhaka alone each month, and most of these leakages take place in a single part of the gas distribution line—risers.

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. As the *Prothom Alo* report mentioned,

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. This means that we are almost living over a live volcano and an eruption can happen anytime and anywhere around us.

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

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.

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".

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. This means that Titas can save at least Tk 700 crore on a monthly basis if it can sever all its illegal connections. The report had also

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 while conducting their routine activities. Meanwhile, the report quoted the director (operation) of the same organisation who

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. Around 15 billion cubic foot of natural gas remained unused, the monetary value of which is almost Tk 293 crore. ACC blamed Titas officials for the misappropriation of this huge sum of money.

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. The same apathy can be found in the words of the state minister for the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources. When asked about the health hazards posed by the unpredictable gas explosions by a *Prothom Alo* journalist, he swiftly avoided the question and gave a contrary reply saying that, "Gas reserves are wasted through providing connections to unplanned industrial and residential complexes. We cannot deny that there are leakages in every distribution line. Work has not been done on these lines for a very long time".

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. Taking necessary steps to bring the corrupt Titas officials to book and thus, saving peoples' hard-earned money from being siphoned away is another aspect of our energy sector that the government must pay attention to, if it truly wants to prevent the waste of a scarce resource such as natural gas.

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



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

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

JUDITH MARTIN
American columnist (1938—)

"It is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help."

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Signs of sorrow
- 6 Make suitable
- 11 Parcel out
- 12 Japanese fish dish
- 13 Hold responsible
- 14 Tribe symbol
- 15 Jason's ship
- 17 Be in debt
- 18 Checkout devices
- 22 Poet Whitman
- 23 Occupies
- 27 Be of use
- 29 Entertainment
- 30 Puzzlesolving choice
- 32 Region
- 33 Wrenches, in Britain

DOWN

- 1 Bar bill
- 2 Building wing
- 3 In the style of
- 4 Lovers of love
- 5 Boat's back
- 6 Section of Queens
- 7 Twosome
- 8 Regarding
- 9 "That was close!"
- 10 Clock reading
- 16 Attain

- 18 Trade
- 19 Bat abode
- 20 Actor Rickman
- 21 Linguist's concern
- 24 Confident
- 25 Manipulative sort
- 26 Pod contents
- 28 Pretend to sing, perhaps
- 31 Pet perch
- 34 Like Loki
- 35 Latvia's capital
- 36 Full range
- 37 Bulb unit
- 40 Whopper
- 42 Helium or hydrogen
- 43 Bulflight cry
- 44 King, in Latin

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BEETLE BAILEY

THE NEW RECRUITS ARE CATCHING ON FAST!

LEARNING TO OBEY ORDERS?

NO. LEARNING HOW TO BRIBE SARGE WITH FOOD

1/23

BABY BLUES

HOW DO YOU GET SO MUCH SAND IN YOUR CLOTHES??

UUA... I ROLL AROUND IN A LOT OF SAND PILES.

WHY DIDN'T I THINK OF THAT?

THAT'S LIKE HAMMIE LOI, MOM.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SPLIT ARBOR
ERASE SERGE
RINSE SOARS
INCASH ZEE
ACE HITLIST
LED IDEALS
PHOTOS IDO
GROWSUP TET
ROT SOWHAT
INDIA OHARE
STORM NICER
TOGAS SPARS

Saturday's answer

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT