

A reflection on Bangabandhu's development plan

The First Five-Year Plan and the portrait of his "Sonar Bangla"



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JUSTICE MD REZAUL HASAN

No government can work in a legal vacuum or without a proper roadmap for its initiatives to achieve development goals. After Bangladesh secured independence in 1971, various laws were enacted within the limit from which they derive the power to govern and manage the newly born state. At the same time, the First Five-Year Plan (FFP) was being prepared as an essential roadmap for achieving the economic and infrastructural aspirations of the war-torn country.

But the FFP was not just a prescription for the hitherto exploited people of Bangladesh to attain economic emancipation and self-reliance, it was something that could guide all new countries in other parts of the

world that liberated themselves from the clutches of colonial rule after World War II. So, constructing the FFP was a huge task. Once complete, it left no areas or sectors of economic concern, nor any contingencies out of its focus and ambit.

Here, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had presented his dream to build a Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal), in a state hard-hit by the devastating cyclone of 1970 that killed thousands of people in the south, destroyed livestock, crops, assets and the ecology, resulting in immense human miseries and an acute food shortage.

Besides, the country still bore the wounds of war after 1971 as foreign reserves had hit rock bottom, infrastructure and communications were in tatters, no production was taking place, and

subsequently, trade and commerce had been halted.

Then came the unpredictable flood in 1974 coupled with a PL-480 crisis that further aggravated an acute food supply shortage at a time when the administration was in disarray.

The FFP was prepared and approved amid such a situation in November 1973 with its foreword signed by Bangabandhu, the then prime minister of Bangladesh. In the foreword, the great leader, among others, had written that it is unusual for newly liberated countries to prepare a Five-Year National Development Plan within such a short span of time. Nevertheless, it was decided that the FFP would be launched as early as possible as the government felt an urgent need to provide a sense of direction to determine the order of priorities within the framework of which coherent and consistent policies and programmes could be formulated, it said.

Bangabandhu had less than two years, from November 1973 till his brutal assassination on the fateful night of August 15, 1975, to actualise his dream of a Sonar Bangla as portrayed in the FFP. And as history shows, only Bangabandhu had shoulders broad enough to bear the huge burden of rebuilding a war-ravaged Bangladesh.

In almost no time after his return to an independent nation, Bangabandhu had promulgated the Bangladesh Abandoned Property (Control, Management and Disposal) Order, 1972, under which the country had acquired a significant number of industries and assets abandoned during the war.

By doing so, he had saved properties worth billions in the aftermath of 1971 and thus added a huge wealth on the credit side of the country's balance sheet. This made the local currency comparatively stronger in the global market. Then, as per the provisions of the Bangladesh Industrial Enterprises (Nationalisation) Order, 1972,

Bangabandhu nationalised all these industrial enterprises and arranged them in sectors under several corporations. These initiatives helped ensure employment for millions of workers after the war while his family planning programme was also a success story.

Bangabandhu had purchased five gas fields on August 9, 1975, just 6 days ahead of his assassination, from Shell Petroleum, a US-based oil company, at the cost of about Tk 170 million. The fields -- Titas, Bakhrabad, Habiganj, Rashidpur and Kailashtila -- are all nationalised property that now contribute about 33.44 per cent of the total gas explored in the country per day. In recognition of this, the government decided to observe National Energy Security Day on August 9 each year.

But just as Bangabandhu was about to make a u-turn from the aftermath of 1971, he was assassinated in a bid to halt the country's progress and break his dream of a Sonar Bangla.

As said by Bangabandhu, the FFP gave Bangladesh a sense of direction towards the path of development. It is apparent that this sense of direction has been aptly picked up by the government of Sheikh Hasina, the honorable prime minister of Bangladesh.

During the last 10 years before the Covid-19 pandemic, as has been put forward by the government with empirical and accessible data, Bangladesh has experienced a steady rise in GDP and attained commendable growth in most economic indicators.

Even amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis, Bangladesh has maintained its GDP growth, albeit below the 8.15 per cent attained in 2019, while many other countries showed negative growth for the period (2020-21). Bangladesh's other positive economic indicators include improved life expectancy, literacy, employment, per capita income, and foreign direct investment.

Similarly, ensuring an

uninterrupted power supply, developing a nuclear power project, discovering new gas fields, extensive and pervasive digitisation, bumper production in the agro-sector and subsequent food sufficiency are all positive indicators as well. Besides, various mega development projects, such as construction of Padma Bridge, are in the offing. Many four-lane highways and flyovers have been built or are under construction, greatly improving the country's infrastructure and connectivity. Even parts of the ongoing metro rail project are already visible.

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) recently decided to replace all Bailey bridges in phases. The decision was also taken to develop a 100-megawatt solar park at Madarganj and Jamalganj while the 28th gas field was discovered in Zakiganj of Sylhet by the Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company. In line with Bangabandhu's vision, the current government in Bangladesh, has, like many other fundamental sectors, also made a tremendous breakthrough in the water sector.

All development partners of Bangladesh, since liberation till today, have reposed a great trust in us and have always been found standing beside the country, helping to build roads and bridges, other infrastructures, and providing technical support and aid to all important sectors. A good number of export-processing zones have been established by the government as well as by some of its development partners.

Bangladesh has become a new regional hub of investment and laws in the country allow it to protect foreign investments as well as give various kinds of concessions, facilities, incentives and priorities in investment sectors.

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