

Bangladesh: Yesterday and Today

Dr. Abdul Momen*

Bangladesh is a success story in spite of calamities. In 1971, it was known as a 'basket case', an economist 'nightmare and test case' with little hope of survival. No wonder, at the time, its trading partners demanded 'third party guarantee' to export goods to Bangladesh, as they were doubtful of its survival. Good news is, in spite of recurrent natural calamities, devastating floods, cyclones, draughts and political upheavals, Bangladesh never had any negative GDP growth rate since 1973. During this period, its per capita income increased nearly seven-fold in spite of the fact that, it has over 160 million people, and it is the world's most densely populated country. While there are only 30 persons per square kilometer in USA, it has 1,200 persons per sq. km, 40 times more than that of USA. Bangladesh is as large as the state of Iowa of USA in size --- Iowa has 3m population, Bangladesh has 160m.

'Necessity is the mother of invention' and Bangladesh is a great example. Its micro credit financing, non-formal education, community healthcare, NGO activities and disaster management are replicable innovations across nations. While micro financing started in USA in late 1930s, promoted in Columbia in early 1960s, but it matured and stabilized in Bangladesh in 1980-90s and now, it is one of the best tools for women empowerment, job creation and 'welfare to work'. In 1970 nearly half a million people perished due to a devastating cyclone in Bangladesh. In 2007, only 3,300 died although ferocity of the cyclone was equivalent to that of 1970 due to its improved disaster management operations. Recently Bangladesh created a highly credible digital voter Ids (identification card) for nearly 85 million people that it can share with post-conflict countries for their Peace building architecture. Bangladesh is ready to share her experiences with others.

Out of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), its achievements in MDG-1 (poverty alleviation), MDG-2 (universal education), MDG-3 (gender equality and women empowerment) and MDG-4 (reduce child mortality) is encouraging and is on track. However, it is lagging behind in others, more so owing to diversion of its scarce resources from MDGs to relief and rehabilitation programs caused due to erratic climate change, global financial meltdown and excessive global price hike of gasoline and food items. It could do much better if the pledged 0.07% of ODA or 0.02% of the GNI to LLDCs would have been honored by the development partners.

Bangladesh is committed to global peace and stability, and it is the top country in the UN peacekeeping operations in terms of both troops and police force contribution. Among the Muslim countries, Bangladesh is especially cited for its democratic values and social justice system. In ancient India, Bengal started practicing democracy as early as 6th century.

People of Bangladesh are very diligent and hard working and they have a rich history, culture and heritage. They are the only nation that sacrificed blood to protect and preserve their mother language, *Bangla* (the 4th largest native speaking language in the world after Chinese, Spanish and English as per Wikipedia.com) in 1952. Now the UNESCO has declared 21st February as the *International Mother Language Day* to protect and preserve native languages and their cultures to enrich society through diversity. No wonder, Indian philosopher Gopal Krishna Gokhle once remarked and I quote, “what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow”.

There is an interesting history between Bangladesh and USA. American Revolution was ignited by the Townshend duties---you heard about ‘No taxation without Representation’ and the ‘Boston Tea Party’--- during mid 1760s, the British Parliament debated whether to continue their wars in two fronts; one against the 13 colonies plus Canada, Caribbean and others in the West, and Bengal or India in the East. Eventually they found that it is better to allow independence to colonies rather than Bengal. Reason was simple; while total revenue earnings from the 13 colonies in best of times as in the time of Townshend duties in 1770s was only 400,000 pound sterling, it was nearly 4 million pound sterling from Bengal, 10 times more. It was Lord Chatham, William Pitt, Jr., the new Premier with the backing of Beckford and Shelburne peace was concluded with 13 colonies, France, Holland and Spain and ‘American colonies gained independence indirectly at the cost of Bengal’, write James Novak of Pennsylvania.

History repeats itself. After nearly 200 years, in 1971 when genocide was let loose on the unarmed people of then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) only because they demanded restoration of State Powers to the elected representatives of the country, American professors, lawmakers and professionals even diplomats defying their government’s position helped the Bangladesh liberation Movement. After nine months of war and with the help of joint forces of Bangladesh and India, Bangladesh achieved its independence on December 16, 1971. On this historic day, while we rejoice our independence, we respectfully remember those 30 million that sacrificed their lives, those 250, 000 women that were dishonored and those 10 million that were forced to take shelter in neighboring India. We deeply remember the help and assistance of many countries including India, U.K. and former USSR.

Bangladesh has many challenges such as climate change impacts, over population, food insecurity, good governance, poverty alleviation, energy shortage, digitalization and institutionalization of multi-party democracy at every level.

The newly elected government of Sheikh Hasina is determined to achieve 100% primary school enrolment by 2011, self-sufficiency in food by 2012, supply of pure drinking water to the entire population by 2011, hygienic sanitation by 2013 and 100% literacy rate by 2014, and more importantly, to raise Bangladesh into a mid-income country by 2021. Without doubt, it is an enormous task and also difficult more so in a country where bureaucratic red tape, mistrust, colonial mindset and political infighting is a norm. In the last general election, the young and the poor, men and women overwhelmingly voted Sheikh Hasina and her party into power as she is a symbol of hope, a symbol of democracy and as she has given them a road map for achieving their dreams and hopes, a roadmap for better Bangladesh in a society where negativism, discrimination, exploitation and indiscipline is the game of the rich and the powerful. It is not easy to reach goals overnight but her government is trying its utmost with dedication and sincerity and in this globalize world, it needs every body's help and support.

* Dr. A. K. Abdul Momen is Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, March 21, 2010, New York.