

Independence and National Day: Our Achievements and Challenges

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26th March is our Independence and National Day. It is a day of reflection of the past and looking forward to future. Our independence was brought about of supreme sacrifices of people and we owe our debt to and remember them on this day with prayers for peace of their souls.

25th March night of 1971 was the moment of truth when Bengalis faced a demonic power of the Pakistan military. It was that night when brave Bengalis, irrespective of religious faiths and gender, decided to fight for independence on the basis of inspirational historic speech of 7th March by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The clarion call on 7th March, 1971 of Bangabandhu for “Mukitir Sangram” and “Swadhinatar Aangram” meant not only freedom from poverty and oppression but also achievement of a democratic independent country for Bengalis.

On 25th March it seemed the lamps went out all over Bangladesh and on 26th March, we witnessed lamps again being lit. There is hope on 26th March but the indomitable spirit and thirst for an independent country originated in 25th March night. Our grim determination to fight emanated from the darkest hour of 25th March night.

Although it was the darkest hour of Bengalis, we were made to feel not only powerful but also morally righteous to fight against the Pakistan military. International community including media and scholars supported our liberation movement.

Achievements:

As the Independence Day enters on the 39th year, we take a stock of our achievements and challenges..

Success was achieved in the communication and physical infrastructure. Many large bridges were built over mighty rivers that provided increased economic activities within the country.

Poverty has been reduced by 9.2% (45% percent are now in poverty level, Dependence on foreign aid and loans has diminished considerably and now hovers around only 2% per cent of the national budget, per capita income has increased to \$699 dollars, despite population growth.

Bangladesh achieved almost its self-sufficiency in food production (last year rice production was 34 million metric tones). Economic growth has stayed more than 5% per

cent over the years and even reached 6.2 % per cent in financial year 2000-01. The effects of current global financial meltdown have been managed with fiscal prudence.

Enrolment rate at primary level has increased to 82.7 % per cent and the child mortality reduced to 82 per 1,000 live births. Some of the social indicators in Bangladesh are better than those in India and Pakistan, according to UNDP.

Foreign direct investment in Bangladesh stood at \$1 billion in 2009 from \$14 million only in 1996. Our exports have increased on average almost 15% per cent each year due to innovative and imaginative policies of leaders of private sectors. The remittances from migrants stood to almost \$10 billion last year. Regular servicing of national debt (about \$18 billion) is being maintained.

On foreign affairs, the relations with India and China have opened a broad framework of cooperation and partnership due to the landmark visits of Bangladesh Prime Minister to both countries in mid January and in mid March of 2010.. Relations with Myanmar and Bhutan were considerably improved. Sea-boundary issue has taken a positive momentum with Myanmar.

Because of pragmatic policy, Bangladesh will emerge as a transportation-conduit for the entire region through interconnectivity with other regional countries. Bangladesh has been on the right path to be noticed as a country which wants to be a part of regional and global economy, taking full advantage of its geographical location.

In foreign policy Bangladesh has made a mark as a responsible international citizen. The trust and confidence reposed in Bangladesh by international community is demonstrated by the fact that the country became a member of the UN Security Council after four years of its admission to the UN (1978), a rare feat of success. Bangladesh again was elected in 1999 as a member of the Security Council. Bangladesh Foreign Minister became the President of the General Assembly in 1986.

Bangladesh's commitment to peace is demonstrated by its contribution to UN peace keeping missions. By February 2010, Bangladesh has become the largest contributing country to provide peacekeeping troops to the UN and the number stands to 10,574 (soldiers and police personnel). They are deployed in peacekeeping missions in 12 countries.

So far about 70,000 soldiers have participated in 35 peacekeeping missions in 26 countries which included Cambodia, Bosnia, Georgia, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Namibia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

Bangladeshi army Generals led the peacekeeping mission in Mozambique in 1994, in Georgia in 2002 and Liberia in 2008. Currently one Bangladeshi General is leading a UN Mission in Ivory Coast.

Bangladesh has been reelected at the Human Rights Council and has secured a seat at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (2010-12), Executive Committee of UNESCO, (2009-13), ECOSOC (2010-12) and International Maritime Organisation (2010-11)..

On Climate Change, Bangladesh's role at the Copenhagen UN Conference was duly recognized in December 2009. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has vigorously presented Bangladesh's case of vulnerability to ill effects of climate change at the UN General Assembly in September 2009, in Rome at a roundtable conference in November 2009 and finally had a video-conference with world leaders in November 2009.

Bangladesh can rightly take pride for introducing the concept of micro-credit to the world. It is a country which houses the largest NGO in the world (Brac) and many of the programmes of the Grameen Bank and Brac are being replicated across the world.

Challenges:

Against these achievements, Bangladesh confronts major social and economic challenges in such areas as food, energy, water, environment, economic and personal security. Another challenge is to confront extremists in their views of non-tolerance to people who do not follow their practices.

The political environment for the last decades has been replete with bitterness, animosity, and violent behaviour of mainstream political parties. Confrontational politics has been the hallmark of political atmosphere in the country. There is little energy remains for constructive views on national issues in parliament. Cooperation, accommodation and tolerance among political parties are a rarity.

The infrastructure of democracy consists of free media, and rule of law, transparency of all government decisions, accountability of government to people and parliament, independent judiciary, gender equality and vibrant civil society. Peaceful co-existence, tolerance and mutual respect for each other political parties are the basic elements of democracy. Tyrannical majority and recalcitrant minority, according to constitutional expert, Sir Ivor Jennings, are enemies which destroy democracy.

Corruption has been widespread in the country. Combating corruption is considered as important step in stimulating economic growth and social development.

Export basket is too narrow and also the export countries are a few. The garment industry generates between 75 and 79% per cent of exports and it needs to be diversified and exports may be targeted toward large number of countries.

The widening disparity between rich and poor within the country is very stark. According Bangladesh Economic Association, 50% of the total households are landless, while on 6.2% per cent families own 40% per cent of the total land in the country. Two-thirds of rural people do not own any lands. About 90 million have practically no access to

standard health care, 60 million people have no access to safe drinking water, 119 million do not have electricity and about 130 million have no access to piped natural gas.

Most economists suggest that investment up to 34% of GDP is needed in the next three to five years to cut poverty and to become a middle income country in a decade and a half. Some say that an investment of \$28 billion would be required by 2013-14 to achieve the targeted growth of 8% per cent of GDP.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads and the emergence of a new invigorated Bangladesh depends on whether political atmosphere is characterized by mutual respect and tolerance. The “winners” -get all-mentality may be discarded from political environment.

Lawrence Ziring in his book “Mujib to Ershad” (1992) writes: “ Bangladeshis were exemplary democrats and staunch liberals when highlighting the dictatorial exploits of their distant, alien and non-Bengali overlords. They were something else when made responsible for their own affairs.”

Many people will not agree with the dismal and provocative assessment of Ziring about Bengalis. Personally, however, I am optimistic for a bright future for Bangladesh because overwhelming majority of people is resilient, hardworking, innovative and adaptable to their needs in the changed circumstances. Let us make Bangladesh a progressive, prosperous and democratic country for our future generations. We must bear in mind the old adage “United we stand and divided we fall”.