



PROCEEDINGS
Webinar on



**BANGABANDHU'S VISION
OF SONAR BANGLA:
BANGLADESH AT 50**



BISS Auditorium, Dhaka
14 March 2021



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)



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A collage of five diamond-shaped images showing various aspects of Bangladesh's development: a modern train, a woman's face, a highway, a port with shipping containers, and a solar panel.

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Webinar on

Bangabandhu's Vision of Sonar Bangla: Bangladesh at 50

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organized a webinar on “Bangabandhu’s Vision of Sonar Bangla: Bangladesh at 50” on 14 March 2021 at BIISS. H E Professor Dr Gowher Rizvi, International Relation Affairs Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the webinar as the Chief Guest. Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te, Director General, BIISS, chaired the webinar. He delivered the welcome address and concluding remarks. Four distinguished scholars spoke in the webinar. Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors and high commissioners, senior civil and military officials, academia, teachers from various universities, and media participated in the webinar and gave valuable comments and remarks in the open discussion session.



Welcome Address



Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te

Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

At the outset, on behalf of all members of BIISS, **Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te**, Director General, BIISS, welcomed everyone to the 4th webinar of the series of seminars on Bangabandhu organized by BIISS in the Mujib Birth Centenary. He mentioned that, previously, BIISS had organized discussions on Bangabandhu's unfinished memoir, leadership, and foreign policy. For the 4th webinar, the topic selected for discussion is "Bangabandhu's Vision of Sonar Bangla: Bangladesh at 50".

Before commencing his remarks, General Bari paid the most profound tribute to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all martyrs who laid their lives for the nation.

General Bari opined that leadership has often altered the course of history and led a nation towards emancipation or destruction. Being truly a son of the soil who deeply understood his motherland, Bangabandhu identified the needs and struggles of his people and shaped those into dreams, inspired people to rise to the dreams in cohesion and break-free the shackles of oppression, and thus delivered a new nation to the world. Bangabandhu's visionary leadership has placed him among the greatest leaders in history, while his speech of 7th March 1971 that enkindled self-determination in his people is now a part of the world heritage.

General Bari then focused on how the father of the nation envisioned the Sonar Bangla when he set the initial course of the nascent state. He remarked that the post-liberation period was laden with chaos—there were complications to be solved and courses of action to be determined immediately. While people placed all their hopes on him, Bangabandhu found his path challenged with conspiracies and sabotage attempts. Pakistani forces destroyed rail lines, bridges, roads, telecommunication systems, industries, infrastructures, productions and supply chains, devastating the entire economy. Pakistani army burnt the entire cash and gold reserve in the central bank just before their surrender. The major challenges on the economic front were: the need for mobilizing adequate internal and external resources, rebuilding infrastructures, rehabilitating thousands of people who lost everything in the war, and reviving the financial, industrial and business organizations. Ensuring security, good governance and establishing effective diplomatic relations with countries across the world were among other challenges in the non-economic sector.

General Bari commented that Bangabandhu rendered not only a charismatic leadership for creating an independent nation but aptly devoted himself to nation-building and state-building efforts just after the

birth of Bangladesh. The foundations that Bangabandhu laid for the nascent state during his brief period of statesmanship had a far-reaching impact on people and are still largely relevant to the contemporary world.

General Bari shed light on how Bangabandhu relocated his efforts towards making his dream of 'Sonar Bangla', 'Switzerland of the East', a reality. He mentioned, immediately after the independence, Bangabandhu instilled a national creed of rebuilding the war-torn country through establishing fundamental institutions and preparing recovery measures. What he instituted were not mere damage-control measures but a prudent prescription for socio-economic emancipation. The empowerment of people was the prime focus of his development approach. Bangabandhu became an architect of policy-infrastructure to lift the nation from the wreckage of war and put it on the track to prosperity. His policy initiatives, such as the third industrial revolution and nationalization policy, state investment in agriculture, rural infrastructure and cottage industries, formulating the First Five-Year Plan of Bangladesh, etc., paved the way for the development of this country. To uplift the nation's dignity in the international arena, Bangabandhu also adopted a futuristic foreign policy.

While highlighting Bangabandhu's initiatives of poverty alleviation, General Bari mentioned that Bangabandhu often called the people of this country as '**aamar dukhi manush**' (my destitute people), and he devoted himself to poverty alleviation and social progress. General Bari quoted Bangabandhu's United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address in 1974— "Let us together create a world that can eradicate poverty, hunger, war and human sufferings and achieve global peace and security for the well-being of humanity". Bangabandhu started a microcredit programme immediately after independence to make the poor people self-reliant. Aligning with that spirit, the current government under the leadership of Honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, is relentlessly working for zero hunger and zero poverty, said General Bari.

General Bari opined that Bangabandhu's visionary leadership and assertive approach, which is aptly followed by his valiant daughter Sheikh Hasina, the Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh, is the key model for the development approach of the country. Under her dynamic leadership, Bangladesh has effectively surpassed all the thresholds set by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) of the United Nations (UN) to be a developing country by 2026.

General Bari concluded his speech by expressing gratitude to the Honourable Chief Guest Professor Dr Gowher Rizvi and the learned audience for encouraging BISS with their kind participation.



Paper Presentations



Professor Dr Mustafizur Rahman

Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

At the outset, **Professor Dr Mustafizur Rahman**, Distinguished Fellow, CPD, paid his deep appreciation to BISS for organizing the event on the occasion of Bangabandhu's birth centenary and the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh.

He began his remarks by remembering the sacrifice of the Father of the Nation and the martyrs of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. He added that "Bangladesh's Transformation from Aid to Trade Dependence" is an important theme for discussion, which is often not appreciated enough.

While discussing the First Five-Year Plan of Bangladesh, Professor Rahman stated that one of the significant features of Bangabandhu's First Five-Year plan was to make the country self-sufficient and reduce its dependency. In the beginning, many people thought that Bangladesh would be a perennial basket case, which means that the country would be going everywhere with its "begging bowl". Here, he mentioned one of the very first books on Bangladesh in the seventies titled **Bangladesh: The Test Case for Development**. The authors of the book in the preface said that "we are not calling it 'a' test case for development' rather 'the' test case for development' because if development is possible in Bangladesh, then it will be possible for any country as it will be perennially dependent on aid." Professor Rahman emphasized, from that perspective, the discussion on Bangladesh's transformation from a predominantly aid receiving country to a trading nation is very important.

Professor Rahman talked about the Paris consortium during the Pakistan era—the major annual event where the aid pledge was determined by various donor countries. When Bangladesh was liberated, Bangabandhu and his first Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad thought that the meeting should take place in Dhaka. Both leaders also thought that gradually through the implementation of the five-year plan, Bangladesh would be able to reduce its dependence on aid and also, there would be a diversification of the export, less dependence on import through import-substituting industrialization. These were the strategies of the First Five-Year Plan.

Professor Rahman stated that looking back from the vantage point of March 2021; one can easily see how the transformation was made from aid to trade. For instance, in the 1990s, the export and aid ratio

was 1:1. During the pre-pandemic year, export was US\$40 billion, and remittance and services trade were about US\$17 billion. In total, Bangladesh's exports of goods and services were about US\$57 billion against about US\$5 billion of aid. Hence, the ratio of trade and aid was 11:1. Considering the purchasing power from the perspective of export and to what extent it can underwrite the import that the country has annually, it is found that in the pre-pandemic year (2019), Bangladesh imported about US\$56 billion against about US\$57 billion export of goods and services. Thus, export could underwrite all the imports. Moreover, the aid burden was about US\$60 billion, which was less than 20 per cent of about US\$320 billion of GDP. Regarding debt servicing, he added that it was less than about US\$2 billion, which was one-twentieth of the export of goods. These statistics inferred that over the last five decades, following the vision of Bangabandhu in his first five-year plan, Bangladesh has been able to translate its economy from aid-dependent to trade-dependent.

While talking about the role of government in this transition, Professor Rahman highlighted the importance of the policy changes. Introduction to the bonded warehouse facilities and back-to-back LCs were important bold steps undertaken by the government to stimulate the emergence of export-oriented Readymade Garments (RMGs). Likewise, the provision of incentive was also crucial. Over the year, several incentives, e.g., export incentives and subsidies, have been given to the export-oriented sectors to stimulate the export. Besides, he also stressed the importance of the global market access scenario. Bangladesh was one of the very few countries that took advantage of the market access facilities and enormously benefitted by the zero-tariff market access, which many of the least developed countries were not able to take advantage of.

Concerning entrepreneurship, he stated that it has helped Bangladesh to transform from primary production-based export to manufactured-based export, e.g., apparel, pharmaceutical and leather goods. Besides, the role of working people who have supported the entrepreneurs in this transformation is also important. These together have transformed the country's comparative advantages into competitive advantages in the global market and contributed to the emergence of the export sector. Subsequently, through this transformation from aid to trade, the country has been able to create jobs for millions of people, including women, ensuring social empowerment, a new generation of entrepreneurs and also able to put its footprints in the global goods and services markets. He argued that this transformation from aid to trade has helped the country to undertake the journey of dual graduation—middle-income transformation and also graduation from the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) by 2026.

Regarding the challenges ahead, Professor Rahman said that the future would not be the linear extension of the past. Moreover, the transformation will be required for continuing past achievements. LDC graduation will mean a lot of changes for the export-oriented sector as there will be no market access in most of the countries from which Bangladesh has taken advantage and been benefitted. Thus, he emphasized the significance of translating the economy from market access driven competitiveness to productivity and



skill driven competitiveness. As there is no zero-tariff market access, skills productivity, labour productivity, capital productivity will become important. For ensuring these productivities, it needs to realign the education system, focus on research and development and go for various negotiations. In this regard, he also highlighted the importance of establishing a negotiating cell in the Ministry of Commerce like the WTO cell. Besides, negotiation, comprehensive partnership agreements and free trade agreements will require reciprocity. Hence, give and take and tradeoffs will be very important; as in different types of discussion, countries do not get what they deserve rather what they negotiate. Along with negotiation skills, reforms to open up the economy will also be very important.

Referring to the LDC graduation, he stated that the pharmaceutical sector has been benefitted from Bangladesh's status as LDC. Due to this status, this sector does not require any patenting and licensing. However, once Bangladesh graduates, obviously, patent and license laws will have to be tuned. Moreover, it will also be needed to realign the country's capacities. For instance, the backward linkage and active pharmaceutical industry will be very important for moving forward. Besides, skills and productivity-enhancing various support measures also have to be compatible with WTO. Till now, there is a lot of flexibility in the WTO that the country has enjoyed. However, in the future, many of these flexibilities will not be available for the country under the WTO. These are the new challenges that will emerge after the LDC graduation of Bangladesh. On the contrary, the transition which has been made so far gives the country strength to translate its potential into realities. Hence, the foundations have been made, and the country has gained enormously from that. Professor Rahman stressed that, as a country and as a nation, Bangladesh is confident that it will be able to achieve the Vision 2041 which the government has designed. Besides developing itself as an export-oriented country, it also wants inclusive development, better jobs and better-paying wages for the workers.

He concluded his speech by saying that the country has proven wrong those who said, "it is the test for development" and it is moving forward with confidence that it will be able to go towards 2041 as a developed country that is inclusive and environment-friendly.





Dr Binayak Sen

Director General, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)

Dr Binayak Sen, Director General, BIDS, discussed the topic titled “Poverty Alleviation and Social Progress in Bangladesh”. At the outset, he highlighted the trends of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. He said that Bangladesh provides an inspiring story of reducing poverty, with 25 million Bangladeshis lifted from poverty over 15 years. In 1973-74, national poverty was assessed at around 80 per cent, and it was around 60 per cent in 1991-92. It reduced to 24 per cent in 2016 and 20 per cent in 2020 just prior to the pandemic. Even with the shock of the pandemic, the overall poverty rate in 2020 did not exceed 25 per cent. Besides, the overall poverty reduction has been complemented by a decrease in the extreme poverty rate from 70 per cent to 12.8 per cent in 2016. In parallel, there has been an improvement in other indicators of wellbeing as well. However, two variables, i.e., female education and increasing female participation in the labour market, played a critical role in the process. Bangladesh is among the few countries to achieve gender parity in school enrollment, with 6.4 million girls in secondary school. The trend of reversal of gender disparity in secondary school is a remarkable achievement, said Dr Sen. Moreover, female participation in Bangladesh’s labour force has increased to 37 per cent in 2019 from 15 per cent in 1983-84. Nevertheless, he opined that the number needs to increase around 55-60 per cent in the next 20 years. In addition, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in reducing the fertility rate. The total fertility rate in 1975 was around seven which has now reduced to two. When a society makes a transition from high fertility, high mortality rate to low fertility low mortality rate, a number of social forces are unleashed, such as increased living standard of children, increased nutritional standard of children, increased maternal nutrition, increased value of female education, etc. And all these lead to social transformation, which is true for Bangladesh as well.

Dr Sen then discussed four drivers, i.e., agricultural growth, growth of the manufacturing sector led by RMGs, flow of foreign remittance and the role of aspiration, behind the progressive poverty reduction in Bangladesh. The growth of agriculture has been one of the drivers for the progress in rural poverty. The peasants played a major role behind the growth of agriculture who had enthusiasm for agrotechnology. This is the classic example of Ester Boserup’s hypothesis of technology adoption under population pressure. The green revolution in Bangladesh started in the 1970s which got momentum in the first half of the 1990s. Not only the adoption of High-Yielding Varieties (HYVs) rice seeds but also the increasing adoption of agricultural mechanized technology and agricultural mechanized service market, i.e., power tiller and power thresher spread quickly in Bangladesh. Now more than 90 per cent operations are done by the mechanized power tillers. The second driver is the growth of the manufacturing sector led by RMG. It led to the growth of middle-class entrepreneurs in contrast to the first-generation default



entrepreneurs of the late-1970s. In recent decades, they have emerged not just in the export led sectors but also in the domestic economy oriented manufacturing activities. The third factor is the overall growth of foreign remittance. It was less than 5 per cent in 2004, that has increased to more than 10 per cent by 2010 and somewhat reduced to 7 per cent in 2016 and maintained a robust growth. The fourth driver is the role of aspiration. The people from all walks of life in Bangladesh aspire to have a better life. He referred to the evaluation of SWAPNO programme in Bangladesh which found that even the desire of the extreme poor woman is to have their children highly educated and get access to the salary jobs. All these factors led to poverty reduction in Bangladesh.

The last part of Dr Sen's presentation focused on some of the challenges and the way forward. He said that although the rate of poverty has declined, the rate of inequality has increased. The Palma Ratio, the measure of inequality, has been consistently increased from 2.62 in 2005 to 3.45 in 2016. Bangladesh's Gini coefficient for income inequality is 0.48 per cent, almost touching upon the danger zone of 0.50, and it has affected the pace of poverty reduction. The national poverty rate fell by 1.2 percentage points annually from 2010 to 2016 compared to 1.7 from 2005 to 2010. Besides, the growth elasticity of poverty reduction has declined as well, from 2 in the 1990s to barely 1 in 2010. Protecting the initial growth elasticity of poverty reduction reduces poverty even in the lower growth rate, which is an important consideration in the post-Covid-19 uncertainty. One traditional solution is redistribution, meaning taking more tax from the rich and reallocating the resources to the poorest and the most deprived to combat this particular challenge. However, this channel is lacking in Bangladesh. The country has one of the lowest tax-GDP ratios (8 per cent in 2019) in the South Asian region. Bangladesh has failed to apply other instruments of tax collection. So, there are rooms for growth of tax revenue. The second challenge is to create a society that is not based only on individual mobility as a way of outward mobility. It has to be accepted that every person of a society does not have the privilege to graduate from a university and access the public and private sector's higher salary jobs. Therefore, the challenge

in the coming decades will be to create jobs for the unskilled labour force. In this regard, he emphasized achieving quality education where technical and vocational education will create a skilled labour force.

Finally, Dr Sen talked about the economic philosophy of Bangabandhu and the constitution of Bangladesh. He stated that the economic thoughts of Bangabandhu are well reflected in the constitution, which includes democracy and social justice. Article 19(1) emphasizes ensuring equal opportunity to all citizens, while Article 19(2) states that the state shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality and ensure equitable distribution of wealth among citizens. In addition, Article 20 mentions that each will work according to his/her abilities according to their work. This is the classic distribution principle which is the main motto of many welfare regimes and social democratic parties and is present in the constitution of Bangladesh. He opined that these are the ethos and philosophy to pursue.





Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Dr Mahfuz Kabir, Research Director, BISS, gave a presentation on “Development Trajectories and Imperatives for Vision 2041”. He started his presentation by paying his respect to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the greatest Bengali of all time. He quoted Bangabandhu, “To build a Golden Bengal, we need Golden People. Bangladesh is plagued by exploitation, oppression, and looting. To solve these problems and to build a happy and prosperous Bangladesh, the people need to work hard to increase production.” He also quoted, “We will turn this war-ravaged country into a golden one. In the future, mothers will smile, and children will play. . . . We can surely rebuild the country through hard work..” And finally, he quoted, “We have to bring smiles on poor peoples’ faces. The people of Bangladesh have to survive and so require a minimum amount of food.”

He highlighted that the keywords in each of the addresses include concepts of hard work, increased production and bringing smiles to the faces of the mothers and the children. The political agenda of Bangabandhu, as Dr Kabir underscored, was to eradicate poverty, improve the lives of the poor people and ensure the food and nutritional security of mass population. He pointed out that among the other thoughts of Bangabandhu, as already mentioned before by the Director General and the previous speakers, were that of ending poverty, hunger and undernourishment. Bangabandhu always visualized Bangladesh as a land of prosperity, and the country can be the Switzerland of the East. Dr Kabir stressed that it was not just rhetoric but a reality that can be achieved. He pointed out two of the special dimensions of the concept “Switzerland of the East”. The first would be the great potential of Bangladesh to be a connectivity hub, and the second was that Bangladesh has all the possibilities, and it can utilize the potential and become a tourism hub.

The next point elaborated by Dr Kabir was self-sufficiency in food and improved living standard of farming households. During the early-1970s, people living below the poverty line were around 80 per cent, and most of them were farming houses. Bangabandhu always tried to channel the public resources to the farming houses, like providing subsidies, agriculture support, etc. He always tried to bring smiles to the faces of the farming houses. Ending miserable living standards, which was the hard reality of the early-1970s because of the war-ravaged country, and lack of basic resources and public infrastructure because of the war, was always emphasized in his plans and goals of rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure and houses for the people.

According to Dr Kabir, another aspect that gained Bangabandhu’s attention was the developmental and social inclusion, emphasizing how it was not only the aspect of production, but also the overall development, including human development aspect of that social inclusion, that the Father of the Nation was working towards. This included all the sections of the society, irrespective of caste, religion, ethnicity, in fact, women or children, and hence, all of them were in the vision and in the radar of Bangabandhu.

Social justice, as already mentioned by the previous speakers, was another important aspect. In the context of prioritizing agricultural and industrial development, Bangabandhu tried to maintain a balance between agriculture and industry, but primarily focused on agriculture. He realized that there should be a strong linkage between the two—vibrant agriculture can ensure the supply of raw materials for the industrial sector. Dr Kabir also raised the point that Bangabandhu always wanted to create lots of jobs, for the educated mass and the mass population, and it was his vision, which was always clearly written in his First Five-Year Plan and in his speeches. He mainly put emphasize on labour-intensive jobs, which are now reducing in the time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, despite the fact that Bangabandhu always wanted that the people get jobs in the industries. In the case of social protection, lots of social protection programmes were initiated during the years of his leadership, like food support programmes, transport programmes and building the houses of the marginalized groups. These are still continuing, as projected in the recent budgets under the leadership of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is continuously moving forward with the dreams of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangabandhu also underscored the development of the children, which can be understood from his speeches, where he says that he wants that the children should play; it does not only mean going to the playground, but also the cultural development, the development of the mind of the future citizens of the country.

Dr Kabir then highlighted some key elements of Vision 2041. According to him, it carries forward the dreams and visions of Bangabandhu. It mentions accelerating the growth rate, and Bangabandhu always talked about the increased productivity and increased efficiency of the economy. Vision 2041, in fact, sets the target growth to nine per cent in the fiscal year 2031 and 9.9 per cent in 2041. Regarding poverty alleviation, there are two targets—reduction of extreme poverty to less than one per cent and general poverty to less than three per cent. Even though Covid-19 has put certain setbacks in place and some statistics have shown drawbacks in poverty numbers, Bangladesh is coming back towards the target under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership. Dr Kabir further added that there are few milestones: one is to become upper-middle income country by 2031 and become a rich, industrially developed country by 2041, with per capita income of over USD12,500, thereby making poverty a thing of the past in Sonar Bangla, as mentioned in the Vision 2041 document. However, there are a lot of imperatives in the process to achieve all the targets of Vision 2041 and the dreams of Bangabandhu, some of which have been mentioned in the Vision 2041 document. One example given by Dr Kabir is education. He remarked that while the curriculum, the schools, the teachers, the infrastructure are all there, the children are yet to realize the dream. Likewise, the baseline for digital Bangladesh, which has become a popular slogan, exists, the people need to understand that it is an essential



need for it as survival is not possible without it. But what would be the way to convey that? It has to be, in fact, conveyed to the minds of the children. There is a need for greater development of the children's minds because they are the future generation of the country, according to Dr Kabir.

High growth rates are very important, but the issue of undernourishment of children is also an important and great challenge for Bangladesh. In fact, now one-third of the children are under-nourished, and it is a big challenge for Bangladesh because if the children are under-nourished, their cognitive abilities will be slowed down, and the country will not get ample return from the jobs and the economic growth will be slower than expected. Human development is also very important because Bangabandhu had that dream of the overall development of human beings; so it is not just about poverty but also improving the standard of living with education, health and job security. All these had been repeatedly mentioned in the speeches of Bangabandhu, his addresses to the nation, and his First Five-Year Plan.

Recognizing that the issue of inequality had already been mentioned, Dr Kabir noted that there are a lot of things in addressing inequality: in 2010, there had been a kind of impression that Bangladesh had reached the Kuznet's maximum, but now when we see that from 2016 inequality is increasing. So, it will be a big challenge for Bangladesh to tame the inequality and distribute the resources to the poor and the marginalized. Another important issue is that the people living in the margins, like people living in the chars, the riverines and the coastal islands, the haors, the hilly areas and the coastal areas need to receive the fruits of development. In regard to attracting FDI, the speaker noted that there was great misery and no foreign investments in the country in the initial years after independence. Now, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the country has established the Special Economic Zones. The entire economy can transform now at an accelerated pace of growth. While the government is already trying to attract both foreign and domestic investments in the Bangabandhu industrial zone, Dr Kabir emphasized that attracting more foreign investment in the heavy industry, electrics and electronics and high-tech sectors can form a stronger backbone to the economy.

Regarding the development of infrastructure, Dr Kabir mentioned the new mega-projects like Metro Rail and Padma Bridge, and other mega-investments like those in the energy sector. However, there are spillover effects, such as what will be the benefit for the poor, the marginalized populations; there are evictions and displacements of the poor because of the acquisition of the land. So what could be the alternative options? He raised the questions: "Can we give share of the infrastructure to the poor who are affected?" His final point was on tourism sector. Bangabandhu has always visualized Bangladesh as a Golden Land and beautiful land with a lot of potential and natural resources vis-à-vis the archeological sites. So, the thought of Bangabandhu can be realized through the tourism sector, by developing the country, the Switzerland of the East. Dr Mahfuz Kabir concluded his remarks by saying that while the scope of Vision 2041 is huge, there remains a lot of other areas that can be brought under Vision 2041.



Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad
Chairman, Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF)

Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, Chairman, PKSF, spoke on the topic, “Transformation of Economic Policies and Outcomes”. He began by exploring Bangabandhu’s vision and shared his perspectives regarding it. He highlighted that Bangabandhu believed in human centricity and their needs and considered them the most important. He noted that, as soon as one says human being, the multiplicity of needs of the people comes in front. Be it a project on education, health, or any other thing, it all starts with human beings. For the human being to go forward, one needs not only food but also education, health services, water, electricity and all other things that a person needs to live a decent life. This has been reflected in the constitution and also in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence clearly mentioned three things: removal of inequality, human rights for all and dignified life for all. These were then elaborated in the constitution. To see the progress of human beings, everybody has to be included in it. On this basis, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development emphasizes that nobody should be excluded. But that was also in the ideals of the Liberation War, that nobody should be excluded and that everybody should be included. Dr Ahmad reiterated that he saw this as the vision of Bangabandhu. There will be one society. Dr Ahmad opined that everybody would not be equal as that is not possible and has not happened in any where in the world and will never happen, but equity has to be ensured. Whatever level of society one lives in, one may be at a very high-power chair, or much wealth, or one may be poor and may be doing manual work, but human dignity has to be enjoyed wherever one is. Dr Ahmad thought this to be the message of Bangabandhu. If one wants to follow Bangabandhu or discuss him, the focus should be on people’s dignity.

Regarding Bangabandhu’s policies, Dr Ahmad shared that Bangabandhu tried to promote his ideas through various actions that he took during his short three and a half years of holding the affairs of independent Bangladesh. First of all, Bangabandhu focused on relief for the returnees from India and the people whose household economies were destroyed during the War of Liberation. Bangabandhu focused on agriculture and gave various kinds of stimulus to restart agriculture. He focused on the industry. Bangabandhu nationalized large industries, but he did not want to take away people’s right to property at a certain level and therefore promoted small and cottage industries. He focused on infrastructure. Unless infrastructure is right, people and things cannot move, and one cannot go very far in terms of improving the economy. Bangabandhu tried all of these, and towards the end, in 1975, he focused on cooperatives. That was a revolutionary thing at that time; nobody’s land would be taken away, nobody’s property would be taken away, but all will work together. Based on that principle, the property owner or landowner will get his or her share, and the cooperative will get its share, and the government will get a share. Here Dr Ahmad brought up the issue of a low tax-to-GDP ratio. He noted that, in Bangladesh, it is only nine per cent, while in Nepal, it is seventeen per cent, and in India and

other places, it is much more than that. Dr Ahmad believed that if the cooperative movement was successful and Bangabandhu had lived, this problem would not be there. Today, in Bangladesh, the rate of becoming rich is the highest in the world, and yet the tax-to-GDP ratio is meagre.

At this stage, Dr Ahmad discussed the policy transformation in different phases and under different regimes. The first policy transformation came after 1975, after the brutal killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There was a shift from human focus to capital and market focus. The 1980s is seen as a lost decade. The average growth rate was around 3.4 to 3.8 per cent GDP growth rate, and the nationalized industries were being de-nationalized, and private individuals were being promoted with government assistance as done in Pakistan times. However, the growth rate did not accelerate, poverty did not go down that much, and foreign aid dependence was total for the development budget. Part of the revenue budget was in some years financed by the funds created under PL480. So that was a lost decade in that sense.

In the 1990s, Bangladesh continued with that same policy-orientation. But towards the second half of the 1990s, a major change took place for the policies, and that was support for agriculture. Agricultural support was neglected in the 1980s and early 1990s. Foreign donors advised not to give much importance to agriculture; rather advised to emphasize the industry. That advice was followed in Bangladesh. But in the second half of the 1990s, the first Sheikh Hasina government decided to give substantial subsidies to agriculture despite opposition from the World Bank and other international agencies. That helped Bangladesh improve the agricultural output and agricultural production, and the country became almost self-sufficient by 2000, which was a major change. But in 2001, there was again a political change, and the same neglect of agriculture started again. Next, there was a two-years' military-supported caretaker government. The policies that remained were the market economy focus. Here Dr Ahmad clarified that he is not opposed to market economy focus, but then it becomes tyrannical. He referred that Bangabandhu also said that this is tyrannical, and he did not support it; Bangabandhu supported socialism. Around the world and in Bangladesh, it can be



seen that it has become tyrannical. The disparity has been created worldwide, and there is no reason why it should not happen in Bangladesh if the country depends on unfettered market forces.

However, in Bangladesh, the disparity has perhaps not increased as much as it could have as there were certain government policies starting from 2009, which focused on the poorer segments of the population. For example, the large safety net programme. In this period, the focus on agriculture was brought back. There was lots of support for agriculture, agricultural credit and other agricultural developments, and subsidies. So, poverty declined. But it is to be noted that the rate of poverty decline decreased. Dr Ahmad provided an explanation for that. He explained that when poverty was easier to solve, the rate of poverty alleviation was faster. But when it became very hardcore poverty, it was not very easy to remove poverty in that context. He shared his personal experience of going around the country and meeting groups of people who have specific problems of their own, for example, the tea garden workers, the people with disabilities and the haor people. He said, “One shoe cannot fit all, these problems need to be separately addressed, and policies have to be first designed and then implemented properly.” Dr Ahmad noted that here is a recognition for that in the policy-making circles. But the problem is that it is very difficult, and therefore, the rate has declined. Dr Ahmad viewed this issue based on the practical aspects of it.



At this stage of his presentation, Dr Ahmad focused on the current condition of Bangladesh's economy. He opined that Bangladesh is now doing very well, and everybody recognizes it. Internationally it is also recognized that these policy changes started in 2009. Many of these issues were reflected in the 2008 Awami League election manifesto, and policies are being formulated towards that end. He noted that the market economy perspectives dampened some of the other social perspectives, and therefore, there is disparity, but it is much less because of the policies adopted to alleviate poverty. Until the Corona pandemic, Bangladesh has done tremendously well. The country improved the per capita economy. The per capita income has gone up to about US\$2,000 from about US\$560 in 2005. Bangladesh was a lower-middle-income country but is now moving forward to becoming an upper-middle income country by 2031. In this regard, Dr Ahmad shared some observations regarding Bangladesh's graduation as dignity is associated with it. He stated that Bangladesh is at a level where the income has gone up tremendously, progress has been phenomenal and internationally

recognized; still, it will remain an LDC up to 2026. He viewed that Bangladesh can get out any time if it wants; if it can build the Padma Bridge, then this can be managed. He calculated that Bangladesh would only lose two billion or something in a year which is nothing in the context of its income. Through graduation, the dignity of Bangladesh will go up. Dr Ahmad realized that there would be certain problems regarding this process; however, he recollected that Bangladesh was told that if the quota system was removed, then the government export would collapse, but it has not, instead Bangladesh has risen to the occasion. Therefore, he opined that Bangladesh should not wait that long. In Bangabandhu's birth centenary, Bangladesh should come out of the LDC dogma and become a country moving forward. However, Dr Ahmad shared that the distinction of least developed, developing and developed is not very meaningful to him. He understood the classification of low-income, middle income and high-income, but not the former one. From his personal experience of extensively travelling through the villages of Bangladesh and in the international arena, he realized that the LDC label hurts the ego. In rural areas, people are moving faster, have expectations, work, and the policy framework created for them is working, which is why there is both agricultural and non-agricultural growth in rural areas. Dr Ahmad stressed that the basis of the economy is in the rural areas, agriculture and non-agriculture. Until the Corona pandemic, some people did not recognize that the rural economy was the foundation on which Bangladesh was building its economy. But now, many people who never mentioned the rural economy are supporting the idea that the rural economy and agriculture saved the country during this phase. So, it is important to be very careful and look back at what Bangabandhu did. Bangabandhu emphasized agriculture, he emphasized people, and he emphasized the rural sectors.

As Bangladesh is moving forward, it faces certain challenges. Dr Ahmad elaborated on a few of the challenges. He gave credit to Bangladesh Awami League as it recognized most of the problems in the election manifesto of 2018. He reminded the audience that the problems are not new to the policy-makers. It is not new to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; she knows all as it was already highlighted in the manifesto. Dr Ahmad discussed some of those. For example, the skill gap is one of the major problems currently faced in Bangladesh. Skilled people are essential for taking the economy and society forward and also earning more remittance. A skill development policy was made in 2011; however, that has to be adequately implemented. But it is also important to survey and find out which sector needs what kind of skills and what levels of skills at a particular point in time. The education system should be geared to that end. The need for skills was recognized in 2011, and it was again recognized in 2018. The second thing that was recognized is corruption. A zero-tolerance policy was declared, and actions have been taken regarding it. It is also recognized that there are governance gaps that should be filled up. The centralization of policymaking and issues of implementation are also recognized by the government. Some of the issues can be overcome at various levels of society and various levels of the economy. Some need to be addressed at the local level and, therefore, included in the policy planning, making and implementation. Others need to be addressed at the macro level, for example, the tax-to-GDP ratio and how to utilize the foreign exchange reserve. The last challenge Dr Ahmad focused on is the implementation of the policies. He opined that Bangladesh could have gone much faster, perhaps, if its implementation side was as fast as its policymaking side.

Dr Ahmad reiterated that Bangladesh has done tremendously well. There are only a few countries that have done so well during the pandemic. Bangladesh's growth rate was 4.5 per cent in 2020 as per the international measurement. Very few countries have achieved that rate of growth that year. The country has managed the pandemic very well, and the economy is starting to recover. It needs to be rejuvenated. As early as 13 April 2020, which was just about one month of the pandemic, the Prime Minister issued a stimulus package, a huge 3.7 per cent of the GDP; later, it was raised to 4.3 per cent.

In summarizing his thoughts, Dr Ahmad shared that Bangladesh has been doing very well and even during the pandemic, it has done well. He thinks that very soon, Bangladesh should be able to go back to the trajectory it was in 2019 so that the country can move forward towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda was adopted by the United Nations on 25 September 2015. In three to four weeks, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appointed a committee in her office to plan how to implement the Agenda 2030. The committee has been working very well, and they have prioritized the targets under 17 goals. Dr Ahmad thought this to be a very forward-looking policy, but its implementation needs to be emphasized. Here he brought back the focus on Bangabandhu's ideals. He stated that if Bangladesh follows Bangabandhu's vision, then it can be seen that these elements are there in that vision, i.e., everybody has to be included. Now there are policy frameworks within the broad perspective that Bangabandhu had, but in many cases, the problem is implementation. Much emphasis needs to be given to implementation and skill development. Within the country, skilled and motivated people are very much needed. Skill development in international negotiation is also crucial so that Bangladesh can take advantage of the opportunities that are there and minimize the problem that the country might face. Dr Ahmad reiterated that the year 2021, the year of **Mujib Borsho** and the Golden Jubilee for independence, is the right opportunity to commit to doing whatever one can do from their positions to promote Bangabandhu's vision, i.e., people-centred development by including everybody.

Towards the end of his speech, Dr Ahmad hoped that through the implementation of the policy framework 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Bangladesh would be able to achieve the prioritized targets that have been identified and become an upper-middle-income country by then, not leaving people behind. Dr Ahmad viewed that Bangladesh can become an upper-income country, even a developed country, by leaving a lot of people behind, but that is something Bangabandhu would not want the country to do. And therefore, Bangladesh has to include everybody, meaning everybody has to be legitimately and equitably included in the process. There are elements of these in the policies, but the task is for everyone to do their bit to see that Bangladesh moves towards the goal of a nation of equals, as human beings, as citizens of a country and not differentiated based on economic or social position. Dr Ahmad concluded by saying that Bangladesh has to move out of "I" and into "we" if it wants to move forward together because that is the heritage and one of the ideas of the liberation war.



Open Discussion

Lieutenant General Harun-Ar-Rashid, BP (Retd), former Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army, began his speech by paying tribute to the undisputed leader of the country, and the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He thanked the BISS for organizing the webinar to discuss the vision of Bangabandhu at the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence and at Mujib's birth centenary.



General Harun mentioned that Bangladesh's success story is now widely recognized as a role model of development in the world. He believes Bangladeshis should claim themselves as a proud nation. He said that Bangladesh should not wait for 2026 for the LDC graduation. Instead, he argued that Bangladesh should declare the graduation from LDC to a developing country in 2021, the Mujib Year.

General Harun opined that, in addition to development, Bangabandhu had the ambition of achieving salvation for the people, which was mentioned in Bangabandhu's historic 7th March speech. He argued that although Bangladesh has achieved its liberation, its struggle for salvation is still underway. He thinks the people of Bangladesh need not only economic salvation but also social and religious salvation.

While emphasizing Bangabandhu's leadership, General Harun remarked that people should not compare the time when Bangabandhu took the responsibility to rule Bangladesh and the current period. He mentioned that Bangabandhu led the country in the most challenging time of its history. During that time, Bangladesh's national reserve was empty, entire transport facilities were destroyed, around 10 million



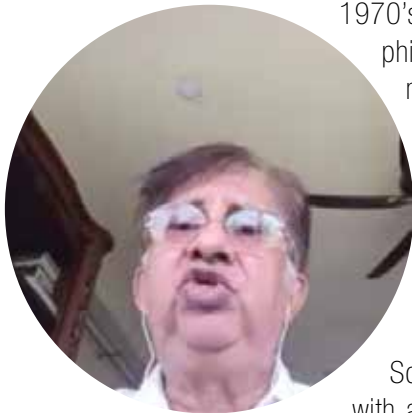
refugees were returning from India, more than 30 million people's homes were destroyed, thousands of freedom fighters and people were wounded, and the country-wide infrastructures were totally destroyed. He firmly believes that it was only Bangabandhu who could take the responsibility of the state and carry out the responsibilities of nation-building and development.

General Harun cited the famous English proverb—"A very good beginning is half done." He believes whatever Bangladesh has achieved in the last fifty years and whatever it will achieve in the future are firmly based on the initial contributions made by Bangabandhu. Citing the proclamation of Bangladesh's independence, he highlighted that the sovereign and the democratic state of Bangladesh were established to ensure "equality, dignity and social justice" for the people of Bangladesh. He believes that Bangladesh can achieve the promised equality, dignity and social justice for its people through the continuous economic achievements that the country has been experiencing.

General Harun said that Bangladesh needs to implement a revolutionary mindset to deal with the current and emerging challenge. He thinks that the country needs an accountable administration and governance system at first. Besides, the country needs to make the judiciary compatible with a sovereign and dignified state so that people can get their judicial services freely. Moreover, Bangladesh needs to make the administration and judiciary as accountable as possible to successfully implement the developmental projects that are being introduced through the political will of the government.

Finally, General Harun said that Bangladesh should continue its journey following the Vision of Bangabandhu. He also reminded the audience that Bangladesh could have achieved more if the country had not lost Bangabandhu very early in 1975.

Ambassador Shamsheer M Chowdhury, Former Foreign Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh, expressed his gratitude to BISS for organizing this very important and timely discussion. He focused on Bangabandhu's philosophy that was reflected in his historical six points programme after the 1970's election and when he emerged as a leader of Bengali independence. The philosophy was that Bangladesh would be a poverty-free country, and it will move toward inclusive development. He expressed his solidarity with Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad and Dr Binayak Sen regarding the statement that Bangladesh will move toward economic and social development along with everyone. It will also ensure law and justice for every citizen.



To explain Bangabandhu's goal of poverty-free Bangladesh, he mentioned his editorial article "Aid is not us", published in the *Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's most prominent newspapers with the help of the North-South Institute, in 1985. The article highlighted that Bangladesh could develop with aid; instead, the country needs to focus on trade. If Bangladesh progresses in trade development, then the country will not need aid, which was proven right in the last decades. He also reflected that today the word "donor countries" is unheard of; instead, now the country has development partners, which is a significant achievement; and with it, the country has moved one step ahead towards Bangabandhu's dream.

According to Ambassador Chowdhury, the former idea of development partners consisted only of those who sponsored projects and provided technical assistance. But he believes since remittance plays an important role in the economic and socio-economic development, and the countries from where Bangladesh gets remittance, like the Middle East, Italy, Malaysia, Singapore, and Korea, should be recognized as development



partners as well. He did not want to comment on this issue of fastening the transition process as a developing country, as many experts are discussing if it can be possible. In his opinion, if Bangladesh wants to advance this way, then the country needs to think beyond the duty-free, quota-free system and move forward with ideas like free trade agreements. The number of free trade agreements is one of the components of a developing country. He mentioned Vietnam, for example. Vietnam does not get preferential programme facilities, but it has free trade agreements with most developed countries in the world. He emphasized that people need to have skills, morale, and resources for free trade. According to him, the government will lose tariffs due to free trade, but it will help to increase foreign investment, which will, in turn, increase employment. The amount lost in tariffs will be gained back from foreign investment and local employment.

Professor Dr Syed Anwar Husain, Bangabandhu Chair Professor, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), began by paying homage to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He shared his profuse appreciation towards the distinguished panellists for their enlightening presentations on the economic aspects of Bangabandhu's Vision of Sonar Bangla. He spoke about a 16th century



French traveller to Bengal, who had remarked that Bengal has a thousand gates to enter, but not a single exit. In the early 16th century, Chinese Ambassador, guest to Sultan Ghiyasuddin, gave two certificates to the people of Bengal—they do not lie, they do not cheat anyone. While the first was a testament to the country's natural beauty that they had heard about from the Bengali people, the second spoke of the high moral standard of the people of Bengal.

He stated that, despite its previous reputation, historical evidence suggests that Bengal was not always the Golden Land envisioned and praised in the past. There were breaches juxtaposed by ranks and inequality. While preparing the new country's outline, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

envisioned Bangladesh to be an ideal state. Bangabandhu wanted to achieve a welfare state, a Sonar Bangla. Bangabandhu articulated what he meant by Sonar Bangla when he gave a speech at Rajshahi in 1972, which Professor Husain believed essential to understand what the Father of the Nation meant by Sonar Bangla and his road map to achieve it. Professor Husain quoted Bangabandhu, "What do I want? I want the Bengali people to get two square meals a day; What do I want? I want unemployed to get jobs; What do I want? I want my people of Bengal to be happy; What do I want? I want my Bengali people to be smiling and be sporting all the time; What do I want? I want my Bengal people to smile again to their hearts' content."

At its 50th year of independence, Bangladesh maintains pride in becoming an economic success story. The country has been certified to graduate from an LDC status to Developing country status. However, Professor Husain added, there remains a lot more to be done. While the economy progresses, the politics lacks, and even though economically the country is progressing, politically, it is not. Democracy, which is the key feature of any developed and developing country, has seen a sort of stunted growth over the years. Moreover, Bangabandhu's vision of Golden Bengal is yet to be fulfilled. The economic strides are interspersed with ideological slits. As the yearning to address and remedy the inequality grows, the country still has miles to go before reaching the goal of Bangabandhu's dream of Sonar Bangla.



Professor Begum Touhida Faruki, Former Director General, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, said that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had a vision. She explained that Bangabandhu had a dream, and through this dream, he gave the people of Bangladesh an independent country. Professor Faruki further mentioned that Bangabandhu had many other visions, but he did not get a chance to implement them. Right after independence, Bangabandhu gave his attention to many sectors, but he could not fulfil it as he was brutally killed in 1975.

Professor Faruki said that Bangabandhu's daughter, Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is now fulfilling the other dreams of Bangabandhu. While emphasizing the visions of Bangabandhu, she said that Bangabandhu put special effort into the eradication of illiteracy, alleviation of poverty, limiting inequality and women empowerment.

As a project director of a programme focused on women education, Professor Faruki shed some light on that issue. By education, she meant both academic education and vocational education. She mentioned that the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made education for women free until graduation and facilitated many vocational education programmes. Consequently, Bangladesh has experienced a significant increase in women's skills, and women are profoundly contributing to the country's economy. This is definitely the fulfilment of a vision of Bangabandhu. Bangladesh has successfully eradicated illiteracy significantly, she added. Professor Faruki believes Bangladesh needs to work more on limiting inequality in society. She hoped that this vision would also be fulfilled shortly because of the good policies that Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is currently implementing.

Ambassador Shahed Akhtar, Former Principal, Foreign Service Academy, expressed his gratitude to BISS for reflecting on the vision of Bangabandhu. He stated that fifty years is a very short period because it takes hundreds of years to go ahead in different areas, but in this particular period, Bangladesh has excelled. Starting from the basket case, today, Bangladesh is recognized as a developing country and at the threshold of moving out of the LDC bracket. He mentioned that the

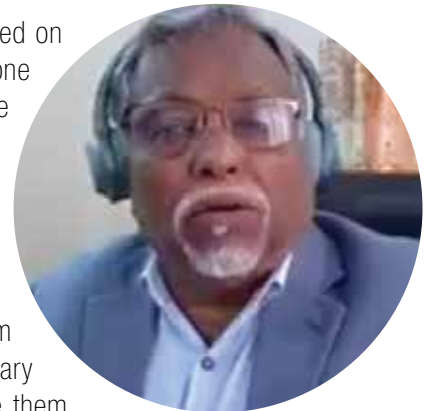


LDC involvement of Bangladesh was very timely and necessary to recover from the difficulties of that time, and it was also a good decision of the government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina to be moving out of this LDC bracket. He expressed his concern that there will be a lot of challenges, and not everything is achievable. He believes the country needs to do a lot of homework and be prepared since there are still five to six years remaining before the transformation. He praised the government for ensuring all sectors' progress, including the health sector, even during Covid-19. He praised Bangabandhu's wise decision that Bangladesh needed to be a member of international bodies, including the United Nations. He also reminisced about Bangabandhu's visit and speech at the United Nations. He opined that Bangabandhu's direction had given Bangladesh a big leap ahead of the many other countries.



Mr M S Siddiqui, Legal Economist, drew attention to the way forward for Bangladesh after LDC graduation and remarked that greater focus should be directed to that issue. This is because Bangladesh, despite having been a country dependent on aid, is now a trading nation, and the LDC graduation is bound to affect the country's international trade. He referred to Ambassador Shamsheer M Chowdhury's illustration of Vietnam's success story, and behind the success story is the Free Trade Agreement. He highlighted that while there has been discussion on the negative aspect of the Free Trade Agreement, but it has not been discussed adequately. He once again referred to Ambassador Chowdhury's words that the country will lose its revenue due to the Free Trade Agreement, which is not correct as per the statistics of the National Board of Revenue, according to Mr Siddiqui. He remarked that Bangladesh has been gradually reducing tax tariffs since 1990, but according to the National Board of Revenue, the revenue is continuously rising. He underscored that his experience shows a different story. He remarked that Bangladesh could comfortably go ahead and further added that Bangladesh should not look back and has no choice but to face its competitors, like other trade-based developing countries, since Bangladesh is going to be graduated in 2026.

Professor Dr Atiqul Islam, Vice Chancellor, North South University, focused on the educational landscape of Bangladesh. He recognized the reality that everyone does not get a chance to enroll into the universities in Bangladesh. However, he does not think anywhere in the world there is a country where everyone goes to university. He also believes that neither everyone wants to go to universities, nor they need to go. He said that although Bangladesh has many educated people, their level of skills needs to be raised. Due to the lack of skilled people, Bangladesh has to hire professionals from neighbouring and far away countries. As a result, billions of dollars go out of the country. He opined that this problem could be solved. First of all, Bangladesh has a huge number of students in primary and secondary education. At the tertiary level, the country cannot accommodate them all. So, those who fail to get admitted to universities should have access to quality technical and vocational education. Consequently, people would make tremendous contributions to the economy; they will not remain poor anymore.

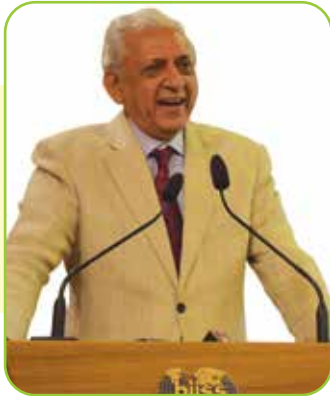


He mentioned the cases of the orphanages and madrasas of Bangladesh. He thinks that the rapid expansion of madrasas and the relatively very slow expansion of technical education are unacceptable. He thinks Bangladesh should increase its budget on education by 2 per cent of the GDP and then give incentives to the madrasas, to the orphanage kids in order to let them learn some necessary technical skills so that they do not have to depend on other people. This will make the madrasa students enlightened and worldlier.



and allow them to access the labour market. Consequently, all the sectors of the country's economy would benefit. Hence, Bangladesh would not have to have everyone in higher education, and it could lift people out of poverty. He mentioned that, in many developing countries, a farmer earns more than a professor and a secretary. So, if Bangladesh could have more electricians, plumbers, medical technicians, it would get much economic return.

Address by the Chief Guest



Professor Dr Gowher Rizvi

International Relation Affairs Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Professor Dr Gowher Rizvi, International Relation Affairs Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, thanked BISS for organizing the webinar. He appreciated the theme of the webinar "Bangabandhu's Vision of Sonar Bangla" and thanked the distinguished speakers for their valuable contribution to the webinar.

Professor Rizvi opined that Bangabandhu's vision was clearly defined, articulated, stated, and recorded in the four principles enunciated in the constitution of Bangladesh. He believed the four principles of the Bangladesh's constitution were not just theoretical aspirations; these were based on Bangabandhu's 23-year experience of dealing with Pakistan and Pakistani policies. The 1972 constitution was a product of Bangabandhu's mind, experience and aspiration for Bangladesh. He thanked Dr Binayak Sen for shedding light on some of the aspects of the constitution and spelt out the visionary aspect of Bangabandhu's dream of making a socially just society in Bangladesh. Professor Rizvi believed that Bangladesh has come a long way since independence. He asserted that the people of Bangladesh have witnessed such extraordinary progress in the country in a very short period of time, which was not a conceivable event even 10 to 12 years ago. He acknowledged that still, there are some challenges ahead which need to be addressed, and there is a lot more to be accomplished in the days ahead.

Focusing on the challenges of Bangladesh, Professor Rizvi mentioned that one of the fundamental commitments of Bangabandhu, and his dream and vision, was creating a secular society. Professor Rizvi expressed his disappointment that, in that area, there has been regression. He said that Bangladesh's constitution has been amended and much of the secular spirit of the 1972 constitution has been reincorporated. But he feared that Bangladesh's society had not become that plural, secular, liberal democracy that Bangladesh had imagined. Even today, inequalities and intolerance between communities and groups prevail. That was not what Bangabandhu had imagined. Professor Rizvi stressed that people need to reflect on that. He cautioned that if people do not take that into account, where there has been regression, it will be a mistake.

Professor Rizvi then elucidated the tremendous economic progress that the country has made in the last one decade but mentioned that there is always room for improvement. He raised a question, “Does this economic progress really fit into the vision of Bangabandhu’s socially just egalitarian society?” He believed that it does not at that level. He remarked that the 1972 constitution described Bangabandhu’s vision. It was the fundamental principles in the constitution that gave the country the roadmap. But, the first three years of Bangabandhu’s administration was taken up for crisis management. He had to face all sorts of difficulties to recreate a war-torn country into a new state. He had to build everything brick by brick that included rehabilitation of the refugees, restoration of agriculture, transport, infrastructure, establishment of institutions, laws and policies. But it was in 1975, when Bangabandhu finally provided the mechanism, the framework, the structure, through which his dream and vision can be materialized. Unfortunately, the framework got discredited even before it was given a try. Bangabandhu was killed before he could implement his ideas, which is popularly known as BaKSAL today.

Supporting the remarks of Dr Q K Ahmad, Professor Rizvi mentioned that Bangabandhu’s vision focused on creating a society based on cooperatives. A society with a decentralized government. A society where property would be respected but the benefits of the property and the wealth would be shared by all. The scheme that was provided in 1975 was a programmatic framework for restructuring the society. Professor Rizvi expressed his disappointment that BaKSAL got popularly condemned as a one-party system, which he believed was far from the truth. People never analyzed the framework properly and carefully. If Bangabandhu would have given even another five years to implement his scheme that he had announced in 1975—devolution of power, creating 64 district with elected governors, moving decision making to the grassroots, bringing justice and policy making at the grassroots—we would have a totally transformed Bangladesh on that time. Professor Rizvi said, “We would have made no less progress that we have made; but we would have made it in a way that was socially just and egalitarian in nature with the values of social justice and secularism.”

Professor Rizvi believes that the ideas of 1975 reform programme are still very much the need of the time. He suggested to look at it, carefully analyze its contents and at least bring some of its policies back so that the dimension of Bangabandhu’s social justice, equitable, egalitarian and secular society can be restored.

Before concluding, Professor Rizvi thanked BIIS for organizing the webinar. He hoped to have a detailed discussion on Bangabandhu’s concrete plan for the society some other day. He thanked everyone for their active participation in the webinar.



Concluding Remarks by the Chair



Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te
Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te, Director General, BISS, thanked the Honourable Chief Guest for his insightful speech. He remarked that it was never easy to organize a newly born state. Right after independence, in the formative years, it was impossible for everyone to see beyond the horizon due to the chaotic situation and scarce resources. General Bari believes only a few could do that, and Bangabandhu was one of them, which could be understood in at least two ways. Firstly, at the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh, whatever development the country has achieved so far can directly be traced back to Bangabandhu's initiatives during his brief period of time. And, secondly, whenever the country had drifted off from Bangabandhu's directives, it got into some potholes. These are some of the manifestations. But General Bari believes that, in the process, as a nation, the people of Bangladesh have developed some skills and habits of getting back on track, which manifests peoples' resilience. Now people of Bangladesh are confident that they will be able to cope with the right kind of leadership, which is assertive and keeps people at the focus of all its activities. General Bari concluded the session by extending heartfelt gratitude to the Honourable Chief Guest for remaining in the webinar full time, despite his busy schedule. He also thanked the learned participants for sharing their wisdom. He expressed his gratitude to all the participants for their presence, enriching the webinar, and honouring BISS. He hoped that Bangladesh would keep prospering, and Bangabandhu's vision of Golden Bengal would become Sonar Bangla in the true sense.

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