THE DREAM OF SONAR BANGLA: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PRESENT CONTEXT

I

INTRODUCTION

Sonar Bangla or 'Golden Bengal' which refers to a pre-colonial 'Golden Age' of prosperity, plenty and cheapness of material wealth in the territory of current Bangladesh and the adjacent areas populated by the Bengali-speaking people is strongly ingrained in popular mind. The Mughal Suba of Bengal was regarded as Zannat-abad or "the Realm of Paradise" an epithet ascribed to it by the second Mughal emperor Humayun. Emperor Aurangzeb has styled Bengal as the "Paradise of Nations".

Such an image of Bengal with the legends of its affluence at the centre has not only been boosted by the local elite but also by a large number of foreigners from almost all corners of the Old World since the medieval time. These include travellers from Morocco, China, Italy, France and others. Bengal, as witnessed by Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta, was known as a Dozakh pur-i-

niamat or "hell full of bounties".² It was known as a hell for its humid weather that was detested by the foreigners and as ‘full of bounties’ for its legendary affluence.

The wealth of Bengal and the cheapness of its wares during the medieval period have also been illustrated by most of the contemporaneous European accounts of Bengal. "The rich exuberance of the country", wrote Francois Bernier, "together with the beauty and amiable disposition of the native women has given rise to a proverb in common use among the Portuguese, English and Dutch that the Kingdom of Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance, but not one for departure".³

The legend about Sonar Bangla has further been crystallised during the severe decline of Bengal caused by the economic exploitation and political deprivation under the colonial rule and more so during the National Liberation Movement against British colonialism. Eulogised by the political leaders, poets and lyricists, Sonar Bangla gradually became ingrained in the popular mind.

The de-colonisation and the partition of British India along the religious line in August 1947 did not bring independence to the people of Bangladesh. Instead, Bangladesh turned to be the worst victim of internal colonialism as perpetuated by the rulers of Pakistan who basically were either from the West Pakistan or migrated to that part from India.⁴ Already in the

early years of Pakistani rule, a protest movement against internal colonialism began to grow among the Bengalis. In course of time, this movement transformed under the dynamic and charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the Founding father of Bangladesh – into a full-fledged nationalist movement with a viable programme, veritable symbols and highly passionate mass participation. The strategic goal of the Independent Movement of Bangladesh for about two decades and the War of Liberation of 1971 has been the emancipation of the country from Pakistani yoke and the building of Sonar Bangla. This has been repeatedly mentioned by the nationalist leaders, including Bangabandhu, activists of cultural, student and workers movements.

While considering the dream of Sonar Bangla against the backdrop of current reality and, on this basis, making efforts to chart a course for the country with a view to ensuring the wellbeing of its people, a host of issues come to the forefront. How far is the dream of Sonar Bangla based on myths and nationalist passion? How far is it based on the understanding of the current state of the nation as well as its achievable socio-economic and politico-cultural objectives? In this regard, striking a balance between the romanticism associated with the dream and the prevailing reality is a crucial point. More important, however, is to formulate a long-standing strategy for the development of the nation that would accommodate the national dream within the realm of possibility.
The paper is not aimed at dealing with all these issues and certainly not designed to address all the questions associated with the subject. It is rather aimed at initiating a discussion on the subject so that the related issues could be analysed from different perspectives. The paper begins with a discussion on the dream of Sonar Bangla with some reflections on both the myths and the reality. Then an attempt is made to project an outlook for the future while keeping in mind the national dream.

II

SONAR BANGLA: THE MYTH, THE REALITY AND THE DREAM

The historical and more so the economic interpretation of Sonar Bangla is full of controversies and also based on highly contradictory or unreliable evidences. Seeing through the fog of time and conflicting perspectives, and demystifying the idea of and the vision for a Sonar Bangla is indeed a difficult undertaking. It is more so because of the fact that while a number of perspectives, current as well as medieval, indigenous as well foreign are vividly manifested, common people's perspective, particularly a medieval one, could seldom be detected.

Mughal description of Bengal as a 'realm of paradise', 'paradise of India', 'paradise of nations', and so on is easily understandable. It reflects only the perspective of one side. To the Mughals, the Bengal has always been the goose that used
to lay golden eggs. Standard rate of rent during the Mughal period was one-third of the whole produce.\textsuperscript{5} It is difficult to ascertain whether the Bengal peasantry was producing such a huge surplus or such a high proportion of rent was being paid through the severe suppression of consumption by the common people. Either due to the ability of the Bengal peasantry to pay more or due to the need for more resources, during Aurangzeb's regime, the rent was increased to about one half of the produce. During Murshid Quli Khan's times (1704-27) the rent was fixed at one half of the produce.\textsuperscript{6} Bengal, like any other pre-industrial agrarian economy, has been a subsistence economy. Extracting surplus and that at the tune of half of the produce from such an economy is highly difficult and could be done only at the expense of the suppression of consumption by the millions of people already in distress. The situation is indicative of the ability of the society to create remarkable wealth. But such an uneven distribution also indicate a 'Golden Age' for the far-away ruling elite at the expense of people of Bengal.

From fourteenth century Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta to seventeenth century European traveller Francois Bernier who created the legend about Bengal's affluence were among the most educated, intelligent and well-informed people of their time. Nonetheless, glorification of Bengal's wealth by them did not reveal the whole truth and often misled the analysts. Even from their eulogies, a curious reader can draw a rather reverse picture. While eulogising the cheapness of wealth in Bengal, Ibn Batuta mentioned that the price of a slave girl of the best quality


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p.9.
was one gold dinar and the price of a slave boy was two gold dinars.\(^7\) The price of a horse in Delhi was much higher than that of a slave in Bengal.\(^8\) This could be indicative of the fact that either the productivity of labour or the wage or even both have been low in Bengal. A recent account of the writings of Ibn Batuta, Al-Beruni and others also suggest that the price of commodities in medieval Bengal has indeed been very cheap for the ruling elite, but for the common people it was quite high as their purchasing power was very low.\(^9\)

The rosy picture of Bengal that was drawn by the Europeans also has been based on the splendour of the ruling aristocracies who were indeed very rich and glamorous with oriental princely lifestyle. Struck by the richness and fertility of the Gangetic plains, the early Europeans were in ecstasy when they wrote about Bengal. The splendour and magnificence of oriental courts gorgeously decorated with dazzling jewels and silk were apt to make a great impression on foreigners as typifying the wealth of the country, while they often ignored the fact that the display of wealth in the court was not necessarily indicative of the prosperity of the people as a whole.\(^10\)

While the wealth amassed by the ruling elite in Bengal and that extracted by the Mughal government in Delhi is a certain fact, making any assessment about the economic conditions of the common people remains quite difficult. According to one

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\(^7\) Ibn Botuta, *op. cit.*, p.267.  
account, rice — the main food grain — was sold eight *maunds* (approximately 36 kg.) for a rupee not only during the rule of legendary Mughal Subadar Shaista Khan (1679-88), but also in 1739.\(^1\) What did it mean for a common man? According to a reliable source, in 1739, an ordinary labourer’s monthly wage could buy five to six maunds of rice.\(^2\) This is indicative of the relative prosperity of medieval Bengal and its common man. First, it was more prosperous than its contemporary societies in its neighbourhood. Second, it may have been more prosperous than many parts of the contemporary world as it is suggested in the tales of remarkably well informed great world travellers of the time. Third, and most important, Bengal, at that time, has been more prosperous than in the subsequent periods of its history. A remarkable point, even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a day labourer in Bangladesh can not buy five to six mounds of rice with his salary of one month. A combination of these factors have, gradually, but effectively created a legend about the wealth of Bengal and the idea of *Sonar Bangla* that existed in the distant past.

Traditionally, Bengal has been known to the outside world for curiosities like, muslin, manufactured for the world market. Even before the advent of modern age and the discovery of trade routes through the world oceans, Bengal products were found in all trade routes and marts of the Old World. With the discovery of the trade routes through the world oceans and the advent of the Europeans, initially as traders and soon as colonisers, the volume of Bengal’s export increased

\(^1\) Sirajul Islam, *op. cit.*, p.6.
dramatically. According to one account, at the turn of the eighteenth century, the Bengal region (present Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) provided nearly 40 percent of the average annual value in Asian goods the Dutch East Indian Company sent to Holland. More than half of the total value in textiles the Company exported from Asia was in the form of Bengal textiles. The picture was not too different in the case of the English as the greatest foreign traders in Bengal.\(^\text{13}\)

Bengal, like any other pre-industrial agrarian economy, has been a subsistence economy. Extracting surplus and particularly that for large-scale export from such economies is highly difficult and often could be done only at the expense of the consumption by the millions of people already in distress. Bengal was no exception.

As Bengal used to export more and import less, large-scale importation of bullion against exports became the characteristic feature of the new commerce. The central question is what did this trade or, more precisely, these metals brought to the economy or the wellbeing of the people of Bengal. Among others, steady export-led growth led to the Industrial Revolution in Britain. But a dramatic rise in the export of Bengal goods in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not lead to any remarkable change in the structure of production either technologically or organisationally.

Along with the European traders, Mughal government in Delhi and a numerically very small ruling elite in Bengal could be the only beneficiaries. Even a small part of the cash received by

the producers was taken away from them by way of land and other taxes. In the circumstances, the Mughal government had a vested interest in welcoming the Dutch, French, British and other maritime people to promote the Bengal merchandise in the world market.  

Gradually, however, Bengal was colonised by the British. While initially the colonial rulers remained under the jurisdiction of the politico-militarily impotent rulers of Delhi, ultimately they assumed absolute control over not only Bengal but also over almost the whole of South Asia. According to a British account, Bengal of the pre-British period has been “easy in its finances, moderate in its expenditure, free from charges and cares of independent dominion, its habitants enjoying an occupation of agriculture and commerce, public peace and abundance”.  

The disastrous consequences of the colonial rule for the economy of Bengal are a well-known story. Suffice it to mention that from 1768 to 1789 the country was never free from scarcities or famines. Bengal was declining in population vary rapidly, and as a consequence, in 1792, one-third of the fertile land of the country fell out of cultivation. An interesting question remains how princely has the life-style of the British rulers been in Bengal? A district collector in 1793 used to draw a monthly basic salary of Rs. 3000 besides fringe benefits of more or less of equal value. At that time, one could buy six thousand mounds of rice for Rs. 3000.  

15 Sushil Chaudhuri, op. cit., p.31.  
Bengal under the colonial rule witnessed gradual but drastic decline caused by the economic exploitation and political deprivation. Bengal, the first British colony in the region, also has been the birthplace of modern National Liberation Movement against British colonialism in India. In the process of this Movement, past glories of Bengal, abundance and cheapness of its material wealth, both real and imaginary, have persistently been eulogised by the political activists, poets and lyricists. This in turn significantly contributed to the crystallisation of the legend about \textit{Sonar Bangla}.

The de-colonisation and the partition of British India in August 1947 along the religious line constituted a tragedy for Bengal. The province was also divided along the religious line. Hindu majority West Bengal joined India and the Muslim majority East Bengal joined Pakistan. For understandable reasons, West Bengal remains outside the purview of this study. Joining Pakistan did not bring independence to the people of East Bengal. Instead, East Bengal, renamed East Pakistan, turned to be the worst victim of internal colonialism as perpetuated by the rulers of Pakistan who basically were either from the West Pakistan or migrated to that part from India. The Bengalis, however, constituted 55 per cent of the total population of the country. It made the ruling elite reluctant either to broaden their base or risk an election. Consequently they became overwhelmingly dependent on the Punjabi-Muhajir dominated civil-military bureaucracy of the country where the Bengalis were almost non-represented. Even in 1955, Bengali representation in the higher ranks of the Central Secretariat was below 8 per cent. In the army, the number of Bengali officers
was 14 as against 894.\textsuperscript{18} Capitalist class also belonged to the West. Only 2.5 per cent of the total industrial assets of the country belonged to the Bengali Muslims.\textsuperscript{19}

The ruling elite in Pakistan, therefore, faced little difficulty in establishing and continuing West Pakistan's economic domination over the East. They have formulated and executed development policies that were designed to enrich West Pakistan at the expense of the East. For instance, during the fiscal years 1950/51-1954/55, 80 per cent of the total development expenditure was spent in the West.\textsuperscript{20} Such economic deprivation has further been supplemented by the suppression of Bengali language and culture. In the face of severe protest, Urdu was declared as the state language of Pakistan. Ultimately this gave birth to a cultural movement that was to have far reaching impact on the politico-cultural life of the country.

Unevenness in the level of socio-economic development of the two wings of Pakistan has been further exacerbated during the military regime of Ayub Khan. The regime itself came to power suppressing the verdict given by the Bengalis in the 1954 Election in favour of equal participation of the two wings in the overall development of the country. The development efforts under Ayub Khan turned to be a deliberate process of economic development of West Pakistan at the expense of the East. West


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p.27.

Pakistan, while providing 40 per cent of the total revenue of the Government, received 75 per cent of its expenditure. West Pakistan's contribution to the total foreign exchange earnings was 41 per cent but it received 70 per cent of these earnings.\(^\text{21}\) Similarly, the West was also allocated a highly disproportionate share of the foreign aid. An estimate shows that between 1951 and 1961, only 18 per cent of the total foreign economic assistance was allocated to the Eastern Wing.\(^\text{22}\)

Development strategy during Ayub regime had disastrous effect on the economic development of the East and generated severe unevenness between the level of economic development of the two wings. Growth rate per annum in West Pakistan during the 1960-1965 has been 7.4 per cent as against 4.6 in the East, during 1965-1970 it was 7.2 and 3.3 respectively.\(^\text{23}\) As a consequence, per capita income in West Pakistan rose from Rs.355 in 1960 to Rs.492 in 1970 while that in the East rose from Rs.269 in 1960 to only Rs.308 in 1970.\(^\text{24}\) Of the 43 families who dominated the Pakistani economy only one was Bengali.\(^\text{25}\)

Uneven development in Pakistan, however, has had a specific feature. Economic deprivation had a disastrous impact on the economic development of the Eastern Wing, and it stood


\(^{22}\) Ataur Rahman, *Pakistan and America: Dependency relations*, (Young Asia Publications, New Delhi, 1982), p.43.


far behind the West. Nonetheless, despite economic discrimination and politico-cultural suppression, the Bengalis politically and culturally remained much more advanced than their West Pakistani counterparts. As a matter of fact, 'internal colonialism' itself gave rise to a broad-based democratic movement. Not only the middle class of the city, student community and the workers, but also the peasants gradually became highly politicised. Their level of political consciousness also had been significantly higher than their counterparts in West Pakistan. Culturally as well, the Bengalis have been more advanced. Bengali language and literature remain richer than those of West Pakistan. Despite relative poverty, literacy rate also continued to be higher. More important, the East was blessed with a strong cultural movement with progressive political undertone.

As a consequence of the deep-rooted cleavage generated by the uneven development of the two wings of Pakistan, Muslim nationalism was in the wane. The most conscious segment of Bengali intelligentsia began to emphasise the ethno-linguistic identity of the people, which separate them from the West Pakistanis as against their religious identity, which united them with the later. Already in the early years of Pakistani rule, a protest movement against internal colonialism began to grow among the Bengalis.

Bengali grievances in a synthesised form were first reflected in the 21 points of the United Front that was formed on the eve of 1954 Election. Demands for provincial autonomy and the equal participation in the politico-economic processes of the country were rather modest and were being far from unduly
weakening the centre. Nonetheless, the ruling elite in Pakistan was far from prepared to bring such issues in the agenda. Such a pattern of behaviour has been one of the characteristic features of the conflict.

In course of time and with the intensification of economic exploitation, political deprivation and cultural subjugation of the Bengalis by the Pakistani rulers, the protest movement against internal colonialism continued to be intensified and radicalised. Six points of the Awami League headed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Student Movement of 1968-1969 on the basis of 11 points correctly reflected the genuine demands of the Bengalis. These also offered the ruling elite of Pakistan an opportunity to resolve the political crisis amicably. It, however, preferred to use brute force to suppress the movement for provincial autonomy. During this period, the movement for equal Bengali participation in the socio-economic and political life of Pakistan under the dynamic and charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the Founding father of Bangladesh – transformed into a full-fledged nationalist movement with a viable programme, veritable symbols and highly passionate mass participation.

The ruling elite in Pakistan did not consider it useful to seek a peaceful settlement to the conflict that would give the Bengalis their legitimate share in the developmental process of Pakistan. Instead, on March 25, 1971, the military rulers of Pakistan disregarding the clear mandate given by the people in the first ever General Elections held in the country in December 1970, imposed a war on the people of Bangladesh
unleashing the worst genocide and exodus in the post-war history. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh the following day and the country was liberated from Pakistani yoke on December 16, 1971.

It is during the Independence Movement of Bangladesh for more than two decades and particularly during the War of Liberation of 1971 that the millennia-old dream of the Bengalis transformed into a concrete reality. For the first time in their history, the Bengalis achieved an independent state of their won – Bangladesh – at the cost of 3 million lives and innumerable sufferings. As repeatedly asserted by the nationalist leaders, including Bangabandhu, the activists of students’, workers’ and cultural movements’, the strategic goal of the Independent Movement has been the emancipation of the country from Pakistani yoke and the building of Sonar Bangla. In patriotic literature, poems and lyrics Sonar Bangla has persistently remained the central as well as the most passionate theme. In the process, Sonar Bangla became deeply ingrained in popular mind. Finally, moved by deep passion, independent Bangladesh embraced the Tagore song Sonar Bangla as its national anthem, and thus, transformed the idea of Sonar Bangla into a national dream.

The dream of Sonar Bangla, while deeply ingrained in popular mind, remained considerably fluid. A future vision as well continued to remain under the deep influence of patriotic romanticism. This, however, does not mean that a concrete vision was not projected. Bangabandhu often used to
emphasise on the necessity to concentrate all efforts with a view to building a *Sonar Bangla*. In this regard, the vision he had in mind is a country free from tyranny, injustice, ignorance, hunger and poverty, a country, where freedom, social justice, enlightenment, and material and cultural well being of the people will flourish. However, the combination of ideas and a future vision of the country that used to be projected have not been free from contradictions. As a matter of fact, the coalition of forces that liberated the country from Pakistani yoke has been a highly heterogeneous one with diverse interests and ideas. The forces that opposed the independence of Bangladesh have been formally defeated, but they continued to exert considerable influence on the socio-economic life of the country. As a consequence, the national dream with regard to the future of the country came to vary depending on who were projecting this or another version of the dream.

In a society like Bangladesh, with its deep pluralistic traditions, diverse opinion with regard to the future of the country is natural. However, the challenge facing the nation with regard to the national dream is to face the reality. No dream could be a perfect guide to the future. For this, any dream must undergo the test of time and the difficulties of real life. This time, the Bengalis have not only a dream, but also, for the first time in history, an independent state of their own under which their dream could undergo the test of time and real life.
III

THE DREAM OF SONAR BANGLA: AN OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Bangladesh’s march towards a Sonar Bangla – a free and prosperous country – is a case of mixed success. The political process in the country has always been a rather volatile one marked by recurrent crises. Since its independence, the country has witnessed Westminster type parliamentary system, one-party radical regime known as Baksal, the assassination of the father of the nation, successive military regimes, and a glorious movement for democracy that ultimately deposed the autocratic rule and ushered in a new era of progressive socio-economic and political development.

Under the democratic disposition, Bangladesh is undergoing a process of unprecedented transformation marked by difficult challenges as well as tremendous opportunities. The most remarkable aspects of this process are the economic liberalisation and democratic regeneration. However, the political environment continues to remain volatile and conflict-prone. The country has also undergone a severe political crisis that ended with the successful holding of the general elections of June 12, 1996 under a neutral caretaker government. The crisis could be resolved thanks to the persistence of the democratic movement, assertion on the part of the resurgent civil society, and more importantly, the courage, caution and sagacity as displayed by the people at large. In conformity with the verdict of the people in the elections, the victorious party – Bangladesh Awami League – formed the new government with its chief Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister. With this, a new era of fresh prospects and
opportunities has ushered in the chequered history of Bangladesh.

Over the years, the country has also charted a more or less clearly defined economic course for the future with a virtual national consensus behind the move. The new economic strategy is based on two policy fundamentals. First is the rapid transition to a market oriented economy; and the second is the integration of Bangladesh economy into the world economy. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to generate rapid economic growth and to accelerate the progressive socio-economic and political development of the country. This has already become the strategic goal of the nation in the long run or so to speak a national dream. While the country's political arena still remains considerably volatile and conflict-prone, economic opportunities at home and abroad are appearing to be considerably great.

The country's march towards democracy and accelerated socio-economic development is certain to be difficult due to the gigantic tasks and severe challenges faced by it on the way of democratic transformation and socio-economic advancement. An array of reasons could be attributed in favour of such a prognosis. Economic and political institutions of the society are underdeveloped. Only a small segment of the population is politically conscious and drawn to the modern economic activities. The vast majority remains illiterate and the level of their political consciousness is low. They live in absolute poverty and are yet to be drawn to the modern economic activities.

On the other hand, exposure to modernisation coupled with the revolution in communication generated great expectations among mass population with regard to prosperity
and freedom, which even sincere attempts on the part of the leadership could hardly fulfil. The country is, thus, posed with the formidable challenge of telescoping the socio-economic progress achieved in the relatively advanced countries. If we take the past as a guide to the future, it could be asserted with some certainty that political stability as well as the future of the on-going democratic process in the country would depend primarily, though not exclusively, on the success of the government in facing the economic challenges.

In the economic realm, the challenges are formidable, but the opportunities for Bangladesh are enormous as well. Economic liberalisation, and more so, new opportunities in the world market has given boost to the burgeoning garment and textile industries. Sectors like frozen food, leather and electronics are also displaying tremendous potentials. The burgeoning market for computer software at the global level also constitutes a potentially vast opportunity for Bangladesh. No less important, the globalisation of the process of production and distribution are also to open unprecedented opportunities for the country in the global market. Now, the challenge facing Bangladesh is to formulate a viable development strategy capable of materialising the economic opportunities, and thus, pulling the country out of the poverty trap.

An authoritative study conducted by a group of scholar while envisioning the future of Bangladesh identified a set of goals to be achieved by the year 2020. These are:

i. substantial reduction of poverty by 2020;
ii. an average annual GDP growth rate of seven to eight percent during next 25 years instead of the lacklustre 4 percent average of the preceding 25 years;

iii. an economy capable of creating 50 million new jobs over 25 years and putting poverty into retreat;

iv. population growth rates cut from 1.82 percent to 1.15 percent and infant mortality reduced by more than half—from 79.9 to 38.2 percent;

v. a fully literate nation assured of basic health care, bringing forth cadres of skilled workers who will be capable contenders in high-tech, information-oriented, global markets;

vi. forest cover restored to 15 (as opposed to 6) percent of the nation’s land; and

vii. cities and towns linked by new systems of road and rail and home to 36.5 (as opposed to 20) percent of the Bangladeshi population with greatly expanded provision for clean water, sanitation and low-income housing.²⁶

This is not also just a projection by some scholars. Finance Minister Shah A. M. S. Kibria, in his budget speech already in 1996, committed to raise GDP growth rate to 5.5 percent in the current year and further raise it to 7 percent in the next five years.²⁷ There is also a near consensus among the scholars in the country that the overall economy must grow at a rate of

about seven percent per year for a continuously long period before a serious dent on poverty can be made through employment creation.

For Bangladesh, to achieve the set of goals by 2020 as mentioned above is certainly a challenging task, but not an unrealistic one. During the past three decades or so, a number of countries in our neighbourhood in Southeast and East Asia have achieved tremendous gains in their developmental efforts. A combination of economic liberalisation and integration into the world economy has transformed them from largely agrarian and underdeveloped economies into dynamic industrial and economic powerhouses. In the wake of the World War II, most of these countries have been close to or even below Bangladesh in terms of the level of economic development. It may be mentioned that per capita income in today’s economic powerhouse South Korea in 1949 was only US$35 as against that in Bangladesh US$46. The experiences of high performing economies of Southeast and East Asia could serve as an important source of learning as well as inspiration for Bangladesh.

While our failures to take advantage of the opportunities offered during the last quarter of a century are remarkable, our achievements are also not negligible. Particularly, in terms of their ability to serve as a foundation for a development strategy designed to achieve dynamic growth, these achievements are of significant importance. As assessed by a prominent economist, the success of our RMG exports, the developments in delivering

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micro-credit at the grass-roots level, the reduction in fertility rates through the rapid spread of contraception, the enterprise of our informal sector and small farmers, our proximity to the fastest growing region of the global economy, the cultural homogeneity of our society, the emergence of a relatively stable two-party political system are all assets.29

Relying on such socio-political assets, it is necessary to transfer the micro-economic gains into a basis for the macro-transformation of the development landscape in Bangladesh. And that would be a significant step forward in the way of fulfilling the national dream of building a free and prosperous Bangladesh – Sonar Bangla.

IV

CONCLUSION

Sonar Bangla – a free and prosperous Bangladesh – has been a millennia-old dream of the Bengalis. With the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Bengalis not only have had a dream, but also, for the first time in history, an independent state of their own under which their dream could undergo the test of time and real life. The experience of the last about three decades has been a mixed success. However, the 1990s ushered in a new era of democratic regeneration, economic liberalisation and the integration of Bangladesh economy into the world economy. All these have opened enormous prospects for pulling the country out of the poverty trap and marching towards progressive socio-economic

transformation. These opportunities, however, are accompanied by formidable challenges. Facing these challenges is a collective responsibility of the policy makers, business circles, academia, professionals, diplomats, and above all, the national leadership, including the opposition leaders. For mobilising concerted efforts on the part of all these forces, candid discussion and exchange of views among them, particularly among political forces from both sides of the dividing line, is indispensable. It is always necessary to keep in mind that a national dream must be based on popular consensus and capable of accommodating the aspirations of all the major forces active in the socio-economic and politico-cultural arena of the country.