

Bangladesh : Showing the way forward

Speech by

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**University of Cambridge
March 14, 2006**

**Distinguished guests;
ladies and gentlemen.**

At the outset allow me to express my sincerest thanks to the University of Cambridge for offering me the opportunity to address this distinguished audience of academics and students. And may I also take this opportunity to congratulate the University of Cambridge, its extraordinary faculty of 5,000 and its 18,000 inquisitive minds as they prepare to celebrate this remarkable institution's 800th anniversary.

It is indeed a privilege to speak on this prestigious campus, to share a few facts, and speak of the inspiration and aspirations that propel our country forward. As Bangladesh prepares to celebrate, in a few days, its 35th anniversary of Independence allow me to tell you of its uniqueness in overcoming obstinate challenges.

Bangladesh: its greatest asset, its people

Against an unfavourable start in the 1970s marked by cyclones and famines, followed by post-colonial political legacies and autocratic regimes, Bangladesh has since waged wars and battles on many fronts. Against poverty and overpopulation, social and economic inequities, against the whims of nature and much more. But Bangladesh's greatest asset in these battles has been its 144 million people and their irrepressible zeal to enhance their quality of life coupled with their entrepreneurial drive and insurmountable resilience. Proving many textbook theories of political science and development economics wrong, it has been in the indomitable nature of the Bangladeshi people to address each challenge head on, and turn our challenges into opportunities.

With the reinstatement of a vibrant pluralistic democratic era in 1991, Bangladesh has steadily and steadfastly set its course on the path of development, economic growth and increasing geo-political importance bridging South and South East Asia. But our successes remain gallingly understated and apparently, more often than not, get lost in the shuffle in the media as well as among some groups of people both at home and outside.

Here, I would like to take a slight detour to underscore a tragedy; a tragedy born of ignorance. Simultaneously, I would want to place a few things in their appropriate perspective.

Apparently, some persons suffer from great certitude when it comes to criticizing Bangladesh despite the reality that it is a nation that has been notching up successes after successes in the face of great adversities. They sit on judgement of a people even without having anything to do with the people of that country. Instead of encouraging the valiant, struggling masses of Bangladesh, as they overcome obstacles with their determined efforts, they castigate them and, in effect, throw newer hurdles in their path, perhaps proving writer Saul Bellow's comment that "a great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep."

Bangladesh: a rare example of interfaith harmony

One of Bangladesh's foremost achievements has been its ability to institutionalize democracy. For any post-colonial Muslim majority country, half the size of the UK, with the highest population density in the world and formidable challenges of resource constraints, repeated natural disasters and environmental vulnerability, it would be extraordinary for democracy to flourish or to resist civil conflict as has happened in many countries across the globe. But Bangladesh has clearly manifested its democratic credentials through peaceful transfer of power following three successfully held and universally recognized free and fair elections in 1991, 1996 and 2001. Moreover, Bangladesh's innovation of a Constitutional provision for fair and impartial elections to take place under a neutral interim caretaker government has been praised to the extent that some nations have been contemplating to replicate this system.

While accomplishing this we have embarked on the difficult but steady journey to continually strengthen and develop transparent and accountable institutions of good governance, rule of law, and protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Bangladesh Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, and freedom of the press. We have one of the highest numbers of local newspapers in the world and a vibrant---and an openly contentious---media.

To ensure social cohesion and ward off all forms of extremism, a conscious and special focus has always been on empowering women, protecting children and minorities. Consequently, separate Ministries on Women and Children, and on Religious Affairs and Chittagong Hill Tracts have been formed especially to oversee their welfare. Latterly an Independent Anti-Corruption Commission has been established to combat corruption in public offices and has started functioning. The higher judiciary has always been totally independent and legislation for separation of the lower judiciary from the executive is underway. An independent National Human Rights Commission is being set up.

The Bangladeshis have proven to the world---especially in specific combustible circumstances produced in the region---that it is possible to be a pre-dominantly Muslim nation and yet ensure the enjoyment of complete political freedom, religious liberty and civil rights for every segment of the population in an environment of excellent inter-faith harmony. This unique characteristic of the people of Bangladesh can be attributed to an ancient civilization in the area where Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam coexisted in peace since time immemorial. In recent times, a number of Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Muslim religious places have been declared as UNESCO cultural heritage sites and are considered as an integral part of the rich multicultural, multi-racial and secular heritage of the country.

It is also certainly worth noting the absence of any kind of backlash in Bangladesh in the wake of such events as the destruction of Babri mosque, the Gujarat mayhem or the most recent cartoon controversy. These clearly point up the tolerant attitude of the people and the pragmatic measures taken by the government.

Bangladesh: leading in social and human development

Last week, Ladies and Gentlemen, at the Asia 2015 conference, it gives me tremendous pleasure to report to you, that Bangladesh was lauded by numerous participants from many different countries as well as by representatives of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the UK's Department for International Development. They not only endorsed the policies that Bangladesh has utilized to attain victories on the socio-economic front but also termed Bangladesh as a leader in the developing world in its social and human development achievements, which could be taken as an example for countries that are trying to overcome similar hurdles. Given the kind of campaign that goes on, it may surprise you, that in terms of social development in some spheres, Bangladesh has overtaken many of its larger neighbours including India, China, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia and that too at the fastest possible pace, having begun the journey in earnest only since the 1990s.

Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia to have already attained three of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals to be met by 2015. It has by this year secured the goals of attaining universal primary school enrolment, eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary schooling and ensuring access to safe drinking water for its entire population. We have the highest health and education sector spending as percentage of GDP in South Asia and the lowest defence expenditure. In Bangladesh, education is free for all upto class 6 and for girls it is free upto class 12 with liberal stipends. From this year it has been extended upto University level for promising girl students. This, inspite of our resource constraints. Obviously, these investments in human development are now paying richly deserved dividends.

We are also well on track to achieving some other MDGs including in the health sector. Bangladesh is the first and only country to have fully eradicated polio and secured the highest child immunisation percentile in South Asia with 83% compared to the South Asian average of 66%, surprisingly even higher than the United States. Within the past decade, we have halved infant and under five child mortality at the fastest possible reduction rate at more than 5% a year among all developing countries of the world. Bangladesh also has the lowest maternal mortality rate in South Asia and has dropped malnutrition among mothers from 52% in 1996 to 42% in 2002.

Evading the pitfall of population control by coercive measures, Bangladesh, with the second largest Muslim population in the world, has achieved the fastest decrease in fertility rates in recorded history from 6.3 in percent 1975 to 1.7 % in 2004 by persuasive means. Life expectancy of women in Bangladesh has overtaken that of men and is currently the highest in South Asia. Bangladesh has outstanding accomplishment in reducing child labour since the 90s. According to UNICEF, the percentage of child labour in Africa is the highest while in South Asia, Bangladesh has one of the lowest percentages (7%) with India (13%), Pakistan and Nepal trailing behind.

The incidence of poverty has been brought down from over 70 % poor in 1971 to less than 42% in 2004. Measured by the UN Human Development Indicator, in 2005 Bangladesh came out third in the developing world, right after China and Cape Verde, graduating from a low to a middle HDI country. With double the population of the 1970s and an extremely unfavourable land-man ratio, the country has attained near 100% food security for its 144 million people.

Apart from being a social development leader, Bangladesh has given the world some innovations and skills to replicate: it is remembered for presenting the world with oral saline, the cheapest means to combat diarrhoea and dehydration, now being replicated in many African and Asian countries. It has global respect for being the birthplace of micro credit. Micro credit is being studied in academic institutions, discussed in global conferences and actively duplicated in many countries of the world, rich and poor, as an effective tool for employment generation and poverty alleviation.

Bangladesh has also earned global accolade for setting up an efficient disaster management system without extensive external assistance. This innovative home-grown indigenous method of disaster preparedness and mitigation network has recently received the endorsement of experts who have publicly suggested that tsunami affected countries as also the US, after the Katrina experience, should learn from Bangladesh in disaster preparedness and management.

In summarising our social successes, I proudly quote a UNDP comment: "Over the past decade Bangladesh has been a leading light in improving human development and should seek to lead the way for other countries as the world looks to achieving the Millennium Development Goals." It added, "Bangladesh demonstrated it is possible not only to sustain strong human development across the broad front even at relatively modest levels of income growth but also to graduate into the medium developed countries category in the Human Development Index." Definitely no mean achievement for a small country which began its journey confronting huge burdens.

Bangladesh: a star performer in achieving gender parity

I cannot resist focusing for a while longer on Bangladesh's performance in gender equality and women's empowerment, which we consider to be effective social deterrents to keep extremism of all forms at bay. Indeed, if one intends to see how a traditional Muslim society empowers its women politically, economically, socially and culturally, one has to study the Bangladesh case. This has been achieved through courageous pro-poor, pro-women policy incentives of the government supported by the partnership of innovative women-centric development initiatives of the civil society nurtured by the highly motivated progressive social attitude of the people.

The World Economic Forum in its assessment of the current size of the global gender gap, measured by the extent to which women in 58 countries have attained equality with the other gender in five critical areas, namely, economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, education, health and well-being, concluded among other things, that Bangladesh at 39th place was ahead of such countries as Italy, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Turkey; and was 4th among Asian countries trailing right behind China, Israel and Japan and on top of all Muslim-majority nations surveyed. Other countries in South Asia, including Pakistan and India were distant followers at 53rd and 56th. This profound change has been quoted as a “star performance in women empowerment” by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and the Asian Development Bank.

In terms of political empowerment of women, Bangladesh is perhaps an extraordinary Muslim majority nation that has successively elected women Prime Ministers for three consecutive terms and also has had female Leaders of the Opposition in parliament. Seventeen thousand women representatives have been directly elected nationwide to local government institutions. Bangladesh, as has been stated earlier, ranks No. 1 in South Asia in female enrolment in primary and secondary level education and in having the largest proportion of women (43%) in its labour force, the major part being in rural areas. India (32%) and Pakistan (30%) lag far behind. Again Bangladesh is the only Muslim majority nation where women have been recruited in hardcore infantry divisions of the Armed Forces and are soon to participate in UN peacekeeping operations, while our female police officers have already been contributing to monitoring peace and democratic elections in distant lands since long.

Socio-economic empowerment of Bangladeshi women has gathered tremendous pace at the grass roots level also, through micro-credit programmes that have reached over 20 million beneficiaries, 95% of whom are women. In our major export industry, the textile sector, 90% of a workforce of two million is women. Bangladesh's success story in its homegrown two-pronged poverty alleviation strategy through micro-credit entrepreneurship and economic empowerment of women is being held up as a development model by the UN and World Bank in many African, Asian and Caribbean countries.

Bangladesh: growth and opportunity

Bangladesh's geo-strategic location between South and South-east Asia, its abundant human resource of hardworking, women-led semi-skilled and skilled labour force, and the country's proven energy resources and reserves including high quality natural gas and coal, all have given it an economic competitive edge over many other countries. According to the 2005 Survey of Investment-Related Cost Comparison in Major Cities and Regions in Asia by the Japan External Trade Organization, Bangladesh is the most competitive foreign direct investment destination in Asia in terms of lowest worker wage, lowest cost of utilities and business, both in industrial and services sectors. Goldman Sachs has recently rated Bangladesh as one of the eleven countries that are most likely to emerge as economic successes in the next phase of development and therefore a most desirable investment destination. For many of you potential investor! s of the future here, you know now where to invest in Asia.

The government's relentless investment in the social sectors and a free market economy has been equally matched over the last decades with a vibrant private sector-led robust growth in the country's exports, industrialisation and foreign direct investment. Proving all political and economic pundits wrong, Bangladesh has witnessed a consistent growth rate of 5 to 6% over the past decade and is expected to grow at 6 to 8% in the coming years. Apart from attaining food self-sufficiency, the country has already witnessed a telecommunication revolution at the grass roots level. Within a short span of five years cellphones have reached all 65,000 villages of Bangladesh and significantly this is being operated as a business mostly by women entrepreneurs.

Over the past decade Bangladesh has succeeded to sharply reduce its dependence on foreign assistance and has replaced aid with trade as the engine of economic growth and development. Foreign aid has fallen to only 1.5% of our GDP, while the unemployment rate is half of the South Asian average. The country's FDI flow has more than doubled in just four years from \$328 million to \$800m, and over the last five years our industrial growth including manufacturing growth has also doubled from 4.92% to 8.6% and exports have had a boom rising from \$5.3 billion to \$8.6b defying all constraints and fears at the expiration of the Multi-fibre Agreements.

Moreover, one may note that Bangladesh has never defaulted in its debt repayment, servicing its debt fully from its foreign exchange earnings. Bangladesh receives now almost \$4 billion in remittances with a higher per capita remittance compared to India and China which have nine or ten times the population of Bangladesh. Expatriate Bangladeshis have reached all corners of the world and have earned a reputation as hardworking, talented and dependable. The World Bank Global Economic Prospects Report says this remittance inflow has helped cut poverty by six percent in Bangladesh and given a boost to the rural economy as almost all migrant workers hail from rural Bangladesh.

The World Bank in its 2004 report has rated Bangladesh's economic performance as follows: "By developing-country standards, Bangladesh's growth for the past two decades has been notable. The past decade's boom in exports---with earnings in 2003/04 (of \$7.6 billion) about three times the level of 1991/92---and the success in halving the 1980's average rate of population increase have helped raise the country's per-capita growth ranking to twice the global median for 1991-2000. By that measure, over the past 30 years, Bangladesh has overtaken Pakistan and Nepal and narrowed the gap significantly between its standing and that of India and Sri Lanka."

Bangladesh: unfailing commitments

Regionally, Bangladesh has been active in deepening political and economic cooperation with its neighbours in South and Southeast Asia. In order to promote cooperation in South Asia then Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman presented South Asia, in the early 80s, the idea of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation--- SAARC---to combat South Asia's common problems such as poverty and underdevelopment. Last November SAARC celebrated its 20th anniversary at its birthplace, Dhaka, at the 13th SAARC Summit when under Bangladesh's pragmatic chairmanship a new dynamism was infused with Afghanistan being admitted as a new member, and China and Japan becoming observers. Currently Bangladesh chairs SAARC and also BIMSTEC, another regional economic cooperation initiative, and is actively promoting implementation of two regional free trade agreements, SAFTA and BFTA involving respectively South Asian and some Southeast Asian countries. Our foreign policy aspirations will always be an extension of our domestic values, i.e. to work with the international community in bringing peace, democracy, development, justice and equity to peoples all over the world.

Bangladesh: challenges ahead

Ladies and Gentlemen, I maybe already guilty of having strained your patience, but one primary reason for this is unfortunately these successes remain consigned largely to the pages of World Bank or United Nations reports and extensively quoted in development conferences. I am confident that the benefit of sharing these facts and figures with you would encourage each one of you to leave this room with a factually accurate image of Bangladesh, thus able to inform ! all others what Bangladesh is all about and the successes its people have attained through sheer hard work and determination.

However, we also face some challenges that are enormous. With global climate change Bangladesh is likely to countenance an enormous natural disaster as one third of the country is projected to go under water with sea level rise in the next few decades. Other challenges include environmental threats such as arsenic contamination of water, impact of a growing world energy crisis, comparative economic disadvantages because of certain globalisation policies and unresolved issues relating to just sharing of the waters of international rivers.

It will not be an easy task to overcome such challenges. However, given our record of social innovation, entrepreneurship and the indomitable enterprise of our people to realise their freedoms from want, deprivation and injustice, I along with many others including experts believe Bangladesh as a nation will continue to make great strides in the next decade. Despite our challenges, the international community has placed a new focus and optimism on Bangladesh's economic and demographic potential and its geopolitical importance. The people of Bangladesh of course always believed in their own ability and hence also share this enthusiasm and optimism. This century, as everyone claims, is going to be Asia's century of growth and development. I promise you, Bangladesh will remain very visible in that picture.

Finally, while there is no one-size-fits-all formula for development, the case of Bangladesh, denigrated in its early years as a “basket case” and later on as a ! “failed state,” has demonstrated the way forward for the poorest countries of the world how to break the vicious cycle of poverty. Moreover, income poverty does not tell the full story.

As shown earlier, micro credit can, while reducing income poverty, more significantly can bring about a positive social transformation of a people through various manifestations in different spheres of national life. Investment in education, especially in women’s education, can produce a paradigm shift in the power structure even in traditional societies.

I would like to conclude by placing before you a couple of questions that the people of Bangladesh must have created in the thinking mind. How is our life to be looked at and evaluated? If happiness is the goal in life then is material acquisition and its concomitant consumerism the standard to measure it by? Even here the Bangladeshis have rewritten the book. In repeated surveys they have shown that they are the happiest people on Planet Earth. In the latest of such a study carried out by BBC World Service Trust, 74% of those surveyed said they were happy with their current life and 72% of Bangladeshis considered spending time with family as the most popular leisure time activity. And it may also interest you to know that 96% of those surveyed felt proud to be Bangladeshi.

And thus I am doubly proud to represent them.

I thank you all very much.