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Reflections on Bangladesh at 50

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic meant the celebrations of Bangladesh's 50th year of independence in 2021 were more subdued than hoped. This Viewpoint article reflects on the messages and the silences emerging from the international articles and online conferences marking the anniversary. Bangladesh's long experience on the frontlines of untrammelled globalization and climate change means it now has lessons, both good and bad, for the rest of the world. Compared to contemporary India or Pakistan, Bangladesh has made great progress, and international articles focused heavily on its economic development and social indicators. There was little, if any, attention to any other aspects of the nation (culture, history, politics), reflecting Bangladesh's continued status as the world's 'Aid Lab'. Scholars and observers noted that the sounds of economic success often drown out discussion of the problems, including not least inequality, social injustice, and the recurrent problem of violence against religious minorities. The article concludes that the clearest sign of Bangladesh's success is in how seriously it takes the issue of women's rights. Discussions about Bangladesh at 50 highlighted how much its success owes to the hard labour, ingenuity and resourcefulness of its women, a matter both worthy of celebration and a lesson for the world.

KEYWORDS

Bangladesh; economic development; women's rights; climate change

The celebrations of Bangladesh's fiftieth year of independence were more subdued than nationalists had hoped. As Bangladesh marked the half century since its victorious war of liberation from Pakistan in 1971, the world was facing an unprecedented health, social, economic and political crisis in the form of the coronavirus pandemic. Had they been feasible, massive celebrations were hardly appropriate, even though Bangladesh had to date been spared the horrors seen in India or Brazil. After all, if there is a country that knows about crises – health, social, economic or political – it is surely Bangladesh. A half-century of independent nationhood has been studded with disastrous episodes that repeatedly illustrated its acute exposure to the vagaries of the global economy on a warming planet. Bangladesh saw devastating cyclones, floods, famine, and brutal political violence in its early years; the calmer decades since brought economic growth, but with it, horrific industrial disasters, even while the southern parts of the country sink under the uncontrolled carbon emissions of the economic growth enjoyed elsewhere. Yet the fifty years have also been a time of learning and acquiring the resources and institutions of resilience. The disasters continue, but Bangladesh is usually better prepared to handle and mitigate them than you would expect from a country that is only just moving out of the ranks of the Least Developed.

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In the current era disasters remain a prominent phenomenon, but increasingly it seems they unfold beyond Bangladesh. In 2021 alone, we saw devastating floods in Germany, a 'big freeze' that killed 700 Texans, and untameable forest fires in California. In the UK, one in five children lived in households where people went hungry – and that was before the pandemic. These are the richest places and people in the world, and they cannot protect themselves against the new crises of climate change or even the old ones of hunger and disease. You might ask: how can Bangladesh expect to weather storms like the coronavirus pandemic or global warming when far richer and more established countries struggle? Yet perhaps a better question, and one that was asked during many of the 'Bangladesh at 50' webinars I attended¹, is: now that the rest of the world is learning about life under unregulated globalization careening into the climate abyss, does Bangladesh have lessons for the world? Rather than pitying Bangladesh for its misfortunes as the world's 'basket-case' (in Henry Kissinger's infamous label), might the world now recognize that disasters are the price of the unfettered pursuit of profit – and that if you seek to avert a dystopian future, you could do worse than to see how Bangladesh has managed?

Bangladesh may have lessons both good and bad about managing exposure to the global system, but it is less as the canary in the coalmine of globalization than as the 'surprising success' of development that Bangladesh's 50th year of nationhood has been celebrated. Articles in the *New York Times*,² *Nikkei Asia*,³ *Deutsche Welle*,⁴ and the *Wall Street Journal*⁵ highlighted Bangladesh's progress, listing human development gains and disaster management among its several happy surprises, but lingering most lovingly on stellar GDP growth rates over decades. Where the role of public services is noted, it is often in celebration of low-cost, often privatized, services for the very poorest in society. These lessons have been treated as vindication of neoliberal development orthodoxy, tempered by liberal humanitarian feeling. The key message of these nutshell accounts of the world's eighth largest nation is that if Bangladesh was the 'test case of development' (as World Bank economists put it in 1976 – see Faaland and Parkinson 1976), it proved that capitalist development could succeed in the most unpromising of contexts. Or: if Bangladesh can develop, *anywhere* can.

Judging from social media commentary, there was growing irritation among Bangladeshis who think about these things regarding this 'success story' trope. It is not that these things are not true: they mostly are. But they are not the only fact about Bangladesh worth knowing. A country is more than the curve of its GDP growth, and yet the contemporary story of Bangladesh is told as if there are no other plotlines worth following. A total focus on economic growth and development inadvertently reinforces Bangladesh's old image as a zone of disaster and poverty, only now by charting its pathway out of those horrors. That Bangladesh grew despite what the rest of the world thought seems to be the only story worth telling to an international audience. Yet it is a thin kind of story, worn thinner by repeated retelling. Why does the 'Bangladesh success story' never spotlight its incredibly rich artistic and cultural heritage? Its literary and musical wealth, or its pioneering architecture? The laser focus on economic growth suggests that even at 50, Bangladesh has not really outgrown its old reputation. It is notable that when the international media covers the Rohingya refugee crisis – which they do far more than they cover any stories affecting the Bangladeshi population – the images and stories centre on hardship and horror, in direct echoes of the old news about Bangladesh. The real story – the remarkable fact that a country that so many had written off as infeasibly poor was now hosting one million refugees fleeing genocide – is rarely told. Those much-published images of poor, brown Muslim refugees are signs of Bangladesh's progress, but somehow that is not what the international coverage suggests.

The thinness of stories about Bangladesh owes in part to the fact that it is often outsiders telling these stories. A point of perennial contention resurfaced during the string of online talkshops that marked the anniversary:⁶ even on the few occasions when the world listens to stories about Bangladesh, it is often non-Bangladeshi telling those stories. One event by a top British university only managed to invite a single Bangladeshi scholar in their line-up of experts. But even then, we Bangladeshis were so interested in listening to the fine international scholars they had lined up, that the event was neither cancelled nor 'cancelled'. It is unimaginable that an international event marking

Indian or Pakistani independence would have been planned with a predominance of Bangladeshi or Nepalese scholars, but this merely confirms that 'Bangladesh Studies' remains marginal, at best an ornamental side-event to the India-fest which is contemporary 'South Asian' studies.

A truly fascinating feature of the 'Bangladesh at 50' discussions is how Bangladesh's success now features in the self-flagellation by the chattering classes of India and Pakistan about the slow and uneven pace of development in their own countries. The international financial press tells the story of Bangladesh's faster growth with just a hint of malicious delight: Bloomberg reported in 2021 that GDP per capita was so much higher in the former East Pakistan than in its erstwhile neo-colonial ruler that Pakistan could conceivably soon be accepting aid from Bangladesh.⁷ (This discourse of Bangladeshi success is so widespread that I recently had a Pakistani Uber driver in Washington DC carefully explain it to me). But while Pakistanis seem to have taken on board the Bangladesh success story as instructive for their own situation, Indians have been less welcoming of their small neighbour's success:

Right-wing figures in India are convinced Bangladesh is so destitute that illegal migrants from there are over-running the border. In reality, Bangladesh is far richer than the depressed Indian states where Hindu nationalist politicians have been railing against Bangladeshi 'termites.' It's as if Mississippi were fretting about illegal immigration from Canada.⁸

When such articles are published, it is clear that Prime Minister Modi has at least invested heavily in his army of social media trolls, who rush to post ungrammatical and poorly spelled slurs against Muslims in general and Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in particular. It is clearly a source of great pain for rightwing Hindutva that a predominantly Bengali Muslim nation on their doorstep should have done relatively well.

The other truth about economic growth is that it has cost the environment and aspects of human security in ways that measurable rises in cash incomes fail to capture. There was a sense of disquiet among many of the Bangladesh studies scholars I listened to during the many 'Bangladesh at 50' webinars of 2021 about how the sound of what had gone right consistently drowned out reflection of what had not. For me, political scientist Rounaq Jahan, whose 1972 *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (1972) remains the best account of why Bangladesh left Pakistan, gave the sharpest take on where Bangladesh is now: 'We deleted socialism from our Constitution [after 1975]. We replaced a discourse of rights with a discourse of development'. She went on to ask: who, beyond a small circle of intellectuals and activists, is really demanding social justice now?⁹ Such a devastating assessment of that much-celebrated trajectory of development 'success' could only come from someone who had been watching and interpreting throughout the 50-year journey, and it was fascinating to hear her analysis of the full sweep of the country's political history. This points to what several observers have described as the 'second generation challenge' Bangladesh now faces. Now no longer staring into the abyss, how to reset the institutions and systems to deliver the fair and equitable society for which Bangladeshis fought and sacrificed?

The answer to whether economic growth will deliver fairness and rights lies, of course, in politics. And it is on this subject that the international news pieces are relatively silent in this celebratory moment. Politics has always been seen as the fly in the ointment of Bangladesh's gains, at home and abroad. The supposed 'Bangladesh paradox' asks: how was Bangladesh's success possible with such venal and corrupt politics? How much more might have been achieved with committed leadership? The idea that 50 years of public policy was not in some way directed by a political leadership committed to development seems to me implausible. For better and sometimes for worse, political imperatives drove public investments in health, education, food security, social protection and women's rights. It often occurs to me that Bangladesh's politicians have not only failed, but have rarely tried to improve their international image: their concerns are directed homeward, in what citizens think about how they are performing. Whereas Benazir Bhutto and even Aung San Suu Kyi successfully attracted international laurels and positive attention as rare women leaders, Sheikh Hasina has rarely done so, despite ruling a more successful country. Of course, unlike Bhutto and Aung, Hasina did not attend Oxford, and it is this kind of detail that frames a political leader as worthy

of international attention. This may yet turn out to be a blessing: the international community's view of Aung San Suu Kyi has soured considerably since she turned out to be in tacit support of the Myanmar Army's genocidal attacks on their Rohingya minorities. Benazir only escaped the inevitable eventual fall from international grace by being assassinated. Sheikh Hasina has herself presided over such a sharp deterioration in Bangladesh's democracy in her party's efforts to retain its dominant position that it would probably be unwise to court international attention. For whatever reason, Bangladesh's politics goes under the radar of international public opinion, when it is not being easily dismissed as corrupt, venal, and so on.

The erasure of politics from the 'surprising success' of Bangladesh at 50 is not the only silence. These events often felt like they shot from 1971 directly to the present: we heard about the glorious and tragic war of liberation, and then we heard about the impressive social indicators and growth rates of the present. What happened in between was rarely discussed. In none of the events that I attended was the 1974 famine, an event I consider to have been a turning point in Bangladeshi history (Hossain 2017), discussed. One statement by a very prominent political economist noted that the discussion of economic policy should start after 1975, for reasons that were not made explicit, but which the audience fully grasped: mention of the famine itself is seen as highly politically sensitive, because the catastrophe took place in the period immediately preceding the brutal assassination of *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family. Nobody really wants to root around in the murky debates about these events, and in particular not during a moment of celebration.

It was correct and appropriate that 'Bangladesh at 50' should focus on the glorious solidarities and sacrifices of that hard-won and bloody battle for national liberation. But I wonder whether in ignoring what happened after 1971 we run the risk of drawing a direct line from national independence to national development success. And it is by no means clear that the line is indeed so straight or so direct. The structural and episodic violence faced by religious minorities and indigenous communities in Bangladesh, including during Durga Puja celebrations in 2021, is a stark reminder that communalism was never defeated, even in formally secular Bangladesh. The socialist and social justice ambitions of the liberation struggle were not achieved, and were at least partly abandoned upon independence. I was struck by how staunchly upper-middle class all of the Bangladeshi voices about their country's success have been. Of the international coverage, only the *Guardian* newspaper appears to have reached beyond the 'Gulshan crowd' to hear what ordinary Bangladeshis feel about the moment.¹⁰ As many commentators noted, the Bangladesh revolution remains unfinished, a permanent work-in-progress.

Liberation also remains incomplete for Bangladesh's women, but women at least are acknowledged to be at the heart of their country's development success. A half century after the atrocities of mass rape that formed part of West Pakistan's genocidal strategy against Bangladesh independence, several events remembered the *Birangona*, women and children who had to find some way back into their societies after unimaginable torture and violation. Bangladeshi society made some effort to reintegrate them, and the political leadership sent high-level messages about honouring them as liberation warriors. These stories remain mostly untold and forgotten, although a new generation of artistic and scholarly efforts are returning them to our history.¹¹ Women spoke and women were heard speaking of the women's rights movement, of women workers' struggles for the most basic of human rights, and of the gains women have made. It is no paradise of gender equality, but women's rights are a serious matter in Bangladesh, from its readymade garments factories that are under growing pressure to respect their workers' rights, to the local governments from which public services get delivered. Much is laid on the strong backs of these 'golden girls' of Bengal, as Professor Firdous Azim put it in one of these events, and there is clear injustice in how much of the burden of development women are expected to shoulder. Yet I came away from these webinars and articles with a confirmed sense that Bangladesh's surprising successes owe greatly to the hard labour – domestic and industrial – as well as the ingenuity and resourcefulness of its women. And this felt both entirely worthy of celebration and a lesson for the world.

Notes

1. Some of these events are available to view: The Institute of Development Studies, Sussex (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1sdqMZSjxM>); Harvard University's Mittal South Asia Institute (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqbtMRJYvI8>); New York University (no video available, perhaps because this replaced the cancelled LUMS event); and the London School of Economics (<https://youtu.be/Zp1pq03tv94>).
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/opinion/biden-child-poverty-bangladesh.html>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
3. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Bangladesh-at-50-how-the-country-has-fared-since-independence>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
4. <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-economy-50-years-on/a-57015896>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
5. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bangladesh-turns-50-11616710420>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
6. This was not the only scandal: a the late cancellation of the Lahore University of Management Sciences/Institute of Pakistan Studies of Quaid-i-Azam University in Pakistan event drew much, mostly Indian, commentary, but also sent 'a clear message' about the politics of history in South Asia (Riaz 2021).
7. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-31/india-and-pakistan-are-now-poorer-than-bangladesh>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
8. *ibid.*
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1sdqMZSjxM>. Accessed 18th October 2021.
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/mar/26/bangladesh-views-50-years-independence>. Accessed October 18 2021.
11. For instance, Leesa Gazi's documentary 'Rising Silence': <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8488370/>.

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Naomi Hossain is a research professor at the Accountability Research Center at American University. Her research focuses on the politics of inclusive development, and often on Bangladesh.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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