

# STRIVING TO REALIZE THE IDEALS OF MY FATHER

SHEIKH HASINA

*Are you going to wear those flashy, expensive sari and jewelry? Most people these days can't even afford a single meal—do you want to show off how rich you are? Don't wear them please, wear something simple and ordinary so that you can identify yourself with the poor people of this land.*

— Sheikh Mujib speaking to his daughter

I can never forget those words of my father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the man people fondly called *Bangabandhu*, or Friend of Bangladesh—a title bestowed in the 1960s that reflected how much they loved him. It was not meant to be a lofty title but, rather, a simple reflection of people's love. I learned from my father how to empathize with the deprived, the disadvantaged, and how to dream about building a prosperous future for them. He dreamt about creating, once again, a *Sonar Bangla*, or Golden Bengal, as our land was known in ancient times. He envisioned a prosperous country based on the ideals of democracy, religious tolerance, and social justice. It ultimately became his political philosophy and lodestar all through his life. I have always tried to follow his advice and example.

During the previous two centuries, our people had been colonized, impoverished, and ruthlessly exploited by rulers who came from outside. This exploitation continued even after 1947, when the British colonial rulers partitioned the Indian subcontinent and established an independent Pakistan. While the word “Bangladesh” had been used by the people of our country for centuries, our land officially became known as East Bengal only in 1905. With the 1947 independence of Pakistan, East Bengal became known as East Pakistan—an arrangement that brought no joy to our nation. Geographically separated from the western wing of Pakistan by a thousand miles, the erstwhile East Pakistan was ethnically, culturally, and socially different from West Pakistan. While our people sought greater autonomy in managing their own

affairs and development, the Pakistani regime brought only authoritarian and oppressive rule. Among other things, it tried to impose Urdu on our people, a language spoken only by a small minority in West Pakistan. Such insensitivity and oppression sparked a popular resistance, giving rise to a movement to obtain the full recognition of Bangla as our national language. I do understand that Bangla is known as “Bengali” in the West, but I will refer to it as Bangla here, as it is our name for our own mother tongue.

### **THE MAKING OF BANGABANDHU AND AN INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH**

This language movement was spearheaded by the young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a law student at Dhaka University, who stood boldly against such injustice. The movement intensified when the Pakistani rulers imprisoned him and his associates on March 11, 1948. Many more episodes of

imprisonment followed, as the people’s demand for autonomy grew stronger. Over the years, particularly as the central government of Pakistan became a military dictatorship, the economic deprivation and political discrimination against our people in East Pakistan continued to worsen. This only served to stiffen my father’s resolve against dictatorship, deprivation, and discrimination.

Among Sheikh Mujib’s many extraordinary qualities, three stood out above all others. First, he naturally empathized and connected with people from all walks of life. His background may have helped in this regard; he was not from a family of extraordinary wealth, but from one in a rural farming community that was economically comfortable. Second, he was fearless in protesting and resisting the forces of oppression. Third, he could articulate and give voice to what the people needed and aspired to.

People could see these genuine qualities in him, which drew them natu-

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sheikh Hasina** is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, now in her fourth term. She is a daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh’s founding father and its first President. Sheikh Hasina is well recognized now as a global leader for her influential work on peace, prosperity, humanity, and climate change. Sheikh Hasina has been the President of the oldest and the most influential political party of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Awami League) for 40 years and was first elected as Prime Minister in 1996 for a five-year term. Subsequently winning three consecutive five-year terms, she has engineered and presided over very rapid economic growth and development, lifting Bangladesh out of the status of Least Developed Countries. She has pursued many humanitarian causes and works relentlessly to build a socially and economically inclusive country. Among her many humanitarian causes, she concluded a peace treaty in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, gave shelter to more than one million Rohingyas who were driven out of their homeland, and currently chairs the 48-nation Climate Vulnerable Forum at the UN.

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rally to him and encouraged them to seek his leadership and guidance. Over a long and arduous 20-plus year struggle—one that involved building grassroots organizations, facing trumped-up charges in the law courts, and enduring numerous imprisonments, yet pressing on for justice and autonomy for our people—Sheikh Mujib galvanized the nation into one nation, winning the hearts and minds of our entire people. Even after a landslide victory in the 1970 general election of Pakistan, and after being declared prime minister-elect of Pakistan by the Pakistani military regime, the military rulers subjected him to a great deal of machination rather than allowing a smooth transfer of power. In short, over a period of nearly a quarter century, the movement to recognize Bangla as our national language was transformed into a battle for justice and equality, then into a demand for autonomy, and ultimately into a full-fledged liberation movement.

Eventually, the moment of reckoning arrived. At a historic mass rally in Dhaka on March 7, 1971, Sheikh Mujib proclaimed, “The struggle this time is the struggle for our freedom! The struggle this time is the struggle for independence!” About three weeks later, in the evening of March 25, there started a brutal military crackdown on unarmed civilians, students at university dormitories and the police in their barracks by the Pakistani army. Given this cruelty and the people’s momentous aspiration for freedom, Sheikh Mujib declared the country’s independence on March 26, 1971, and called for the people to resist the brutality of the Pakistani Army. During the tense days between March 7 and March 25, when the Pakistani military regime was filling the barracks with soldiers from West Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib had contemplated various corresponding practical contingencies on his side. Just minutes before Sheikh Mujib was arrested and

taken away by the Pakistani military, he sent a nationwide message to members of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), the paramilitary force serving as border guards that was made up mostly of Bangladeshi men. Some of the EPR men were very enthusiastic about independence, and four of them conveyed Sheikh Mujib’s message of freedom and independence over their wireless sets across the nation. Four such EPR men carried the message of Sheikh Mujib through their wireless sets to all over the nation. It was later discovered that they were arrested and killed by Pakistan Army. These four martyrs’ contributions were immense as that had spread the leader’s message rapidly through radio stations and other means of announcements around the country, building up an effective solidarity and resistance. Since Sheikh Mujib’s call for independence resonated very deeply in the hearts of people, they launched an all-out war against the occupying Pakistani forces, which continued to carry out unimaginable atrocities that can only be described as genocide. Victory came on December 16, 1971, and Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign nation, thus fulfilling the dream my father cherished for a quarter century. Our country’s name officially entered the world’s vocabulary.

Throughout his political career, Sheikh Mujib led a nonviolent movement to achieve his goals. However, the military regime again arrested him on that calamitous night of March 25, 1971, when it started the genocide in Bangladesh and imprisoned him in a dark solitary cell in West Pakistan. In a secret military trial on the prison premises, my father was sentenced to death. He was about to be executed, when Bangladesh succeeded in its struggle for independence.

Because of his frequent imprisonment in the past, my sister, brothers, and I were deprived of our father’s presence,

but never his enduring affection. My mother wholeheartedly supported him through his long political struggles; she was also by our side, ensuring that all her children received a proper education. We dearly missed our father; his frequent absences only deepened our loyalty to his idealism. We were fully aware that he was absent because of his imprisonment and the reasons for it. His sacrifices made it easier for us to make corresponding sacrifices. Our parents taught us about the value of patriotism, and we shared his deep love of the people and his steadfast commitment to the liberation of our land. They made it easier to never lose our way, to never lose hope for a brighter, better future.

After Bangladesh won independence, the Pakistani military finally released my father. He immediately and triumphantly returned to Dhaka and was given a tumultuous hero's welcome by his beloved people. As head of the new government, he launched the daunting task of rebuilding a country emerging from the ashes of a devastating war. The government treasury was empty. Ten million Bangladeshi refugees, who had taken shelter in India to escape from the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military, had to be quickly rehabilitated as they began to return home. The country's railways, roads, and bridges had to be rebuilt and communications reestablished. Firearms had to be recovered from citizens who had spontaneously declared themselves freedom fighters and resisted the Pakistani military during the Liberation War. Law and order had to be restored. Crop production, disrupted badly during the war, had to be resumed, and the availability of vital agricultural supplies had to be secured.

As rehabilitation, restoration, and recovery were pursued in midst of chaos and confusion, the newly formed Planning Commission began to prepare a

comprehensive plan for the country. The most important task was to frame a constitution for an independent Bangladesh, one that truly reflected the aspirations of those who had fought and sacrificed their lives for their cherished freedom. Additionally, to secure support from neighboring countries and the international community, Sheikh Mujib sought urgent diplomatic recognition from countries throughout the world. He accomplished these difficult tasks within a very short time and was soon recognized as a charismatic world leader, a statesman with a clear vision. Many world leaders visited Dhaka, and he was invited to many of their countries. Through his historic speech at the UN General Assembly in New York on September 25, 1974, Sheikh Mujib made all Bangladeshis proud of their nation and their heritage.

## **THE TRAGEDY OF 1975**

Then tragedy would strike, whose enormity I still have not fully adjusted to! My younger sister Rehana and I, along with my two children, were visiting Germany, where my husband, Dr. Wazed, was working as a nuclear scientist. During a short trip to Belgium, in the early morning of August 15, 1975, I was awakened by the harsh ringing of the telephone. Our host received the call but did not want to talk to me, only to my husband, who was standing very close to me. My husband turned to me and said that there had been a coup in Bangladesh, but nothing more. However, the sense I got by reading his face, was I felt that something cataclysmic had befallen my family in Dhaka. I was shocked and stunned, and the only words that came to my mouth were, "If there has been a coup, then I have lost everyone." After going to Ambassador Humayun Rashid Chowdhury's house in Bonn, we confronted the heartrending news that my father, my mother, my newly married

brothers and their wives, and even my kid brother Russel had all been killed.

It pains me to list all 18 members of my close-knit family who died that day, and it may pain my readers to go through the list. However, I am compelled to identify and honor the innocent people whose lives were senselessly taken. In addition to killing my father, Sheikh Mujib, the president of Bangladesh, they killed my mother, Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib; my younger brother, freedom fighter captain Sheikh Kamal and his wife Sultana; another younger brother, freedom fighter lieutenant Sheikh Jamal and his wife Parvin Jamal Rosy; and our uncle, freedom fighter Sheikh Abu Naser. My 10-year-old brother, Sheikh Russel, was the last victim of the killers. Others killed on that night included Sheikh Mujib's military secretary Colonel Jamil and police officer Siddiqur Rahman. At the same time, they had attacked my aunt's house and killed her son, Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni a freedom fighter, journalist, and editor, and his pregnant wife Arzu Moni. At another aunt's house, the murderers killed her husband, freedom fighter Abdur Rob Serniabat, and her daughter Baby, son Arif Serniabat, and grandson Sukanta Babu; her nephew Shaheed Serniabat, a journalist and freedom fighter; and a close family friend, Nayeem Khan Rintu.

The usurpers of power wouldn't allow my sister and me to return home. Along with my two infant children, we spent about six years in wretched exile. We ran as refugees from place to place, always afraid that we would be hunted down by the assassins and finally eliminated.

## **MY RETURN TO BANGLADESH IN 1981**

Finally, we began to see some light at the end of the exile tunnel. As limited political activities resumed in the country, the

Bangladesh Awami League, the political party my father had built up since the 1950s, selected me to be its president—a decision welcomed by our people. I returned to Bangladesh in 1981, despite some resistance from the prevailing military regime. This return did not automatically lead to a smooth political ride for the daughter of the country's founder. There were troubles, trauma, and turbulence at every turn. I focused all my passion and energy on carrying out this daunting political career; I saw no choice but to go forward, as my father would have done. I felt compelled to confront and overcome the obstacles thrown at us, not just to vindicate the cruel and senseless assassination of my father and family members. In my mind, the crimes of the conspirators were bigger than murders; they had also killed the hopes of a burgeoning new nation, one that had been subjugated by colonial rulers for centuries.

In confronting these many difficult issues, I followed a simple methodology. I asked myself, "What would my father Sheikh Mujib do if he had remained alive?" The answer was always to remain steadfast to the ideals of Bangladesh that had inspired him and the entire nation. We needed to remain faithful to the ideals of the Liberation War of 1971, for which three million Bangladeshi people had sacrificed their lives.

To understand the needs of the people, particularly those who were down-trodden, I had to have empathy for their current problems and their aspirations and dreams for the future. I began to meet routinely with many people, especially those from poor households in the villages, who represented the real Bangladesh. I visited countless village markets and grassroots centers. In the process, I learned firsthand about economic activities in rural areas and became familiar with their needs, especially dur-

ing natural disasters such as floods or cyclones. I extensively visited the areas vulnerable to *monga* (“*monga*” is a word used in our Rangpur district meaning localized famine), which affected northern Bangladesh, and tried to understand the practical details of these situations. My memories were filled with what my father had told us about his own dreams and specific plans for the development of the country. He used to share with us his ideas about how the endemic poverty that had plagued the country since colonial times could be eradicated once and for all.

I also realized that many of the party’s leaders had been lost in the Liberation War; the party had been rudderless since 1975. Sheikh Mujib’s solution would have been to undertake a systematic reorganization. This led me to start reorganizing the Awami League. There was resistance; some insisted we did not need to fix what was already working. The party had, after all, swept the 1970 general election in erstwhile East Pakistan, winning 167 seats out of 169, and spearheaded the successful Liberation War, proving its well-functioning capabilities. I believed that it needed to be strengthened to become our political platform, starting with the lowest units at the grassroots level. It was hard, painstaking, organization-building work. Here too Sheikh Mujib’s philosophy, ideals, and aspirations were very helpful in preparing the party to be ready for a change. The overwhelming desire at the ground level was to infuse our people with the spirit of the Liberation War and with the basic principles of the country’s constitution.

My knowledge and understanding of my father’s thoughts and plans—stemming from his lifetime dedication to and thinking for the country—have helped me translate his ideas into concrete programs. The guiding principles involve being steadfast, being empathetic to the needs of the downtrodden, and being sys-

tematic about my actions.

My father’s dream was to build an independent Bangladesh that would facilitate a better life for all the people in the country and change their destiny. When he was home, he would often discuss with us his thoughts and plans on ways to make each village self-sufficient by further increasing agricultural output. He visualized industrialization, road-building, the dredging of waterways, expansion of railways, and so forth. He imagined good roads leading to every village, with rice fields on one side and farmers’ settlements, schools, colleges, railway lines, hospitals, religious institutions, and all the social elements of life on the other. He dreamt of introducing various machines, purchased either individually or through cooperatives, which he asserted would greatly increase productivity. He also considered production-sharing (keeping land ownership intact) schemes in which the current landowners would claim a part, the state-supported cooperatives would claim another part, and the laborers would claim yet a third part. He had schemes for marketing the farmers’ produce. The important point is that he was always thinking and believed that conditions could be improved through innovations. His thoughts and beliefs became my inspiration and education.

## **CHANNELING THE PAIN AS A POSITIVE FORCE**

The pain that came from losing virtually all members of my family in 1975 has been impossible to overcome. However, for the welfare of the people of Bangladesh, I have tried to channel my pain from losing my family members into building Bangladesh, the cause for which they perished.

There are many instances of wealthy families who, after great loss, donated their wealth to serve humanity by creating

institutions of excellence. The Stanford family donated more than 8,000 acres of land when they lost their only child, Leland Jr., to typhoid in 1884, creating the foundation of today's Stanford University. The Widener family invested in Harvard University when their son Harry died in the Titanic disaster in 1912, helping to create the university's largest library and one of the best in the world. I bring up these examples to point out that the pain of a tragedy can be channeled for good purposes. I believe that the loss of my whole family was a tremendous tragedy, but I did not have any wealth to donate. However, I realized that I could channel my tears, tenacity, and time into building Bangladesh. My path since that dark year of 1975 eventually led me, 21 years later, to become prime minister for a five-year term, starting in 1996.

In the election of 2001, however, the Awami League party did not return to power. Rule by another party degenerated into military rule, and many of our programs were disrupted and discontinued. Fortunately, our party won overwhelmingly in the 2008 general elections, followed by two additional consecutive five-year terms, the last one being at the end of 2018. This has given us a good amount of time to follow up on our programs consistently, which has enabled our society and the people to become stronger in a number of areas.

## **MEETING SEVEN OF THE PEOPLE'S BASIC NEEDS**

### **Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition**

We began our effort to develop agriculture by prioritizing increased production and food security. Several other benefits arose from this emphasis. The largest part of our workforce (43%) is engaged in this sector; increased production and income are good not only for them but for the

national economy. Their purchasing power translates into the creation and expansion of factories, industries, markets, and, possibly, exports. More productive farms and rural areas also reduce rural-to-urban migration. With these thoughts, we have allocated more resources for rural and grassroots development so that we ultimately leave none of our precious arable land uncultivated or unused. We have helped farmers in at least four ways.

**Inputs.** We have provided them with high-quality seeds, fertilizers, and other products, along with support for irrigation.

**Finance.** We began to give sharecroppers agricultural loans at low interest rates without requiring any deposit from them. We also increased certain subsidies and provided cash incentives for increased production. At present, an 80% subsidy is being given for agricultural mechanization.

**Research.** We continue to search for ways to diversify production of grains, vegetables, fish, meat, eggs, and fruits. The overall goal is increased food security and improved nutrition. New varieties of maize, wheat, vegetables, and fruit have been introduced. We have allocated resources to develop saline-tolerant rice species, restore native fish, and devise ways of raising fish and growing rice simultaneously in the same plot of land, so that when paddy fields that get inundated during the rainy season, rice and fish can be grown at the same time. Our scientists are working not only on improving nutrition but also making people aware of innovations and their benefits.

**Operations.** We continue to educate farmers about crop diversification, modern farming methods, soil-testing to identify fertilizer needs, product marketing, constructing silos for food storage, building warehouses, and good ways of storing

food. We also advise them on various other issues. As a result, even though Bangladesh is comparable in size only to the US state of Wisconsin, in terms of actual annual production, Bangladesh ranks third in the world in inland fish, second in rice, and third in vegetables. Our country has achieved this productive capacity by wisely using the space left over after accommodating a population that is half that of the United States.

## **Health**

To improve the health of our people, we have worked on a wide range of activities—building hospitals and clinics, providing healthcare services to people of all ages, and disseminating knowledge about prevention of diseases and maintenance of health. Our facilities may not meet Western standards, but our reach and effort are quite significant; given the country's rising income level, we are increasingly able to do more.

**Community Clinics.** Free medical treatment and medicines are provided through 18,000 community clinics and healthcare centers across Bangladesh. They provide first aid and refer people, if necessary, to *upazila* (subdistrict) hospitals.<sup>1</sup> Special arrangements are in place for serving children and mothers, and the names and addresses of all patients are registered so that they can receive regular treatment.

**Step-by-Step Healthcare System.** Community clinics are the smallest grass-roots healthcare units. Medical facilities are the larger centers, such as maternal and childcare centers, upazila hospitals, district hospitals, and divisional medical universities.

**Maternity Care.** Women receive various services during the prenatal period and while breast feeding. Working women are given a maternity allowance so that they can eat nutritious food and give birth to a healthy baby. We also have

introduced a monthly allowance of \$10 for lactating mothers.

**Hygiene.** Children are regularly vaccinated and taught about hygiene, hand-washing, and other health issues. We are constructing separate hygienic wash-rooms for boys and girls in the schools.

**Awareness.** Clinics and upazila hospitals carry out awareness training and counseling for midwives, nurses, and other female health counselors, as well as for patients. Families are given consultations about services for expectant mothers and newborns. As a result, people have become more health conscious, and maternal and child mortality rates have significantly dropped.

**Sensitivity to Women and Senior Citizens.** Women, particularly girls, benefit the most from these clinics, as they can walk in for health check-ups without depending on others. Older people also have access to regular health check-ups.

**Hospital Size.** The government has decided that every upazila and zila will have a hospital, the number of beds in these hospitals being determined by the population size. Recently the number of beds in 152 upazila hospitals (out of 421 upazila hospitals) have been increased to 50 from 31. At the same time, in 34 zila hospitals (out of a total of 63 zila hospitals), the facilities have been increased to 250-300 beds. There used to be 100 beds in these zila hospitals until recently.

**Modernized Equipment.** Modern equipment has been provided to every hospital and skilled technicians have been appointed to operate them. Similar opportunities have been provided in the health sector as in the industrial sector to attract domestic and foreign investment. Web cameras have been installed in every upazila hospital so that doctors unable to visit the patients can get connected and discuss the issues the patients face. Similarly, we also have created opportuni-



ties for online medical services and consultation with medical specialists abroad.

**Upgraded Nurse Training.** Nursing colleges and institutes are being established, as we wish to lift up the nursing profession and recognize the greater respect nurses deserve. Nurses are recruited through the Public Service Commission. At present, they are expected to have a degree (not merely a certificate) and to have taken college-level courses. The number of nurses, as well as their salaries and benefits, have been increased. We are also encouraging the establishment of nurse training institutes through private initiatives.

**Private Hospitals.** The government is encouraging private initiatives, and as a result, some world-class hospitals are being established in Bangladesh. Doctors and nurses have been given the opportunity to receive training and higher education both at home and abroad. Scholarships for higher education and special grants for research are being provided.

**Specialized Hospitals.** Thematic institutes have been established to train specialist physicians and ensure treatment of all diseases. For example, we have set up separate institutes for eye, nose, ear, throat, cancer, kidney, heart, pediatrics, gastro/liver, burns, neuroscience, and trauma so that those who need specialized care can receive it. Public and private diabetic hospitals and separate hospitals for women have also been established.

**Addressing the Pandemic.** Covid units have been opened in specialized hospitals to treat coronavirus patients. Bangladesh has shown greater resilience than many other countries where medical facilities not only meet higher standards but also are more readily available. Despite our limitations, I believe our performance is better because our programs and initiatives are focused on prevention rather than cure.

## Education

Soon after forming my government in 1996, we undertook initiatives to massively expand universal education. Since people are our focus and our only resource, their education is the best means of upgrading the economy and managing many of the country's problems. Educated citizens can devise creative and robust solutions to their problems, and make it easier for the government to disseminate information. In addition to K-12 and tertiary education institutions, we have extended our activities to include adult education and those based in religious institutions that belong to all faiths prevalent in the country. As a result, our population has become more appreciative of the value of education and how the children can advance by acquiring education and training.

**Literacy Rates.** We started a project to make every district literate, which led to a rise in the literacy rate from 45% to 75.6%. Unfortunately, that rate faltered while we were not in power from 2001 through 2008. However, since 2009, when we formed our government for the second time, the literacy rate has been rising again; it is now at 74.3%, another consequence of our consistent focus during the three consecutive terms.

**Financial Support.** Thirteen million primary school students are supported by stipends, which eases the financial burden on parents. Stipends reach the mothers or legitimate guardians directly through their mobile phones. We also provide scholarships for secondary and higher education. As a result, about 23 million students have advanced from primary school to higher education.

**Educational Materials.** Free books are now distributed to all students up to the secondary school level. School lunches (also known as tiffin) have also been arranged. As a result, dropouts have decreased. During the global pandemic,

educational activities have continued online, and via radio and television.

**Emphasis on Science and Technologies.** Starting in my first term, we have adopted laws and policies to establish 12 science and technology universities in order to upgrade our people's science and technology-based skills. Technical education has spread throughout the country, which has enabled graduates to get jobs more easily. Technical education institutions are currently being opened in all 492 *upazilas*.

**Building More Tertiary Institutions.** With public and private initiatives, primarily since 2009, we have begun to establish universities, technical education institutes, and medical colleges in every district, especially the large ones, with medical universities in each of the eight divisions.

**Female Students.** Four academic institutions have been built exclusively for women. In the general schools and universities, the number of female students is greater than the number of male students, and the percentage of female students continues to increase. Our extensive efforts on this matter, after being re-elected in 2009, are bearing fruit in the form of increasing female student enrollment and decreasing dropout rates at all levels. These efforts have helped raise female enrollment for secondary, higher secondary, and university levels to 55.07%, 50.27%, and 35.21%, respectively. The secondary school dropout rate has fallen from 64.92% to 34.86%, and the higher secondary dropout rate has dropped from 42.48% to 22.02%. Higher female enrollment is having other positive ripple effects, including a significantly lower rate of child marriage, and parents seeing girls' education as helpful to their families. Girls are no longer perceived to be a financial burden.

**The Pandemic.** The worldwide pandemic is affecting the whole country, but

our students are facing its worst effects. We have rapidly adopted digital platforms and public television channels to provide online education.

### **Shelter**

Of all the inequities that exist in Bangladesh, the greatest is housing. During 2020, the centennial year of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's birth, we pledged to build homes for the landless and to provide everyone with a proper home address. Eliminating homelessness alleviates poverty, creates more equity, and results in a healthier citizenry. It has been inspired, like many other initiatives, by Sheikh Mujib, who set up clusters of villages for landless people and began the distribution of state-owned land for building better housing. We have upheld his paradigm and are currently implementing it.

**For the Homeless.** We initiated the Ashrayan-1 project, through which landless families can obtain modest housing; however, they cannot sell it to other families. Initially, we built small barrack houses, each with one room and balconies on two sides. The claim to each house is given jointly to husband and wife; if they ever split up, the woman will have the priority claim. Clusters of houses are governed by cooperative societies, while maintenance is provided by the government. The residents of Ashrayan-1 are being encouraged to pursue careers as blacksmiths, potters, fishermen, and barbers. Religious institutions, schools, healthcare facilities, and community centers have been provided along with this housing. An improved design and construction scheme is being pursued in the Ashrayan-2 project. We have already built half the number of homes we set as our goal, and the remainder of the housing needs will be met in the next two years.

**Lacking the Means to Build.** A housing fund has been set up by the central bank for those who have land but cannot afford to build a dwelling on it. Any NGO or other institution is allowed to borrow money from the central bank, with only a 2% service charge and an interest rate capped at 5%. So far, about 29,000 families have built houses using these loan facilities. Hostels for garment workers have been built separately.

**Housing for Slum Dwellers.** The government is constructing small flats for slum dwellers. These flats can be rented on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Special loans are being arranged through a program titled Return Home for dwellers who want to return to rural areas. Those who return to a village will be given a house, six months' free food, and a low-interest loan so that they can take time to resettle without being pressured to earn a living immediately.

### **Women and Marginalized Groups**

We have created a social safety net to provide allowances to meet a variety of difficult circumstances: old age, widowhood, extreme poverty, disability, and destitute freedom fighters. For the current fiscal year, we have allocated BDT 956 million (close to US\$12 million) for this purpose. About 95,000 people from the transgender, gypsy, and other hitherto neglected communities are included. About 45 million people have come under social security, directly and indirectly. We distribute food free of cost.

**Affirmative Action.** Training has been arranged and special employment opportunities have been created for women. After independence, Sheikh Mujib made women's education free of cost. He reserved a 10% quota system for women in government workplaces. Today, 60% of teachers' job in the primary schools is reserved for women. It is meant to encourage women to form the

majority of the primary school teachers who are naturally from the local communities; primary school teaching does not require much specialization. This has encouraged women's participation in teaching jobs and, at the same time, encouraged families to send girls to school.

**Policies and Recruitment.** The National Women's Development Policy was formulated in 1997 with the aim of empowering women; this effort was disrupted from 2001 to 2008. Since forming our government in 2009, the participation of women has been ensured. Unlike anything that has taken place before, we started recruiting women at all levels, including higher and lower court judges and a secretary in the administration; a deputy commissioner and superintendent of police at the district level; an *upazila nirbahi* officer at the upazila level; officers who are in charge of police stations, army, navy, air force, and the Bangladesh border guard; and a university vice-chancellor.

**Local Governments.** Women's participation at various levels of local government has also been ensured. It is now mandatory to elect women at every level, from unions to city corporations. As a result, opportunities have been created for women to play a role in overall development activities. Today, Bangladesh tops the nations in South Asia in women's empowerment.

### **Child Welfare**

My father loved children. He had five children himself, and greatly missed them during his many periods of imprisonment. My youngest brother, who was killed in 1975, spent a great deal of time with him. In the 1970s, my father undertook several initiatives for children's welfare. During his short tenure, he enacted the Children's Act and made primary education free and compulsory. I am, of

course, very inspired by him on this front as well.

**Establishment of Laws during My Tenures.** Several additional initiatives have been put in place to make the abusive treatment of women and children illegal: the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act-2010, Children Act-2013, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act-2017.

**Plans and Policies.** There also are policies and plans that cater to the welfare of children: the National Children Policy Act of 2011, which aligned with international charters, children's laws, and constitutions, and the Women and Child Abuse Prevention Action Plan 2013-2015. Child labor has been banned since 1996, especially in hazardous environments. Laws and plans on paper may not go far enough, making it sometimes necessary for the government to get directly involved.

**Facilities for Childcare.** Various programs and activities were also undertaken to create educational opportunities for poor children, who are more vulnerable to abuse. We have established childcare centers and breastfeeding corners in every department in the government and for women workers in garment factories.

**Programs against Violence.** There are 5,292 adolescent clubs, involving virtually all upazilas, that exist to prevent gender-based violence against adolescent boys and girls: the National Academy for Autism and Neuro-Developmental Disabilities, the National Helpline to prevent child abuse, 60 one-stop crisis centers across the country to prevent violence against women and children, and mini-stadiums in every upazila, where children can exercise and play.

**Sports and Tournaments.** State-supported programs are available to promote tournaments and sports competition. In 2019, a total of 110,354 students involving 6,142 teams at the upazila level participat-

ed in two national football (soccer) tournaments for boys and girls.

**Direct Financial Help.** My government also lends a helping hand to young students, their mothers, institutions of different religions, and NGOs that are engaged with children. As already mentioned, 13 million students get financial help that is delivered through their mothers' cell phones; scholarships are provided to 7.3 million students in secondary or higher education; and students with special needs receive stipends. Students also receive school lunches, textbooks, and other educational materials free of charge.

### **Financial Inclusion**

Inclusivity is deep in our ethos. This is because the consciousness of our nation emerged against the discriminatory rules, first under the British and then under the Pakistanis. Sheikh Mujib was the champion of inclusivity and the best articulator of this ethos. Development must engage our entire society. It must be inclusive. It must be participatory. My government is committed to reflecting this ethos in the world of finance, as shown by the following few examples.

**Mobile Financial Services.** Once digital communication devices became widespread, we realized that they could be harnessed for financial inclusion. As a result, my government endorsed the idea of mobile financial services immediately after my second term started in 2009. Today, more than 80 million people in the country are using mobile financial services, and we are a proud world leader in this sector.

**Bank for Small Enterprises.** We established the Karmasangsthan Bank—a bank dedicated to facilitating small enterprises—where young men and women can obtain loans without a deposit for sums of BDT 200,000 (approximately US\$2,400) or above to run a business or farm. Other startup programs are provid-

ing training and access to low-interest loans.

**Micro-Savings.** I conceptualized a savings scheme and created what is now known as the My Home-My Farm project for rural people. The aim is to encourage savings, facilitate productive activities and cooperation among rural people, and overcome poverty in the process. Through this program, those who have houses and adjoining open spaces or ponds are being harnessed for increased production of food. Initiatives have been undertaken to implement production-oriented programs by harnessing the talents of the household members. The areas selected include cottage industries, handicrafts, fruit farming, vegetables, spices, vegetables, mushroom farming, and other conventional or non-conventional income-generating programs, such as fish, poultry, pigeon, and quail farming. Our philosophy is to not leave an inch of our precious land unproductive. With appropriate incentives, we are encouraging the formation of cooperative societies to procure inputs and market outputs collectively.

**Matching Incentives.** To encourage greater productivity and saving, we first provide training and advice to those who will be involved in productive activities. They can then obtain loans to engage in those activities. If a person saves from their profits, the government doubles their savings by providing a matching amount as a gift. For instance, if someone saves BDT 200 from profits made by selling manufactured goods, another BDT 200 is offered as a gift from the government and is deposited in the producer's savings account. This scheme is being implemented by a bank we have set up, called *Palli Sanchay Bank* in Bangla, which translates to Rural Savings Bank.

## **MAKING THE COUNTRY MORE CONDUCTIVE TO PEOPLE'S ADVANCEMENT**

In addition to the programs described above, there are at least seven areas where we are doing our best to enable people to help themselves.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Almost immediately after starting my first term in 1997, we negotiated and signed a historic peace agreement with the indigenous population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area, putting to an end to the long-running conflict there. The lack of peace in the area had reminded me of the marginalization Bangladeshis faced under British rule and under the Pakistani military. This agreement, which ended a long-festering armed insurgency in the eastern region of the country, recognized the rights of the local people and ethnic tribes. It also established a regional development council to promote greater prosperity in a region that had been held back.

### **Water Supply**

The 1996 Indo-Bangladesh agreement for sharing the water flowing through the Ganges River was another major milestone event. It ensured an adequate flow of water during the lean season for crops and quickly boosted agricultural growth in the southwestern region of the country. To deliver the benefits of this or other water deals with India, we have created various irrigation projects that have helped boost agriculture. At this point, 72% of our arable land is under irrigation, allowing us, as mentioned elsewhere, to become the world's second largest producer of rice and third largest of vegetables.

We also started implementing various programs to ensure that people had clean water, sanitary latrines, and overall household cleanliness. At the moment,

98.5% of our population receives safe drinking water; 85.7% is through tube well/boreholes, and 11.7% is through piped water. However, something that needs significant improvement in my country is the rate of piped water in urban areas, which remains low at only 38.1%.

### **Communications**

When we began governing in 1996, Bangladesh had a very underdeveloped infrastructure. To reach the remote villages, it was necessary to construct bridges and a rural road network. This, of course, involved large investments and required years to implement.

In the world of physical infrastructure, the most important accomplishment during my first term was to complete and open the 5.8-kilometer bridge over the Jamuna River. This bridge linked the northern and western regions of Bangladesh with the country's eastern region; the latter was comparatively more developed. The country's first mega-project, the bridge ushered in a new era of agricultural development in the northern districts, which had hitherto lacked access to the bigger markets in the eastern districts and to Chittagong port, the gateway for most of the country's imports and exports.

While the bridge was an important achievement, Bangladesh still lacked world-class roads and highways, and the existing ports and airports had limited capacity. Dhaka and Chittagong have become large cities but they have no mass rapid transport system. We are experiencing some of worst traffic congestion in the world, which reduces our productivity. However, Bangladesh is the world's largest river delta, crisscrossed by many large and small rivers. Even after bridging the mighty Jamuna in 1996, there were many more bridges and roads to be built.

During my second term, which began in 2009, we started much of the unfin-

ished work. We are currently constructing a new multimodal bridge over the mighty Padma River, known as the Ganges outside Bangladesh. It should be inaugurated next year, which will usher in a serious transformation of the southern part of our economy, just as the Jamuna bridge boosted the economy of the northern region.

Massive new investments in mega-projects for the modernizing of physical infrastructure, including a rapid transit system in Dhaka, are now taking place, many to be completed by 2025.

### **Digitization and Modern Technologies**

Within months of taking office in 1996, I endorsed three digital mobile licenses for nationwide services. These networks now provide mobile access to virtually everyone in Bangladesh. In 2009, to capitalize on the widespread availability of mobile phones, to complement the phenomenon, and to catapult the country into a digital future, we launched the Digital Bangladesh initiative. This vision includes e-governance (bringing doorstep delivery of government services through digital platforms), creating a technology-centric knowledge-based economy, and developing a world-class ICT sector. We set ourselves the ambitious target of achieving our first phase of Digital Bangladesh by 2021, and I am pleased that our achievements have exceeded our expectations. Today, government services continue their rapid digitization, our ICT sector is a booming export industry, and our IT freelancers are in demand all over the world. Some of the initiatives we undertook are outlined below.

#### ***Embrace of Technologies in General.***

Although digital technologies rightfully get a lot of attention these days, we are mindful of other beneficial technologies that are also being increasingly adopted in

Bangladesh. Examples include vastly expanded the use of television, radios, airplanes, helicopters, and more. Much of this proliferation has been encouraged through private initiatives. Correspondingly, we have encouraged and incentivized their use in hospitals, schools, colleges, universities, and media.

**Grassroots Organizations.** Digital centers have been set up in each union council (community-based governance group) location; there are 5,275 union councils across Bangladesh. In a typical case, a small entrepreneur runs each center. These union council-based centers have started getting broadband access, a project that will be completed soon. Arrangements are also being made to accomplish government work using digital centers and digital devices in 6,500 post offices and 18,500 government offices in the *zilas* and *upazilas*. We also are establishing 13,000 Sheikh Russel digital labs for children (8,000 have already been established) across the country. Similar agricultural data centers have been established, through which farmers can obtain information of interest to them via their own mobile devices. Finally, NGOs are promoting online trade, purchasing, imports, and exports through digital systems.

**Information and Communications Technology Parks and Incubators.** The grassroots organizations described above are complemented by relatively large information and communications technology parks, incubators, and world-class data centers across the country. People in remote areas are already benefiting from Bangabandhu-1, a satellite recently launched by Bangladesh. We are also preparing, through 31 specialized labs, to harness new opportunities now on the horizon: artificial intelligence, robotics, cyber security, and the internet of things, among others. My government has invested US\$300 million in funding, help-

ing, and promoting startups.

**Employment Opportunities.** Area-based employment opportunities have been created by small shops (largely convenience stores) selling stationery items, tea, foodstuffs and snacks, over-the-counter medicines, and other items; the employment so created is largely in the use of digital technologies in these convenience stores. Now these stores offer printing, photocopying, and mobile financial services. Another source of income for the digital centers comes from expatriate workers who want to make video calls to their families at home. People with disabilities can arrange their own employment after they get training arranged by the government.

**Training.** Multimedia classrooms and computer education are being provided in most schools, which encourages children to learn through digital devices. Expanding training in information and communications technologies will require further revamping of our school curricula at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. It also will require expanded teacher-training programs. Trained and skilled Bangladeshis employed overseas can become a major source of foreign income and a primary resource for propelling economic development. To date, more than two million young people have received training in various ICT-related trades.

**Freelancing.** We have introduced learning and earning programs, whereby youth are able to learn technical skills (such as coding) and then earn money while working at home as freelancers. Foreign companies seek out these freelancers when they want to outsource their software development. A large share of Bangladesh's educated youth is earning through this outsourced work. To recognize their work, the government is registering freelancers and giving them certificates to make it easier for them to obtain

outsourcing jobs.

**Exports.** At the moment, Bangladesh is exporting US\$1.3 billion in software and other digital services. In addition, about 650,000 freelancers are earning more than US\$500 million a year. We are aiming to boost exports to US\$5 billion by 2025. As developed countries experience population decline, demand for highly skilled people in their service sectors is likely to increase. We are working on this great potential to further increase our earnings.

**Addressing the Pandemic.** During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies are becoming more appreciated as a safer way of living and earning. Meetings among government officers and cabinet members, court activities, and business activities have continued during the pandemic. Our e-commerce activities were around US\$100 million at the beginning of 2020, a figure that has doubled during the pandemic.

### **Electricity Supply**

I have always considered energy to be a major pillar of economic development. Hence, starting with the Private Power Generation Policy in 1996 and my efforts to privatize power generation that year, we have increased both the generation and diversification of energy sources. We formulated several other policies, including one creating incentives to mobilize private capital and foreign investments for this capital-intensive and technology-dependent sector. Our diversification efforts have embraced different fuel options, including nuclear and renewables. In addition, we have initiated regional cooperation with India, Bhutan, and Nepal for the export and import of power, including hydropower.

The results of these efforts are now quite apparent, thanks to the support of the people, which has enabled us to stay in power for three consecutive terms and to

build this pillar of economic development consistently since 2009. Electricity has reached almost every village; 99.5% of the population is now connected to the electricity grid. While reaching virtually all 70,000 villages does not necessarily mean we have reached all our people, the number of people receiving grid power has risen from fewer than 11 million to nearly 35 million since 2009. Electricity has been ensured to reach the country's island areas through submarine cable or by solar panels. The number of solar panels in use in the country has risen from fewer than one million in 2009 to 55 million today. Sustainable and quality transmission lines are being set up, so no household will remain without electricity. In terms of power generation, we have increased our capacity from 4,900 MW in 2009 to 25,235 MW at present. Power generation used to be completely state owned; at this point, more than 50% is coming from joint ventures with private companies and imported from India. We are projected to achieve 40,000 MW by 2030 and 60,000 MW by 2041.

### **Foreign Investment,**

### **Industrialization, and Job Creation**

Many industries in Bangladesh would welcome investment and, I believe, produce good returns. These include agriculture and food processing, leather, light engineering and manufacturing, automotive parts and batteries, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, construction materials and chemicals, textiles, and electrical devices and electronics. The domestic demands in these areas are massive. It is, after all, a country of 165 million with an economy that was growing at an annual rate of 8% just before the pandemic (6% during the pandemic).

In the pre-pandemic years, our foreign direct investment (FDI) increased steadily, reaching close to US\$3.9 billion



in 2018-19. It fell to US\$2.4 billion in 2019-20 and to US\$2 billion in 2020-21—most likely due to the pandemic. We think our FDI will pick up after the pandemic, especially since more infrastructure, including the expanded power supply, is coming on board, along with other kinds of incentives for FDI. Investments relative to GDP, both public and private, have been holding at 30% during the pandemic. In particular, private investments as a percentage of GDP are holding above 21%, which highlights local investors' (including foreign ones who are already here) ongoing confidence in the economy. This should be a good signal to potential new foreign investors.

To promote industries and facilitate greater FDI, we have been working and continue to work on several fronts.

**Physical Infrastructure.** In addition to building better communication facilities, we have created special economic zones (SEZs) or industrial estates to attract both foreign and domestic investments and set up new technology-based industries. These zones have improved infrastructure (e.g., gas and power connections) and specialized ecologies suitable for specific types of industries. We now have 88 SEZs, 59 of which are owned by the government and 29 by private parties; five more will be added by 2030. Within these SEZs, 38 countries have made investments.

**Legal Infrastructure.** We have been enacting laws and promulgating regulations to provide a consistent legal landscape and remove the possibility of unexpected changes in policy, tax, and duty structure. We are establishing systems to expedite licensing processes, removing procedural complexities that cause delays in certifications, payment of taxes, and standardizing regulations.

**Financial Incentives.** Our various financial incentives include a 10-year exemption from taxes in certain geo-

graphic areas and sectors; accelerated depreciation allowance; cash incentives for certain exports; duty-free import of machinery; double taxation avoidance treaties with 34 countries, including the United States; 100% foreign ownership; and full repatriation for capital and profits.

**Human Resource Development.** We have established vocational training schools in order to mitigate concerns that our labor force lacks adequate skills. In any event, there are 150 higher education institutes in the country at the moment. There is long list of efforts underway to train young people.

Admittedly, Bangladesh has attracted less FDI than East Asian countries. This should improve in the post-pandemic world and as more modern infrastructures come on board. What is important to note about Bangladesh is that we did not window-dress our country to attract FDI; instead, we built an inclusive economy by addressing the needs of the lowest-income people. This has brought Bangladesh to a new stage with much greater capacity to put large amounts of FDI to good use.

Let me elaborate a bit on the power sector, which could be using the largest amount of FDI. Our 2041 target of 60,000 MW will require about US\$100 billion to cover power generation, transmission, and distribution. There are at least three reasons why the scale is profitably sustainable. First, in terms of handling the speed of expansion, we have quadrupled power generation in the last dozen years (since 2009) and thus have proven our ability to handle rapid growth. Second, this planned increase in the power supply will buttress our projected economic growth of 8% per year (the actual pre-pandemic level), which in turn will support the capital cost with good returns. An increased power supply will empower people to achieve more economically and

improve their ability to pay for power, which, in turn, will provide proper returns to the capital deployed—particularly because they also will enjoy the support of my government. At the same time, the government stands on sound financial footing to play that supporting role. For instance, the foreign exchange reserve today is at US\$47 billion, and Bangladesh has been maintaining a relatively low rate of borrowing, below 30% of annual GDP. In short, the power sector will require large capital investments, and my government will welcome FDI with adequate protection and returns for foreign investors.

### **Natural Environment**

Perhaps the greatest long-term threat Bangladesh is facing is climate change, which is bringing warmer temperatures and rising sea waters. We have the largest delta in the world, and much of our coastal region is likely to be inundated. It is indeed a global issue, and we hope that wealthier nations will take concerted concrete action to reduce carbon emissions and meet the agreed-upon targets of the Paris Agreement. We have formulated our own long-term delta development plan to mitigate the adverse effects of global climate change. To protect people in coastal areas from cyclones and tsunamis, we have built thousands of multi-storied and multi-purpose cyclone shelters, designed by our engineers. We also have erected embankments along the coast to protect people and their farms from the incursion of sea water. We are developing a comprehensive plan that focuses on sustainable economic growth, environmental conservation, and enhanced climate resilience.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I wish to stress that our nation has literally risen from the ashes of

the devastating 1971 war. Today's Bangladesh is a transformed country, one that is economically self-reliant. Formerly food deficient, today it is self-sufficient and even has surplus production of various food crops. Rice production has increased more than three times since independence, a time during which the country's population doubled. Our healthcare infrastructure has gradually increased, and extensive family planning campaigns have begun to produce results. Healthcare has been brought to the doorsteps of people, even in remote rural areas, through the establishment of community clinics. Our rapid population growth in the early 1970s was a demographer's nightmare. The fertility rate has now come down to a replacement level that is lower than that of our neighboring countries. Power generation has increased greatly and now reaches 99% of rural households. Almost 100% of school-age children are going to school, and primary immunization has reached the entire child population. To encourage children and their families to go to school, the government has taken the initiative to distribute cost-free textbooks and a large number of stipends to students up to the secondary level. About 23 million students from primary school to the higher levels have been given various stipends and scholarships.

We have accomplished a great deal in the last 50 years. When we emerged as an independent nation at the end of 1971, our war-ravaged country of 75 million was mired in widespread suffering. The per-capita GDP was only US\$133 and growing minimally, if at all, and life expectancy was only 47 years. Bangladesh is now a vibrant economy of 165 million, with a per-capita GDP of US\$2,554 and growing fast, and life expectancy has risen to 73 years. Taking into account the relative cost of living—that is, adjusting for purchasing power parity—Bangladesh is

now close to being a trillion-dollar economy.

Bangladesh is certainly one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. GDP has grown consistently since 2010 at more than 6% annually; it exceeded 8% in 2019, but there has been a small setback due to the pandemic.

- Once in a situation of chronic food deficit, the country is now one of the world's top three producers of rice, inland fish, and vegetables; it is still rapidly diversifying its crop production.
- The country is the fifth largest producer of vegetables in the world and the fourth largest in production of freshwater fish. Marine fish output from the Bay of Bengal has also increased in recent years. We are self-sufficient in livestock and poultry.
- Bangladesh garments have become popular globally; it was the second largest exporter of ready-made apparel in 2020.
- Remittance earnings from expatriates working abroad hit a record US\$21 billion in 2020, the eighth highest in the world. The country's foreign exchange reserve stands at US\$47 billion.
- More than 100 public and private universities provide tertiary education in information and communications technology and other new technologies. Eight thousand union-level digital centers provide one-stop services to the vast rural population.
- The UN has recently adopted a resolution that Bangladesh will soon graduate from the status of Least Developed Country to a Developing Country.

This amazing transformation within a decade has taken place neither accidentally nor by a miracle. It has happened because of planned efforts, grassroots initiatives, and the entrepreneurial spirit of our people, who are determined to overcome our adversities. It is the result of

hard labor, blood, toil, and tears of enterprising farmers, garment workers, and expatriates abroad. Prudently coordinated and encouraged by the government, it is a result of enterprise, big and small.

The last two years have, as we all know, been extremely trying for the entire world. However, during this pandemic, Bangladesh celebrated two major milestones. Last year would have been my father's 100th birthday, and this year is Bangladesh's 50th.

As I look back at all we have achieved, I can't help but wish my father could see us now. I know how proud he would be of how far we have come, and I know he would remind us that there is more work to be done.

It is the indomitable spirit of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that drives us forward, and we dare not rest till we achieve all his dreams.

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<sup>1</sup> For administrative purposes, Bangladesh is divided into eight divisions, with each division being subdivided into a number of zilas or districts. Each of the districts is further subdivided into upazilas or subdistricts. There are 64 zilas (districts) in 492 upazilas (subdistricts).