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## Passage to Salvation-The Case of Bangladesh

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Guest Column by Kazi Anwarul Masud

One wonders how much culture influences economic development of a country. Such discussions become relevant to countries like Bangladesh where the rate of growth, high compared to developed economies crawling out of recession and the emerging ones with predictable reduced growth rate in the immediate future and some mired in middle income trap, has to remain high where we have to run all the time to remain in the same place like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland who said: “It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

We have been doing well as reported by reputed international institutions but for the recent political instability injected by the terrorist group in the opposition camp who in the name of recouping democracy are effectively destroying the very institutions on which democracy is sustained. In a fit for self-immolation Bangladesh political opposition parties, to the utter amazement and concern of the international community, appear to be hell-bent to inflict upon the poverty stricken “under class” and the people in general death and destruction, a paradigmatic turn in our history of political agitation, through the introduction of murder of innocent people by using petrol bomb throwing terrorists.

Our relative underdevelopment perhaps caused by our inability or lateness in adapting to Niall Ferguson’s six “killer apps”—competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society, and work ethics-- that had enabled the West “to dominate the world for the better part of 500 years”, do not explain the suicidal behaviour of some of our political leaders. One wonders whether the agitating opposition have forgotten the extinction of Muslim League, a party that led then Muslim aspiration for independence and consequent partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, through democratic means by defeating Muslim League in 1954 elections, that similar fate may be waiting for the

opposition combine.

The departure of Muslim League after an interregnum of several coalition governments in then East Pakistan led to the popular installation of Awami League as the main political party leading ultimately to our War of Liberation and the emergence of Bangladesh. It is conceivable that the current course of BNP-Jamaat politics may lead to peoples' refusal to give mandate to BNP in the next elections to rule, as provided in the Constitution, and by default make the Islamists main effective opposition bringing along their culture of violence so alien to democratic, non-communal, and egalitarian traits inbuilt in our traditions and culture.

As it is the brutalities by ISIS, Taliban, al-Shahbaab, Boko Haram and assorted terrorist groups have raised questions in the minds of some people about the future of democracy. The decline of democracy is also credited to lack of performance in economic and political arenas by advanced economies, new self confidence and seeming vitality of authoritarian nations, and shifting power balance from the developed to emerging economies. Happily though both President Obama and John Kerry have made it abundantly clear that in countering violent extremism there is no room for Islamophobia and success will require global partnership and inclusivity of those who feel betrayed and excluded from mainstream society. Herein India comes in.

Some commentators have posited that India is shackled by her neighbors. India with its new leader wants its position as a great global power. Yet paradoxically she is unable to shape events in its immediate environs. As a consequence, India has missed out on the important economic gains that would accrue if normal trade ties were allowed to take hold between South Asia's largest economies as a more liberalized trade regime would increase bilateral exchange as much as twenty times above current figures, along with boosting general prosperity in both India and Pakistan. Countries. In a 2012 report the Confederation of Indian Industries, for instance, found that cross-border trade between India and Pakistan could easily quadruple in just a few years if both governments moved to increase economic linkages.

South Asia remains one of the world's least integrated areas, with intra-regional trade amounting to less than two percent of aggregate GDP compared to over twenty percent in East Asia. It is further posited that (India, Glimpses of Economic Optimism and Frustration FEB. 11, 2015 Vikas Bajaj New York Times) as the World Bank and the IMF are projecting that India will become the world's fastest-growing major economy in the next several years, surpassing China while the Indian government is saying that its economy may already be growing as fast or faster than China's then India may be looking beyond the SAARC region for its economic development.

India has the advantage of demographic dividend while China's population is aging and its labor force is shrinking. A question being asked by many Indians is what kind of economy Modi government will give to the people. Nearly two-thirds of Indians surveyed in a recent poll commissioned by The Times of India revealed that Hindu nationalist groups allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party, were hurting "the development agenda".

Then the question of equitable distribution of the benefits of development, raised by Indians and articulated by Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze (An Uncertain Glory-India and its Contradictions) that the promised growth is hampered by underdeveloped social and physical infrastructure and neglect of human capabilities has to be addressed.

Like India Bangladesh is also threatened by inequitable income distribution that threatens to become structural. Some may point out the situation in the US where “surging income inequality doesn’t create just an economic divide. The gap is cultural and social, too. Plutocrats inhabit a different world from everyone else. The technocratic solutions to public-policy problems they deliver from those Olympian heights arrive in a wrapper of remote benevolence. People might not mind that if the political economy were delivering for society as a whole. But it is not: wages for 70 percent of the work force have stagnated, unemployment is high and many people with jobs feel insecure about them and about their retirement. Meanwhile, the plutocrats continue to prosper” (New York Times Plutocrats vs. Populists by Chrystia Freeland November 1 2013).

An allied question that remains to be answered is if societal development is an essential prerequisite for development then even if we are given the requisite killer apps of Niall Ferguson would we be able to effectively use the apps to transform ourselves to a middle income and then to a developed economy as we want given our work ethics ? Why is it that Paschim Banga which was the most industrialized state of India in 1947 is now lagging behind most of the other states of India?

Gregory Clark in his book Farewell to Alms--A Brief Economic History of the World argues that the Industrial Revolution occurred in Britain and not in some other country because Britain's development was not a sudden leap forward that was propelled by the invention of a few power-driven machines. It was gradually taking place over the course of several hundred years prior to the 19th century. In Clark’s way of thinking, the Industrial Revolution would have never occurred without the changes in values that were happening for centuries before. From the Middle Ages on, following the Magna Carta in the 13th century that limited royal authority, Britain had the stable political, legal and economic institutions so often touted as the preconditions for economic growth. Besides stable political institutions, a reliable legal system, predictable land values and functioning markets were the necessary along with gradual development of precisely that set of deep cultural changes, especially a sense of competitiveness and a strong work ethic, that was required if sudden technological breakthroughs were have to have any real impact on the society.

Modern technology alone will never be able to turn around an economy and to boost the standard of living among a population. The development of a mindset, with accompanying values and habits, is a big part of the equation. Economists generally are not optimistic about the less developed parts of the world due to dependency syndrome. While infusion of sufficient capital might help strengthening of institutions, political and economic, is essential for economic growth. But proponents of the cultural dimension of economic development are suggesting that the creation of such political and economic institutions would need further cultivation of attitudes and values before a country is fertile for economic development.

As mentioned earlier President Obama in his speech at the Summit on countering violent extremism called for an end of the cycle of violent conflict especially sectarian conflict, address the economic and political grievances exploited by terrorists, empowering women, and welcome and respect inter-faith adherents. India battered by decades of state sponsored terrorism should welcome international cooperation.

In our case Bangladesh has the advantages of homogeneity as most of the people are Sunni Muslims and thereby having no sectarian conflicts, a moderate Muslim country where inter-faith conflicts are rare, culture of tolerance, and demographic dividend enabling us to increase productivity of a large working population making them market competitive both at home and abroad. Price Water House report on The World at 2050 published recently puts Bangladesh having GDP at US \$ 536 billion ( at PPP) in 2014, increasing to US \$ 1291 billion in 2030 and then reaching US\$ 3367 billion in 2050 indicating an upward curve reflecting growing international trust in the fundamentals of our economy. In the case of India the figures are US \$ 7277 billion in 2014, \$ 17138 billion in 2030 and \$ 42205 billion in 2050.

For Bangladesh Price Water House projections may be denied by the violence let loose by the opposition political parties and we may fail to reaffirm our image as a moderate Muslim country that brooks no tolerance to any kind of extremism, an image we were born with and cannot be allowed to be smeared by sociopathic terrorism by the opposition politics. We owe it to this generation to live in tranquility and pass on to the future generations the inheritance of a peaceful and prosperous Bangladesh. The international community may wish to be on guard so that the contagion of violent extremism does not affect their development plans as well.

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