

## Bangladesh - Basket Case to Prosperity

By Nicholas Kristof Mar. 12, 2021

Bangladesh was born 50 years ago this month amid genocide, squalor and starvation. Henry Kissinger famously referred to Bangladesh then as a “basket case,” and horrifying photos from a famine in 1974 sealed the country’s reputation as hopeless.

Back in 1991, after covering a cyclone in Bangladesh that killed more than 100,000 people, I wrote a bleak article for the New York Times suggesting that the country was “bountiful primarily in misfortune.” I was right that Bangladesh faces huge challenges, not least climate change. But overall, my pessimism was dead wrong, for Bangladesh has since enjoyed three decades of extraordinary progress.

Economic growth rates rose steadily, and for the four years before the current pandemic, Bangladesh’s economy soared by 7 percent to 8 percent per year, according to the World Bank. That was faster than China’s.

Life expectancy in Bangladesh is 72 years. That’s longer than in quite a few places in the United States, including in 10 counties in Mississippi. Bangladesh may have once epitomized hopelessness, but it now has much to teach the world about how to engineer progress.

What was Bangladesh’s secret? It was education and girls.

In the early 1980s, fewer than one-third of Bangladeshis completed elementary school. Girls in particular were rarely educated.

But then the government and civic organizations promoted education, including for girls. Today, 98 percent of children in Bangladesh complete elementary school. Still more astonishing for a country with a history of gender gaps, there are now more girls in high school in Bangladesh than boys.

As Bangladesh educated and empowered its girls, those educated women became pillars of Bangladesh’s economy. The nation’s garment factories have given women better opportunities, and that shirt you’re wearing right now may have been made by one of them, for Bangladesh is now the world’s largest garment exporter, after China.

Granted, factories in Bangladesh pay poorly by Western standards, have problems with abuse and sexual harassment, and pose fire risks and other safety problems; a factory collapse in 2013 killed more than 1,100 workers. But the workers themselves say that such jobs are still better than marrying at 14 and working in a rice paddy, and unions and civil society pushed for and won huge though incomplete improvements in worker safety.

Educated women also filled the ranks of nonprofits. They got children vaccinated. They promoted toilets. They taught villagers how to read. They explained contraception. They discouraged child marriage.

Bangladesh hasn’t had great political leaders. But its investments in human capital created a dynamism that we can all learn from. The World Bank calls Bangladesh “an inspiring story of reducing poverty” - with 25 million Bangladeshis lifted from poverty over 15 years. The share of children stunted by malnutrition has fallen by about half in Bangladesh since 1991 and is now lower than in India.

You skeptical readers are shaking your heads and muttering: Overpopulation will undo the progress. In fact, Bangladeshi women now average only two children each (down from seven.)

In short, Bangladesh invested in its most underutilized assets - its poor, with a focus on the most marginalized and least productive, because that's where the highest returns would be.

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*Kristof is a columnist for the New York Times.*