

Bangladesh's Intellectual Renaissance: A Call to Action

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Introduction

Bangladesh has a rich intellectual tradition, with a history spanning hundreds of years. From the grandeur of the Bengal Sultanate to the region's resistance against colonial domination, Bengal has been a beacon of cultural and intellectual vitality. Yet, this intellectual wealth has not consistently led to tangible benefits for the people, nor has it always been directed by Bangladeshis themselves.

As we navigate the 21st century, Bangladesh faces profound challenges—political instability, educational shortcomings, and a worrying brain drain. Despite significant economic growth, these challenges threaten the nation's progress. However, in July 2024 we saw a new generation demonstrating that change is possible, igniting hope for the future; this culminated in the ouster of the country's most entrenched dictator. But this spectacular success and potential can only be realised through a comprehensive renaissance—a cultural, political, economic, technological and intellectual revival that draws on the nation's rich

drain in the country.

Governance is weak, and civil society is fragmented. Politics is often more about personal or party gain than national interest. A small, secular elite dominates the intellectual and cultural spheres, often at odds with the broader population. Corruption has become normalised, and moral decay pervades public life.

Despite these challenges, the private sector has driven recent economic growth, outpacing many neighbours. However, long-term sustainability is uncertain, hindered by fragile politics and poor infrastructure. The gap between rich and poor widens, with corruption and the black economy becoming more entrenched.

The Need for an Intellectual Renaissance

Bangladesh requires nothing less than a knowledge-driven revival, one that reflects its centuries-old traditions, cultural norms, and religious heritage. This revival must be inclusive, engaging the majority of the population in a collective effort to rebuild the nation's intellectual capital.



history while addressing its current needs.

The Current Reality

While countries like China and India have risen from the ashes of colonial onslaught, Bangladesh has struggled to find its footing. The education system remains mired in outdated colonial legacies, with little emphasis on critical thinking or life skills. Universities, plagued by political interference, fail to produce the intellectual capital needed for progress. Millions of young Bangladeshis, unemployed and disillusioned, seek opportunities abroad, further exacerbating brain

Successful Bangladeshis exist in various sectors but are often unrecognised or unsupported due to a lack of social cohesion. The concept of *Asabiyya*—social solidarity and group consciousness—must be revived to foster unity and purpose. Rooted in moral values and spiritual guidance, this solidarity can propel the nation forward, preventing the rise of destructive nationalism.

Bangladeshis have a proud history of family values, generosity, and simplicity. Yet, long-standing intellectual stagnation and socio-political malaise have fostered undesirable traits, such as short-term thinking

and envy. These negative tendencies can be transformed into strengths in a constructive environment.

Decolonising the Mind

Europe's Renaissance unshackled minds from centuries of stagnation, leading to unprecedented material success. But without moral restraint, it also led to some of the worst atrocities in history. Bangladesh must learn from these lessons and pursue its own revival—one grounded in moral and spiritual values.

To do this, Bangladeshis need to adopt a proactive approach, reforming the education system as well as engaging in systematic research and collective action. The focus should be on serving the entire society, not just select groups. By sowing the seeds of nation-building across various sectors, Bangladesh can achieve a sustainable and inclusive renaissance.

Sowing the Seeds of Change

A nation's dignity and influence start with its intellectual capital and national character. Knowledge is the primary measure of superiority among individuals and nations. Just as the Mongols eventually adopted the superior knowledge of the Muslim world they once destroyed, Bangladesh must recognise the power of intellectual leadership.

The journey begins at home, with parents and teachers nurturing the next generation to be knowledgeable, confident, and empathetic citizens. Investment in children's education, both at school and in the community, is crucial. Engaging with civil society to enhance social and life skills will build stronger individuals and a more cohesive society.

Changemakers must prioritise excellence in all endeavours, whether in education, research, or the arts. The pursuit of excellence (*ihsan* in Arabic) should become a national ethos, driving Bangladeshis to aim high and strive for perfection.

The Role of the Diaspora

Diaspora Bangladeshis, whether in Asia or the West, have a crucial role to play in this revival. Those in the West, in particular, have excelled in education, various professions, and business, and can be invaluable assets to Bangladesh's future.

However, the younger generation often feels disconnected from their roots. By creating better opportunities and fostering a sense of belonging, Bangladesh can tap into this diaspora potential, ensuring that their skills and experience contribute to the

nation's revival.

Action Planning for a National Revival

Challenging times call for resolute leadership. A national revival is a long-term strategic project that requires sustained effort from patriotic Bangladeshis across the globe. Courageous and innovative individuals must come forward to lead this charge, overcoming the many challenges that lie ahead.

This revival will start with small, incremental successes. By highlighting role models, building networks, and celebrating achievements, changemakers can create momentum. A culture of excellence must be nurtured, with a focus on innovation and continuous improvement.

Bangladesh needs a positive vision for its future, one that builds on its rich history while emphasising the importance of intellectual capital in driving economic growth, innovation, and societal well-being. Ethical politics, accountable governance, and a high-skills economy are essential components of this vision.

Conclusion

The twin dangers of global warming and political toxicity threaten the very fabric of our world. For Bangladesh to reclaim its pre-colonial glory and secure a better future, it must think globally, plan strategically, and act locally. Creative changemakers must work with exceptional ingenuity and resilience, leveraging Bangladesh's unique identity to build a prosperous and self-reliant nation.

At the grassroots level, parents, teachers, scholars, and social leaders must take up the task of raising confident, patriotic, and well-rounded future generations. Improved education will lead to better reading habits, critical thinking, and communication skills, fostering a sense of unity and purpose among all Bangladeshis.

Just as other nations have unshackled themselves from colonial chains, Bangladesh has the potential to stand on its own through an intellectual, cultural, and moral renaissance. The time to act is now, and with the right leadership and collective will, Bangladesh can become a nation of givers, not just takers, embodying the spirit of the timeless Hadith: "The upper hand is better than the lower hand. The upper hand is the one that gives, and the lower hand is the one that takes."