

HISTORIC 7TH MARCH

The call for freedom

NURUL ISLAM ANU

MILESTONES in history are sometimes created without design; they are hardly the product of any deliberate engineering. And yet these incidents have expressed momentous truth, inspired the human mind to achieve the miracle with their awesome and irresistible appeals; they have broken barriers of prejudice and repression built over ages with a bang and set a road map of redesigned future for a nation; it creates cyclones of human emotion capable of sweeping the evils of oppression, injustice and discrimination into the dustbin of history. That is why these days have been called historic.

7th of March 1971 is just yet another day in the daily calendar but stands immortalised in the history of Bengali Nationalism -- made so by a rare and magnificent feat of political eloquence. The quality of the speech, delivered by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, its inspiring and mesmerising character have hardly been paralleled in the contemporary political history of the world, the closest comparable being the speech delivered by American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, where he brought home the message of a DREAM of a non-discriminatory multiracial America.

The speech of 7th of March, galvanised the deepest-held political aspirations and frustrations of a majority fighting for decades for their legitimate rights, denied by the manipulative design of an insensitive minority. The struggle followed its classical course of designing of political programmes, demand for its implementation inside the so-called parliament, street protest, facing the ruthless use of the instruments of oppression against the people and their political leaders yet the March of the movement for political rights continued on its designed course -- the Six-Point programme Agartola conspiracy case, the mass movement of 1969 -- to name a few. Constitutional movements conducted within the context of a repressive and manipulative political culture inevitably tend to lead to armed struggle; it has happened in Palestine of Yasser Arafat, in South Africa of charismatic Nelson Mandela, in Ho Chi Minh's

Since the day is admittedly a part of our political heritage, its dignity must be preserved and be a shared responsibility. The story of 7th March needs to be told and retold to all successive generations, its audio and video preservations played and replayed as a tribute to those who attended that historic meeting and the countless others who also got inspired to die for the founding of their motherland.



March 7, 1971: Bangabandhu addressing the mammoth gathering at Race Course Maidan (Suhrawardy Uddayan)

Vietnam -- all inevitable products of this dynamics of history. Bangladesh was no exception. Events leading to the 7th of March witnessed the last act in the political drama in the collapse of Pakistan following the cancellation of the session of National Assembly; the country-wide street agitation the virtual collapse of the Pakistani Administration and the emergence of Bangabandhu as the virtual administrator of former East Pakistan. The public enthusiasm for a movement reached a militant height ready to be ignited with the

smallest spark. The stage was just set for the ultimate act.

7th of March was a call for an armed struggle because of the futility of a constitutional redress to the pangs of the Bengali nation which was starkly demonstrated before the political leadership. Ebarer Sangram Muktir Sangram -- Ghare Ghare Durgo Gore Tolo -- Tomader Ja Ase Ta Niye Shatru Mokabela Koro what would be clearer than this inspiring call to take arms and signal a message of the abandonment of constitutional struggle to the Pakistani junta and

the world? Ebarer Sangram Muktir Sangram, Ebarer Sangram Shadinatar Sangram was a clear call for an Independent Bangladesh. This message for an armed struggle to establish an independent Bangladesh was delivered with majesty of eloquence and political drama, toughening the inner soul of every Bengali inspiring him to achieve the impossible. The outline of the speech was not previously designed by a crafted speech writer -- nor was it rehearsed. It was the

spontaneous and thunderous expression of a political mind consumed by a relentless passion for the love of the common man and the establishment of his right; it was the expression of an uncompromising, bold and courageous mind prepared to gamble with life for the fulfillment of the ideals the speaker -- the Bangabandhu -- believed in. A consumed passion spoke out in the Race Course Maidan, combined the mystic virtue of courage, love for his country and its people. Bangladesh was born with an unsung majesty.

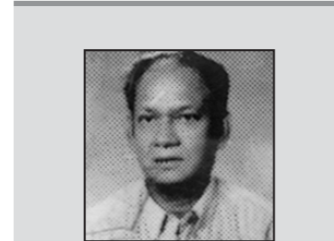
Unquestionably 7th of March is and must remain a treasured part of Bangladesh history. It will tell an inspiring, colourful and glorious tale of the fight of an unarmed nation for its sovereign existence to all future generations. Nations get glorified by preserving treasures; they appear small at indifference, smaller when it is administered indifference. 7th of March is not a partisan day -- it was the majestic expression of a nation's voice, its right to declare its existence, its determined endeavour voiced by someone with deep commitment to a cause and his uncompromising willingness to suffer and die for that cause -- fearless, daring, uncompromising and yet armed with a serene confidence in the content of his message. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib declared what destiny asked him to do.

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Derelection from this responsibility will amount to a disrespect for the day, irresponsible and immoral.

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Bush in South Asia



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

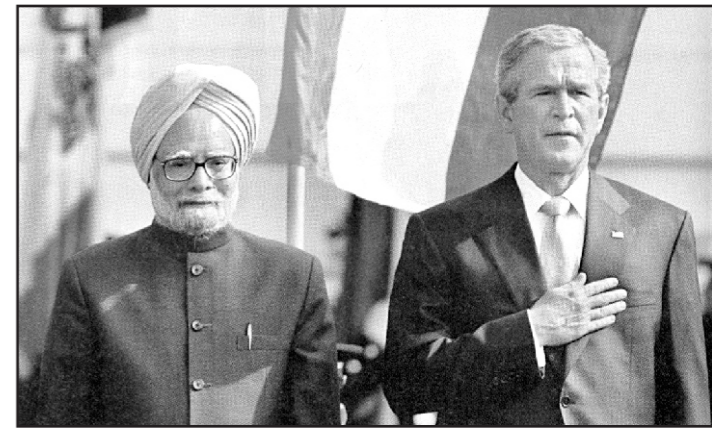
ALTHOUGH the visit of President George W. Bush was designed to cover an important part of South Asia, the thrust has undoubtedly been India. The President has spent most of his time there and what is more is that the most powerful country of the world has paid special attention to the rising power of India.

The visit of President Bush began with what looked like a clandestine visit to Kabul. It is supposed to be the sanctuary of Osama Bin Laden and Taleban noises are still heard within earshot of Kabul. Afghanistan is the country where President Bush started his anti-terror campaign, which has by now assumed global proportion. President Bush ousted the 'terrorist' regime of Taleban from Afghanistan and installed their chosen man Hamid Karzai to rule the land. President Bush has installed an 'elected' government in the inhospitable soil of Afghanistan. From all accounts the writ of the Karzai regime does not go much beyond Kabul. Since by all accounts Afghanistan has become a kind of US protectorate President Bush had to make a mandatory stop. Yet the security situation is so delicate in Afghanistan that no announcement of the visit was made.

The second leg and by far the centre piece of the visit of President Bush was India. He received a warm official welcome from the Indian authorities, who spread the red carpet in the real sense. Equally warm and noisy were the protests of many Indian demonstrators, a sure sign that Indian democracy is in good health. The Indian authorities managed to keep at bay the demonstrators and President Bush had ample public contact. The most important event was the unusual importance that President Bush attached to India, which along with the United States, he described as the two largest democracies of the world. This is sweet music in Indian ears. He heaped praise on the Indians' remarkable progress in virtually all fields of human endeavour including its buoyant economy, technological breakthroughs and its near readiness to join the big league of the world. The Indians succeeded in offering him the

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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US President Bush with Indian Premier Manmohan Singh

public grand stand to address the people, an honour reserved for the few. It must have pleased President Bush enormously for lately thanks to non stop demonstrations against him within the country and abroad, he does not have much opportunity for public interaction.

India and US managed to overcome the last hurdle of removal by the US of the barrier for assistance for facing the burgeoning demand for oil by India. Thus the US has accepted that India separates her civilian and military nuclear activity and her nuclear power for military use remains entirely in her hands. President Bush has declared categorically that he will succeed to convince the doubters within the Congress the useful nature of the deal.

One matter that has been hanging fire is India's long standing effort to become a Permanent Member of the Security Council of the UN. Although it does not figure in any of the announcements it is inconceivable that the matter did not come up for discussion. It is well known that prior to the last UN General Assembly Session, Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed sweeping reforms within the UN. The simple argument is that, since its birth in 1945 with less than fifty members the Organisation has reached the figure of 191 although its basic structure of a five Permanent Member of the Security Council has remained unchanged. Kofi Annan proposed a six-member expansion including India, Japan,

Germany and Brazil. It is understandable that the five Permanent Members may not wish to share power with newcomers. Yet the truth is that the ground reality pushes the leading members to take a positive decision. Of all the Permanent Members the US weighs heaviest. Will they be ready to back India? Only time will tell.

President George W. Bush had to include Pakistan in his itinerary if for no other reason that Pakistanis would be deeply hurt and the US continues to need her in her global War on Terror. Otherwise the visit sits uneasily specially since he has been singing the praise of the 'two largest democracies' and he sets foot on a country which is an avowed military dictatorship. It is all the more difficult for President Bush because he has been exporting democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq, with uncertain results.

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Road to 2015: MDG prospects

This is the second and concluding part of the article published yesterday under the title Bangladesh 2015: Crossing miles....

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

BANGLADESH is the only country in South Asia other than Sri Lanka to have already achieved gender parity in education not only at the primary level but also at the secondary level. By current trends, the country should also be on track to achieve MDG targets in consumption-poverty, child mortality, child malnutrition, sanitation and tree cover. Though major expansion has occurred in primary and secondary education, MDG targets of net universal primary enrolment and completion is likely to be a challenge. The same is true for gender targets of maternal mortality, political representation and female labour productivity as well as the target on access to safe water. Beyond these challenges, a major problem to address will be the inequality which cuts across key social targets.

Governance and politics are unlikely to detract from outcomes on the MDGs in which the country is on track. However, they are likely to be critical determinants of outcome prospects in the off-track MDGs. In the case of safe water, the contentious issues will be the incorporation of private sector and market pricing, safety nets for the poor, and development of effective regulatory structures. To its advantage, Bangladesh is already embarked a rich variety of experiments on these contentious issues.

Access to energy is likely to be the most critical of future challenges with implications both for growth and MDG attainment. While a great deal of experimentation is going on in the area of renewable energy, this will remain an auxiliary, albeit important, source in the context of power needs of a 5% plus growing economy. Bangladesh will have to look to its gas and coal resources as well as the hydro-power potential of the sub-regional context. Politics and governance are and will be key determinants of outcomes in these areas. Policy vacuums as well as lack of transparency in dealing with the issues are emerging as critical concerns. The role of development partners will also be a factor.

Indeed, a flawed policy decision of the development partners in the mid 1990s when the power sector was given up for private sector financing which failed to materialize has been an important contributory factor to the power constraint on the growth process.

The challenges on the health MDGs have less to do with politics per se. It is the governance challenges which are paramount here. The government has established emergency maternal healthcare centres. They are not functioning well because of the lack of decentralization and proper management. Potential oversight bodies such as Upazilla health advisory committee remain dormant. In the cases where these have been activated often with NGO initiative, there have been qualitative improvement in outcomes. MPs are ex-officio chairs of such committees but are neither regular in holding the meetings nor inclined to delegate so that meetings could be regular even in their absence. If these types of governance challenges can be addressed, it will be very much feasible to attain these MDG targets.

On the education MDGs, gender parity is already achieved and enrolment too has seen major expansion. However, universal net primary enrolment and completion remain off-track. The critical challenge is quality but also renewed targeting of the bottom ten percent of the population. Bangladesh is already ahead of several South Asian countries, notably India, in the proportion of public resources devoted to basic education. Nevertheless, additional resources will be necessary. Non-budgetary challenges lie in the introduction of pre-schooling, a curb on rampant private coaching, and better performance monitoring. The PRSP has identified the introduction of a school meal as a potential quality-enhancing intervention through prevention of drop-out and improved retention capacity particularly of poorer children.

Politics and governance: The balance of possibilities

It is easy to despair of politics in Bangladesh if one focuses only on the all too-visible political culture of confrontation and bickering. But certain less visible facets of the political dynamic are also germane to an assessment of political and governance prospects in the coming decade. These pertain to issues of political system development, role of the electorate, entry points for governance improvement, and, emerging flashpoints.

The contrast of doomsday scenarios and eventual occurrence of time-bound elections has been a common feature of the three elec-

nate experience of 'voterless elections' under the overt military rule of the 1980s. Similar experiences abound in other parts of the developing world. The emergence of the electorate as a political force in its own right is therefore never a given but has to be seen as a specific political achievement. The three national elections of the past fifteen years provide a clear demonstration of the significance of such a process. It is instructive to note here that notwithstanding the politically-connected corporate ownership of the media, it is consumer and citizen aspirations which is driving the

judicial process, aspects of land administration, social safety nets, direct financing of local governments etc.

An audit of the political dynamic will thus highlight three critical features: a dysfunctional political culture, a policy process lacking political capacity on 'big' decisions but relatively open and engaged on 'small' challenges, and an electorate assertive on the basic issue of continuity of competitive democratic politics. On current prognosis, all three features are likely to persist in the coming decade. This means a continuity of both the electoral cycle

The reference framework for today's infrastructural vision is a rapidly urbanizing market economy aiming to maximize growth dividends from the synergies of a burgeoning domestic market and a competitive globalization process. While important gains have been achieved in rural road connectivity, infrastructure, most notably power and port, has already emerged as a binding constraint on the goal of accelerated growth and poverty reduction.



tions held so far since 1991. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the process has been a frivolous one. In 1991, a substantive issue i.e. switch to parliamentary form, was achieved. In 1996, the substantive innovation was on the caretaker formula. In 2001, the political idea of level playing field gained sway. In 2006, the substantive agenda which is likely to endure as a democratic gain is the independent election commission. Clearly, the last fifteen years has been a case of democratic agenda-building despite the questionable quality of politics. The agenda-building may have been minimal but the discourse space has undoubtedly expanded. However, critical system building challenges loom, most notably, rationalizing MP jurisdiction, strengthening opportunities for institutional grooming of political aspirants, and, reversing the trend towards a disregard of standards in the critical area of appointments.

From a process perspective, an equally significant though less focused development has been the quiet rise of the electorate as a force to be counted in the political space. This is important because even though electoral democracy is in place in many parts of the developing world, it does not necessarily follow that it is the electorate which is one of the critical actors in shaping the political dynamic. Bangladesh even had the unfortu-

media content. This is in sharp contrast to the government-controlled media which enjoys far less popular legitimacy.

The other critical feature of the political dynamic to be highlighted is the relative autonomy of aspects of the policy process which has allowed for incremental, albeit uneven, policy and governance gains on targeted economic and social issues. While politics has detracted from 'big' policy decisions, a secondary process of 'small' achievements has accumulated, notably on procurement, aspects of

and the existing growth momentum. However, quality improvements in politics as well as a significant acceleration of the growth process is unlikely to emerge without the appearance of major new strategic 'inputs'.

An assessment on the balance of possibilities must also take into account likely flashpoints on the horizon. Two bear attention. Firstly, the issue of utilization of energy resources is demonstrating the potential to develop into a political minefield with unforeseen consequences. Secondly, quality divides

in education, unless addressed urgently, may fuel discontent and engender social conflicts which are unlikely to be mitigated by the opportunities of existing growth process.

Strategic challenges

On the road to 2015, Bangladesh can at once be both confident and apprehensive. Segmented victories are clearly within reach. But the goals being forged in people's hearts is for a sum greater than its parts. The quest is not for enrolment alone but for the quality of the education, not for the right to vote

public service commission, election commission, central bank among others through a conscious strategy of ring-fencing. Given that the political system lacks the capacity and the will to undertake big-bang institutional reforms, concentrating on selected strategic institutions is a vital 2nd best, and more importantly, achievable avenue to pursue.

Continue the focus on governance solutions with small g: A frequent mind-set barrier to effective agenda formulation on governance is to over-focus on big solutions i.e. governance with a capital G while neglecting the window of small solutions i.e. governance with a small g. A recent useful contrast is between the "big solution" of reforming the land record system. Though efforts on this front are nearly a decade old, progress to date has remained elusive. In contrast, an effective "small solution" was the recent change in the Stamp Act, a small administrative innovation by a reform-minded bureaucrat which has produced multiple benefits. In one modest stroke, the amendment has led to cost savings for the government, removed some of the institutional sources of corruption around the printing, distribution and forgery of stamp papers, reduced the bureaucratic load on the sub-registry offices, and reduced the hassle for the buyers and sellers of land. Such small solutions serve to improve the quality of governance as a process, are effective entry points to pry open intractable macro-governance agendas, and provide real-life demonstration of what is feasible in contexts which may not be amenable to more ambitious reform. Bangladesh has gained from an engagement with this micro-governance window and a more strategic engagement is likely to bring better results.

Addressing quality divide in education: The gulf in standards between rural and urban schools is a threat to achieving a MDG which is otherwise within reach. However switching from an access focus to a quality focus is not a matter of mere administrative re-adjustment. The challenge is both at the level of mind-set and at the level of intervention initiatives which are contextually meaningful. The latter includes promotion of pre-schooling, social campaign against commercialized private tutoring, activating local communities, administrative and

management structures for performance monitoring, fast-tracking English learning, linking training to class-room practices, recognition of existing good practices, and, establishing model schools outside metropolitan areas.

Overcoming infrastructural constraint on growth: The contemporary infrastructural challenge for Bangladesh is on a qualitatively different plane than when the country was a subsistence-dominated agrarian economy with low level of urbanization. The reference framework for today's infrastructural vision is a rapidly urbanizing market economy aiming to maximize growth dividends from the synergies of a burgeoning domestic market and a competitive globalization process. While important gains have been achieved in rural road connectivity, infrastructure, most notably power and port, has already emerged as a binding constraint on the goal of accelerated growth and poverty reduction. In the coming decade, the three priority challenges will be comprehensive resolution of the power constraint, development of strategic national and regional road transport corridors, and, development of the full potentials of the Chittagong Port as a national and regional gateway.

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NOTICE

The Daily Star invites its readers to send in pieces for publication in the upcoming March 26 special supplement. Special request is made for original writings detailing the writer's personal experiences during the war of liberation. Please keep submissions below 1000 words.