

Slices of October history

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OCTOBER has been a fascinating month in history. And history, if you must know, is something you live without. Anyone who tells you history does not matter is someone who is only exposing the brilliant ignorance he suffers from. Ignore his philistine behaviour and move on. For those of us who have lived through some of the most stirring of times, October is a journey back to some old tragedies, some near forgotten tales of heroism and some defining moments in the lives of people across the world.

It was in October 1967 that Che Guevara was murdered by the Bolivian army and its friends in the CIA. His captors thought that killing him and then hacking off his arm to prove to Fidel Castro that the revolutionary was truly dead would be the end of Guevara. Well, it was no such thing. Thirty years after his murder, Guevara's remains were located and unearthed and sent to Havana for honourable burial.

October, if you reflect on it, has been an extraordinary time for revolutionaries. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China at Tiananmen Square and so launched a phenomenon that was to have dramatic results for many across the globe.

October in China has always been a season of remembrances. It was on October 10, 1911 that Sun Yat-sen's Young China followers overthrew the Manchus and set the country on the road to republicanism. In another October, this one in 1934, Mao, Chou En-lai, Chu Teh, Liu Shaoqi and other communists led 100,000 of their followers into what came to be known as the Long March. By the time the march drew to an end, only 30,000 remained of that mighty force.

The communist revolution which led

to the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917 exploded on October 25 (or November 7 by the new calendar). In October 1964, the powerful Nikita Khrushchev was removed from office by the triumvirate of Leonid Brezhnev, Alexei Kosygin and Nikolai Podgorny.

In terms of modern history, October remains a point of reference for Moscow, for it was in October 1962 that the Cuban missile crisis broke out and pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war. Neither US President Kennedy nor Soviet Premier Khrushchev would budge from their positions, until eventually Moscow agreed to a pull-out from Havana. Suspicion has since lingered that the Soviets operated at the time on a quid pro quo basis: they had America's promise to withdraw its own war materiel from Turkey.

October 1964 was a triumphant month for, again, China. It exploded its first atomic bomb, sending waves of worry through the capitals of the West. Two years earlier, in October 1962, the Chinese had launched a war against India. Jawaharlal Nehru was a broken man after that. And the irascible but extremely intellectual Krishna Menon was out of a job.

Pakistan has had its own trysts with October. Its first prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in October 1951 at a public rally in Rawalpindi. In October 1958, its army seized the state for the first time, propelling General Ayub Khan to the presidency, where he hung on for more than a decade. Forty-one years later, in October 1999, General Pervez Musharraf became Pakistan's fourth military ruler when he ousted the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif in a move that was as bizarre as it was comical.

Khwaja Nazimuddin, Pakistan's second governor general and then its second prime minister in the 1950s, died in October 1964 as he and other opposition



A month of great historical significance.

politicians looked to Ayub Khan's defeat at the upcoming presidential elections at the hands of Fatima Jinnah.

Britain, buffeted by the Profumo scandal in 1963, saw Prime Minister Harold Macmillan quit office in October of the year and replaced by the urbane Alec Douglas-Home. In the event, Home was to last in office for just a year. In October 1964, Harold Wilson's Labour Party beat Home's Conservatives at the general elections and went on to form a new government.

You may remember Dienbienphu when you travel back to 1954, for it was a time when the silent, determined Vietnamese injected enough fear in the French to force them to leave the country. On the last day of October 1954, another historic step would be taken: Algerian nationalists, personified by the likes of Ferhat Abbas and Ahmed Ben Bella, launched the struggle for liberation that would compel France to bid farewell to Algeria eight years later.

In October 1973, Egypt's Anwar Sadat launched the Yom Kippur war against Israel. The shock engendered by the conflict would force the stalemate, in place since June 1967, to an end through what would become known as Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy. Eight years later, in October 1981, Sadat was murdered by soldiers of the Egyptian army at a military parade marking the anniversary of the 1973 war.

In October 1956, Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invaded Hungary. Prime Minister Imre Nagy would be deposed and executed and hardline communist rule would be restored in the country.

Indians have celebrated Mahatma Gandhi's birth in October. They have also, since October 31, 1984, remembered Indira Gandhi. On that day, she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards.

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Successes, surprises and challenges

While figures quoted in these reports speak for themselves, the underlying story is a far more complex one -- a story of successes, surprises and impending challenges, but above all a story of a people striving heroically to improve their lot against formidable adversities.

WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

ON October 24, 2010, the United Nations turned 65. While speaking at a function to observe the day, it occurred to me that I was only a couple of years younger. Happily, Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni was there as the chief guest to present the vision of a much younger generation. She spoke persuasively about a reformed UN of the future that will better reflect the aspirations of all nations -- big or small.

The theme of the discussion was an appropriate one, namely, the state of Millennium Development Goals in Bangladesh. Our achievements regarding the MDGs are a testimony to a very fruitful relationship between Bangladesh and the UN system over the years. The Planning Commission has in recent years undertaken a regular stock-taking of the state of MDGs in Bangladesh.

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Bangladesh is on target in several of the MDGs, most importantly in poverty alleviation, despite the persistence of extreme poverty and food deprivation, particularly concentrated in some economically depressed and ecologically vulnerable regions.

However, our most remarkable achievement is in respect of a number of social development indicators, including under-five mortality, child immunisation, contraceptive adoption, and female school enrolment. Bangladesh has clearly outperformed most low-income countries in terms of progress achieved in these indicators.

And this has been made possible in spite of still widespread poverty, low per capita public social spending, and an extremely poor service delivery system. The phenomenon has come to be known

as Bangladesh's development surprise. What is happening?

Much of the progress has been due to the adoption of low-cost solutions like the use of oral saline for diarrhoea treatment, and due to increased awareness created by effective social mobilisation campaigns such as for immunisation or contraceptive use or school enrolment. The scaling up of programmes through spread of new ideas is helped in Bangladesh by a strong presence of development NGOs, and also by the density of settlements and their proximity.

Compared to many other parts of the developing world, the poor people in Bangladesh are found to be more receptive to affordable new development ideas. Many innovative government programmes supported by international donors have also helped.

But as the gains from low-cost solutions are reaped, further progress may increasingly depend on more public social spending and an improvement in service delivery systems. For example, further reduction in child mortality will require more expensive child survival interventions, such as hospital-based care to avert neonatal mortality resulting from birth-related complications including underweight births. Similarly, lowering the currently high maternal mortality rate will also require the provision of relatively costly health services.

Again, while remarkable progress has been made in school enrolment, especially for girls, there are serious concerns about the quality of education and the resulting school drop-out rates. Clearly, Bangladesh needs to improve the quality of service delivery in order to consolidate the gains made thus far and make further improvements.

The improvement in the social development indicators reflects an underlying process of social transformation that usually takes place at much higher standards of living than currently prevailing in Bangladesh. However, we do not know whether the positive changes in social attitudes achieved through successful social mobilisation campaigns -- such as

for immunisation or contraceptive adoption -- are habit-forming and can be sustained on their own, or may falter in the absence of continued campaigns.

There is already a slackening in the trends in child immunisation and fertility rates. The progress achieved thus far has also been uneven in many respects. In spite of the many achievements in social development, Bangladesh continues to perform poorly in ensuring civic rights, including prevention of violence against women.

The problem of governance resulting in poor service delivery is widespread in the social sectors in Bangladesh. Service delivery systems are highly centralized, with very few mechanisms for accountability through community participation. The rural healthcare system is plagued by poor utilisation of services and widespread absenteeism of doctors -- estimated to be as high as 75% in rural clinics according to a nationwide survey conducted in the early 2000s. Similarly, the quality of schooling suffers from widespread teacher absenteeism and moonlighting, lack of accountability, and low student attendance.

While efforts need to be made to mobilise more funds for public social spending and improve governance, we need to explore any remaining scope for benefitting from creating awareness about low-cost solutions. The tendency of the international agencies to go by the globally accepted templates often entails the risk of ignoring more cost-effective and locally relevant technologies -- say, for improving sanitation or reducing maternal mortality or reducing child malnutrition. Incidentally, in each of these three MDG indicators, Bangladesh is trailing behind, despite significant progress in recent years.

There are various institutional pathways to improve the governance of service delivery. The NGO-led path followed in Bangladesh has been more effective in motivating people to adopt new ideas for improving individual welfare than in promoting civic activism, such as for demanding better service delivery by government agencies. In contrast, the Indian state of Kerala provides an example of a different pathway to social development, namely, through decentralisation and effective local governance. West Bengal provides yet another example where grassroots political development has had success in addressing issues of local democracy and land reform with relatively good effect, but public policies dealing with

health, education and other related matters of social development seem to have been so far largely neglected.

It is also noteworthy that non-democratic China's worthiness in the provision of primary education and health services at the local level may have been better than in democratic India; local communist officials in China have been responsive to local needs as long as there was no conflict with party directives. In Sri Lanka -- a country often cited as the success story of social development -- the experience of decentralising service delivery has been largely disappointing. Clearly, while there are many pathways to social development, there is no unique blueprint for success.

While we do our stocktaking of the MDGs, we need to look beyond. The global initiatives for education, for example, may have led to a too narrow focus for education policies by emphasising only quantitative targets. The new emphasis should be not only on education for all, but also on quality education.

Globally accepted standard tests on learning outcomes have produced widely varying results even among countries with similarly low income levels -- there are shining examples and the dismal ones. We need to put our educational outcomes to standard tests. For example, how many of the children finishing primary school can read a simple sentence? Be prepared for a surprise, if not a shock.

Lastly, regarding the MDGs related to ensuring environmental sustainability, Bangladesh faces challenges quite different from the global ones. There is no historical precedence of economic development taking place under such extreme conditions of population density, resource scarcity and climate risks as facing Bangladesh. Many of our achievements may even be reversed if we cannot adapt to environmental vulnerability and the impact of climate change.

I can do no better than quote from a recent report on Bangladesh in the British newspaper, the Guardian, asking: "Can the people of one of the most resilient and innovative countries transform it from being the world's most famously 'vulnerable' country to being recognised as one of its most 'adaptive' country'?" We hope we can.

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Army Housing Scheme

Inept handling leads to unnecessary death, public resentment

AN army housing scheme (AHS) estimated to involve 13,000 bighas (about 4,333 acres, approximately at 3 bighas per acre) without Rajuk's and Works Ministry's involvement speaks not only of the naivety of army seniors dealing with the scheme but also of the subconscious mindset that any army's scheme will get implemented regardless. Otherwise how could a scheme of such dimension, providing for 27,000 plots, even be conceived without a thorough planning and thinking about its feasibility, not only in terms of finding such a huge chunk of land but also in terms of public reaction to such a move. Reportedly this scheme to be funded by personal savings of the members of the armed forces, was approved by the Prime Minister's Office, following which a limited company was formed with the Quarter Master General as the chair and a Brigadier General as Managing Director. So far 1,400 bighas have been purchased, with the target of getting 13,000 bighas in total.

It has been clarified by the MD of the project that AHS was not an official undertaking of the army. It has also been stated that a limited company has been formed for this purpose. As a consequence several questions arise. First and foremost, what is the status of the project? Is the army as an institution involved in it? If yes, then on what basis, under what law or what army norm? From what has been so far made public it appears to be a private project of serving army officers. If so, can serving officers have private projects? Can a limited company be set up with serving officers as office bearers? Why were army personnel in the local land registration office monitoring who is selling land to whom and then allegedly blocking the registration of sales that were made between parties other than to this project.

There are two ways of looking at it. Naivety, or blatant use of army's name and prestige. That officers would want to have their own houses after retirement is a perfectly legitimate aspiration. But using the structure of the army, facilities of the armed forces, its clout and prestige is in no way different than any bureaucrat, office holding politician or any office bearer of government abusing the power of that office for private or group interest. It is worse because generally armed forces remain outside the focus of the mass media and public scrutiny.

We think the whole legal basis of this project needs to be made public. How the land has so far been bought should be made transparent. Question also arise as to whether the PMO did its due diligence before approving the project? Why did the PMO not take advice from the works ministry and Rajuk which are the two relevant government bodies to handle such a scheme.

Army for its own sake must become fully transparent about this incident. If it wants to maintain its public image and respect it must give the public full detail about it. Let us never forget that openness is the best guarantee for building trust and respect.

We have noticed with distress that the issue is being politicised. Within hours of the event, without waiting for any investigation, the AL leader Hanif declared that BNP was behind it. Not to be left behind, the BNP secretary general Dilwar Hossain said this was done to destroy the army. We condemn both these instances and appeal that armed forces should not be dragged into our acrimonious party politics.

High Court move on jailed children

Counselling will help them return to normal life

THE High Court directive that the authorities free all children currently in various jails all over the country could not have come sooner. By the standards of civilised behaviour, both on the part of individuals and institutions of the state, it is morally and even legally inexplicable why persons under eighteen years of age should be kept confined in prison. Yes, there may be offences committed by the very young, but that does not allow the state to treat these young in the same way that it treats all hardened criminals. Besides, when the institutions of the state begin to feel that children should be kept in jail, without any possibility of freedom, they are only making sure that these children will in time turn out to be hardened criminals themselves. It is just the sort of condition we as citizens would like to prevent from shaping up.

A few days ago we reflected, in these columns, on the poverty which stalks a very large number of Bangladesh's children. And now comes this very grave matter of what we must do about children who, for a multiplicity of reasons, have found themselves in prison. The first step, surely, is to have them freed as the High Court has directed. These young should never have been sent to prison in the first place. It is a testimony to the callousness with which our institutions operate that they generally do not distinguish between a need for punishment and a requirement for a sensitive handling of acts that we do not approve of. The HC judgement speaks for all of us when it approves of the lower courts and the relevant ministry ought to have done about these children. In other words, these children should have been kept in safe homes and away from places (in this case, jails) where they have been brought in touch with some rather nasty aspects of life.

Let the authorities now take up where the High Court has left off. The more than a hundred children (media reports speak of the figure being 145) in prison must now become the responsibility of the authorities. These children, after their harrowing experience in jail, are in need of counselling to return to normal life. Unless such counselling is provided to them, they will bear the scars and with that the stigma associated with imprisonment for a very long time. Now the job is cut out for social welfare ministry and its safe homes.