

SHAHADAT CHOWDHURY: A TRIBUTE

Godspeed, my hero, but no goodbyes

ZAYD ALMER KHAN

EDITOR, writer, artist, organiser, activist, freedom fighter, visionary, kingmaker, cultural trendsetter -- Shahadat Chowdhury could be described as each of those things, and many, many more. He was a maverick, a true Renaissance Man. He was a dreamer -- one of those very few dreamers who had the knack of translating their dreams, almost all of them, to reality. He was a bohemian, but he was also the mainstay of so many more bohemian souls flourishing around the institutions he built. There was that odd dichotomy about his character, you couldn't quite pin him down. Perhaps that is exactly why he was so many things to so many people.

To me he was Shahadat Chacha -- my mentor, my inspiration, my hero. He is why I am a journalist, and this is my ode to him.

My fondest memory of Shahadat Chacha will always be that photograph of him standing on the railway tracks near Shalda Station in late 1971. The freedom fighters of Sector Two had just won the legendary battle of Shalda River. The young guerrilla in the picture, a sten-gun casually slung over one shoulder, will forever remain in my mind as the embodiment of the muktijoddha. I figure that is just as well, because of all the identities that Shahadat Chacha had taken on throughout his life, the one that he was most proud of, and the one that I dare say shaped him, his ideologies, and his philosophy of life most, was that of being a muktijoddha.

I was lucky to have grown up among heroes -- my parents and their friends belonging to the generation that fought the War of Independence. I had grown up listening to tales from the frontlines, from the trenches that surrounded battlefields, from the hideouts that the guerrillas called home. I had seen that glint in the eyes of my bedtime storytellers as they relived the moments that they narrated, those dreamy eyes that fought for a better nation, a better future.

Of all those heroes I could pick from, I chose Shahadat Chacha to be my life's hero, my idol. Because in Shahadat Chacha's eye (he had

lost one early in life), more than anyone else, I saw that glint remain even after the stories had long been told. Long after the war was over, long after many of his comrades had become disillusioned -- some involuntarily succumbing to the drudgery and mundanity that is life, some plunging more spectacularly into the depths of mediocrity -- Shahadat Chacha kept on dreaming, of a better future, of a better Bangladesh.

The pages of Bichitra, the pioneering weekly magazine that he spearheaded for over two decades, represented the dreams that he dreamt for the generation after, and soon enough the pages of Bichitra came to represent and mould the aspirations of that new generation. Bichitra gave us hope, Bichitra gave us comfort, and even at the most cynical of times, Bichitra stirred our inner instinct to keep on fighting.

The lives Shahadat Chacha touched, I thought, were limitless. And all he wanted to imbue in them was the integrity of life's struggle. For millions of us, he made the impossible seem possible -- not through miracles, just with a bit of inspiration.

Yes, indeed, Shahadat Chacha was my hero. He is my hero.

I was a student of class eight when all of a sudden one day Shahadat Chacha decided to treat me like a man. I had claimed once that I was an "accidental journalist" -- stumbling onto the profession by mere chance and then being forever taken in by its intoxication. But to be perfectly honest, it wasn't an accident, it was by choice. But not mine, Shahadat Chacha's! I didn't know it then, but I do now, that on that July day that he looked me in the eye and almost ordered me to his Bichitra office, he had made the decision, that I would be a protege. And that was that.

For that moment of inspiration (on his part), I can never be grateful enough. For Shahadat Chacha showed me the world -- through the books he made me read; through the conversations we had over a zillion cups of tea at the Bichitra office; through the people he introduced me to, all of them so brilliant; through the stories he planned and the assignments he gave that at first seemed so out-



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people like myself Shahadat Chacha had inspired to build the future he dreamt of would be an exercise in futility. There are scores of us, and not just journalists -- doctors, lawyers, academics, vagabonds, actors, musicians, executives, and on and on.

That, more than anything, will be his greatest legacy, the gift he had to arouse something special inside so many otherwise ordinary people.

Shahadat Chacha would often tell us a story about his sector commander during the war, Khaled Mosharraf. The army major would tell his boys: "A liberated country does not welcome former guerrillas; it only wants to embrace storied martyrs."

I always felt that saying didn't apply to Shahadat Chacha. For he never gave up the fight, and hence could never be called a 'former guerrilla'. And now that he has left this world, I somehow feel Shahadat Chacha will never be a martyr either. Early Tuesday at the Birdem Hospital, one of his "bellbottom" comrades from the war was saying into his phone: "Shahadat Bhai is no more." But I couldn't believe that, I wouldn't believe that.

Shahadat Chowdhury could never be dead. He lives on through the dreams he has shown the world. He lives on through us, whom he leaves behind to carry on the fight.

Zayd Almer Khan is Deputy Editor of New Age.

Non-partisan Speaker needed

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE Daily Star of November 24 reported that on November 23 the Speaker of the parliament Jamiruddin Sircar "rejected all the opposition lawmakers' demands for discussion in parliament on different issues including rise of militants and price hike of essentials." The Speaker reportedly said that the government was seized of these problems and trying hard to solve them. So, there was no need for holding any discussion on these issues. The 19th session of parliament that began on November 20 was prorogued on November 24 without transacting any major business, including enabling laws.

The Speaker's rejection of the opposition lawmakers' demands to discuss burning issues like terrorism, price spiral of essentials, gas and power crisis is contrary to the recent assertion of the Prime Minister in the 18th session of parliament. While addressing the parliament on September 8, the first day of the 18th session, the Prime Minister and Leader of the House Begum Khaleda Zia said that they considered parliament as the most appropriate place to discuss all the issues of national importance.

The Speaker's rejection has astounded the conscience citizens of the country and given rise to the question as to what more important issues could be discussed in parliament. The Daily Star in its editorial of November 25 thus wrote: "The issues on which notices were served for discussion in parliament on Wednesday are evidently not partisan matters, they are national issues and should be dealt with accordingly at all levels especially in the House of the people. Our entreaties are with the Speaker that he broadens his approach and vision."

Political observers, civil society leaders and academics are of the opinion that the aforementioned situation has not improved, if not worsened, under the incumbent Speaker. The allegations generally leveled against the present Speaker are as follows:

- As the guardian of parliament, his role in running the parliament has not been non-partisan. He has virtually proved his undoubted loyalty to the treasury bench rather than to the House of the people.

It is a fact that a nominee of the ruling party is elected Speaker. But that does not deter the Speaker from discharging his duties and responsibilities neutrally and courageously. In Britain, the birthplace of parliamentary democracy, the party in power proposes the name of the Speaker of the House of Commons and he is unanimously elected at the opening of each parliament and remains in office till the life of parliament.

The Speaker ceases to be a party man after his election. He does not participate in politics nor does express an opinion on political issues. He is, accordingly, recognised as the non-partisan and impartial custodian of the rights of the members on the treasury benches and in the opposition. The essence of his impartiality lies in the way he maintains an atmosphere of fair play by ensuring that the opposition have an opportunity to express their views and criticisms, yet at the same time seeing that there is no parliamentary obstruction to hinder the government in its task of governing the country.

Bangladesh has adopted the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy. Then, why cannot our Speaker emulate the Speaker of the House of Commons in Britain? This is primarily because of the fact that he, unlike his counterpart in the House of Commons, cannot continue in office for so long as he wishes no matter whether or not the party which first proposed him for the Speakership is returned in the election.

Anyways, our present Speaker has served as a minister in more than one ministry. He served as the acting President of Bangladesh for two and a half months following the resignation of Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury from the

House. This restriction was imposed by the executive at the beginning of 2004 which goes against the spirit of rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament.

- During the last four years, there have been repeated quorum crises in the House. He has set a record by running the House without ensuring the quorum and presenting a novel explanation on formation of quorum.

- During the last four years, he has rushed to the Prime Minister's office on several occasions, ignoring the norms of parliamentary system of governance, and thereby has undermined the dignity of his office.

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First, apparently a favourable wind is blowing to bring the two major parties, the ruling BNP and the main opposition AL, to the discussion table inside or outside the parliament. The Speaker can contribute to the process by initiating sincere efforts to bring the main opposition back to the House assuring them that their grievances pertaining to the conduct of business in the House would be removed. The Speaker should write letter to the leader of the main opposition expressing the assurance and request her to attend parliament to save the nascent democracy. Telephonic talk should follow. Once the main opposition returns to the parliament, a favourable atmosphere to discuss there all issues of national importance may prevail.

Second, a cursory look into the proceedings of parliament during the last 15 years of parliamentary democracy does not show "any

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A lesser right to life?

CRISTINA P. ALESCI

THE American religious right continues to derail women's health policy, turning decades of advancement about face. This month, the General Accounting Office released a report questioning the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) rejection of over-the-counter (OTC) sale of an emergency contraceptive, Plan B. Discord over the decision emerged earlier in the year when two agency officials resigned from their posts. Both Dr. Frank Davidoff, an agency consultant, and Susan Wood, the former head of women's health, suggested that political interference was behind the drug's non-approval. Ms. Wood, in particular, alleged the FDA deviated from normal vetting procedures and did not base its decision on scientific evidence.

Conservative manhandling is not restricted to the executive branch of government. On the judiciary front, right wing Christian groups are seeking to overturn a woman's right to choose. Their cries for Supreme Court nominees with documented anti-abortion positions were tempered when the president nominated Judge Samuel Alito. As a Federal Appeals Court Judge, Judge Alito argued on several occasions for the restriction of abortion rights.

Conservatives now have another demand, which, if met, would stir a revolutionary breakthrough in the battle against cancer. Fortune Magazine recently reported that religious conservatives are opposing the widespread use of a newly developed vaccine for a disease linked to cervical cancer.

The vaccine, designed to target specific strains of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), is generating a lot of attention in conservative circles because HPV is a sexually transmitted disease.

HPV is fairly common, affecting roughly 20 million people in the United States alone, but because most strains are asymptomatic, a majority of those infected never know it. In fact, most men carry the virus without suffering any ailment. Only a few "high risk" strains of the virus are the root cause of cervical cancer. But for thousands of women in the US and tens of thousands more abroad, however, infection leads to death.

American women who follow through with an annual gynecological exam undergo routine screening for abnormal cervical cell growth. If abnormalities are detected, treatments can range from time-consuming, often

painful, surgery to debilitating chemotherapy. Women who undergo these procedures are the "lucky" ones. Approximately four thousand others in the US (or double the amount of American lives lost thus far in Iraq), are not as fortunate -- they die.

Cervical cancer is an even bigger killer in countries where preventative health care is in its infancy and a yearly gynecological exam is a luxury, not a staple. Every year, cervical cancer claims the lives of 273,000 women worldwide (almost a third of them in India and Bangladesh). Mandating the vaccination of girls in their teens, before they become sexually active, could halt the virus's spread.

Ironically, the HPV vaccine's commercial availability is being challenged by some of the very pro-life groups who claim to be the guardians of innocent life. They argue that shielding young women from HPV infection will encourage more teens to have sex outside of marriage. Under the right to life doctrine, a fetus, whose status as a living being is still hotly contested, is seemingly afforded greater protection from mortal harm than an adolescent girl. As the debate over the vaccine unfolds, Christian groups seem more concerned with preserving ideology than protecting life.

Tony Perkins, the president of Family Research Council, a conservative religious organization that seeks to influence key policy issues, has openly denounced the vaccine. Instead, he insists young people should be inculcated with "abstinence" messages, not inoculated with HPV vaccines. Perkins even went as far as to pledge the life of his 13 year old daughter to his religious cause, vowing that she will remain "safe" and unvaccinated.

Peddling abstinence as a sexual health panacea is dangerous, because abstaining until marriage, while decreasing the chances for HPV infection will not necessarily prevent it. A "good" unvaccinated Christian woman who "saves herself" for her husband has not saved herself at all -- she could be infected with HPV by her new husband on their wedding night.

The HPV vaccine will most likely be available in US as early as next year. Whether or not physicians adopt HPV vaccination as standard practice, however, depends on the recommendations issued by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), advisory arm of the Centers for Disease Control.

The ACIP issues a list of "recom-

mended vaccinations," which most physicians use as a guide in deciding which vaccinations to administer. If excluded from ACIP's list, the HPV vaccine necessity will be called into question. As a result, parties that often foot the bill for vaccination, such as managed care organizations or government programs, will be less willing or able to do so if the vaccine is not ACIP recommended. Weak domestic sales of the vaccine will undermine the manufacturer's expected profits which subsidize discount to other countries, where the vaccine is even more desperately needed.

The vaccine's fate is further shrouded in uncertainty by the appointment of Reginald Finger to the ACIP. In 2003, Finger accepted the Bush administration's offer to sit on the committee after serving as Medical Issues Analyst for the religiously conservative Focus on Family organization. Want a clue on what Dr. Finger thinks women's health policy needs? Pick up a copy of his study entitled, "Association of Virginity at Age 18 With Educational, Economic, Social, and Health Outcomes in Middle Adulthood." Although the title connotes a co-ed investigation, extra emphasis is placed on women. The study's conclusions: "Abstinence is, without a doubt, the only choice to give our next generation the best chance at life."

"Life" and its "culture" is both a convenient and popular tag line for groups like Focus on Family in their anti-abortion campaigns. It is a message that resonates with millions, and has swayed many to believe the rights of a fetus trump a woman's own body.

But how will conservatives continue to market "life" after having sentenced thousands of women to a senseless death for the sake of ideology? It is time for mainstream America to recognize that religious zealots at home, like those abroad, have only one thing on their minds: imposing their dogma on secular society.

Perhaps Americans will wake up when Christian fanatics start meddling with men's health policy -- but they know better than that.

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RON CEPESIUK

In a memo leaked to the press in the fall of 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld posed a question to his aides: "Is this a case in which the harder we work, the behinder we get?" It was a revealing rumination from a key Bush administration official about the course the War on Terrorism. Yet, despite the free falling opinion polls and growing public discontent about our mission in Iraq, the administration has given no indication that it's willing to admit mistakes and reassess its foreign policy.

In "The Next Attack," David Benjamin and Steven Simon answer Rumsfeld's question. They argue that the Bush administration's failure of leadership and inability to develop a comprehensive strategy is causing the US to lose the War on Terrorism (WOT). As the authors explain: "Only two indicators are used to show the measure of our progress in the War on Terror: the number of days since 9/11 in which we have not experienced a second catastrophic attack, and the number of al Qaeda members who have been apprehended or killed."

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While agreeing that spreading democracy in the Arab World is a worthwhile foreign policy goal, the authors maintain that "a policy based on rapid withdrawal (from Iraq) is necessary to limit the damage we have already accrued."

The book is timely and the authors have the credentials to challenge the Bush administration on its WOT policy. Benjamin and Simon are distinguished foreign policy experts who served on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration. They co-authored the award winning "The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America," which has made them leading experts on al Qaeda. And as their sourcing for this book shows, they have extensive contacts in the corridors of power.

While the authors cover the usual topics (weapons of mass destruction, intelligence failures, the neocon establishment, etc.), they also provide new information based on fresh sources who worked inside the Bush administration. For example, one State department official told the authors about a January 2002 meeting during Martin Luther King weekend in which the Bush administration planned the invasion of Iraq. "The original idea was to go war by Tax Day (April 15) 2002," the official revealed.

Unlike the many other Bush administration critics, moreover, the authors present a plan for "getting it right." Any winning strategy, they contend, would have to begin with cutting our losses in Iraq. The capital we gained in destroying the terrorist base in Afghanistan was squan-

dered when we invaded Iraq. The country is now a haven for terrorists, and the Iraq War has escalated the potential for violence against the US and our allies, making us less safe. Meanwhile, the war is fueling anger in the Muslim world and creating a seemingly inexhaustible supply of terrorists.

Another important element of their strategy is for the US to dispense with its futile military solutions. While agreeing that pressuring state sponsors make sense, they document how state sponsorship of terror has been waning for years. Cell-based units, not state sponsors, are at the heart of the terrorist movement. So building stronger links with foreign law intelligence and law enforcement agencies, especially in those developing countries, should be a high priority.

One may not agree with everything in the authors' critique and strategy. Some Bush administration supporters would argue that preventing new attacks on US soil since 9-11 shows that it's doing a lot of things right. But a lot of things are obviously wrong, and Benjamin and Simon do offer sincere and sage advice on how we can strengthen the country's anti-terrorism strategy. Plenty of evidence strongly suggests that it's time we move beyond the rhetoric of "The Axis of Evil" and develop an intelligent and comprehensive plan to defeat our Jihadi enemies.

As the authors frame the challenge: "We must decide whether we want a strategy for this conflict or a theology. How much blood will be shed depends at least in part on that choice."

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