

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# A panegyric to non-violence



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**B**C Hardtalk on Wednesday featured Dr. Gene Sharp, a political theorist. He was introduced as "the man who has changed the world" or perhaps he can change the world. How? By authoring the Non-Violent Revolution Rulebook where he has summed up quite a few hundred non-violent methods of bringing a revolution. It seems unfinished Arab Spring revolutions motivated him to present his perspective.

Mind you, his handbook is on revolution and yet his means are serene as if serenading the fall of despotic rule achievable, he thinks, entirely through non-violent strategies. But to ordinary mortals non-violence and revolution are mutually exclusive.

We don't even ponder the guru-disciple lineage of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. These days they are far removed from the minds of politicians. Yet they are shining beacons to the art of steadfast use of non-violence as a political weapon.

A relevant message there for us about how not to handle an elected democracy as a playground of violence which it manifestly is in our context. Whilst thus fouling up a tested system (I'm afraid, it hasn't evolved to be so in Bangladesh), we have not only missed on the substance of democracy but are even putting its form to jeopardy.

We are going through self-enforced selective amnesia. All in a harried speed and within a compressed space of a fortnight only. The intensity of political fluidity we have been through lately, and are perhaps bracing up to see more of, is simply nerve-racking.

It's only human to try and blot dark thoughts out of the mind but it is foolhardy not to draw on messages underlying even abhorrent developments.

Just a while back we emerged out of the furor over a foiled "conspiracy" of an "attempted coup." The scar barely healing, the search for answers to various questions generated by the incident goes on. As though

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that was not enough, all of a sudden, people find themselves catapulted into a cycle of spiraling political violence.

By some sights and sounds, Awami League's reading into the aborted plot has been that the BNP was up to creating a disorder in the army and while taking charge of the street they would have tried to precipitate a "Tehrir-like" mass upsurge.

But Awami League would have been better off drawing some positive messages from the whole experience. By foiling the attempted conspiracy the army has just not played its constitutional role in defence of a democratically elected government but also won accolade from the international community, thereby enhancing its image abroad.

The AL, however, actuated by its assessment that the BNP had something up its sleeves, decided to toughen up and not concede street to the opposition. That is why the government's prohibitory orders against opposition's protest programme, the ruling party's announcing a counter rally on the day the opposition had shifted its original plan to stage a protest rally and take out procession.

For all the tough AL stance, the capital basked in a political glow for the BNP -- never mind public hardship due to traffic congestion (sad, we are yet to have a Hyde Park or a Gorer maat to spare the city centre and the peripheral spillages).

This is, however, contrasted by reports from outlying districts being dominated by an incidence of police firing on protesters, five of whom died to bullet

shots.

It is commonsensical to realise how a government's desperation pulsates through the veins of its law enforcement agencies. And so they overdo their role. On the other hand, the opposition's desperation also transmits through its cadres. Result: we have casualties on both on both sides and provocation to greater violence.

Politics had already touched a new low following exchange of vituperative statements between the two of our top leaders: "Where you would go after quitting power just think of it" (Khaleda); and "We are taking down the registration numbers of the vehicles used in the long march to probe where the money came from to buy them" (Sheikh Hasina). This is the softer variety compared to some other slanderous remarks traded off.

Why not let the AL complete its term unhindered to exercise its electoral mandate as you champion your demands through institutional outlets? Why try to force your partisan agenda on the people denying them their right to peace and development dividends? The politicians better not face each other; instead they should face the people and what better way to do it than by waiting to win by ballot rather than by street violence. The people feel that a trust deficit rankles not only between political parties but more dangerously between the political parties and the people themselves. They are effectively eroding the power of the vote which defines their very existence -- this is the biggest tragedy of our politics.

The fear of vote engineering over which most of the political controversy rages is misplaced and largely without foundation given the heightened vigil of the voters and some built-in institutional safeguards.

Notably, it is the people who are at the receiving end of blunders political parties commit while the latter count their bloodstained scoring points by divesting households of their only earning members, widowing spouses and emptying mothers' laps.

If wailing of the bereaved do not reach the ears of political leaders for them to be pulling away from the path of violence, it is then a double-edged hypocrisy to the people -- one, the opposition thinking that their ammunition against the ruling party has acquired a new feature thanks to corpse culture; and two, the ruling party labouring under a belief that the opposition might have a second thought before risking unpopularity through deaths of its activists. Those who died have a claim to martyrdom they mustn't have intended to.

The opposition BNP has had its day on the street. They have got the taste of a certain anti-incumbency popularity, and they have been winning at the local polls. Though neck-to-neck with the ruling party in most of these, still it is a far cry from their poor showing in the last general election. It is time for the opposition to return to parliament forthwith with new vigour.

The takeaway message from the ground reality is that the performance of both the ruling party and the opposition are equally placed under the popular scanner. People are watching, they will be the best judge who they would like to be served by.

If the Awami League wants to improve its standing with the people and make the best use of the remainder of its tenure, it should whole-heartedly welcome the opposition to parliament. Let both parties begin from the overarching reality assumption that without accommodating each other on the caretaker issue, nothing positive can emerge for the nation.

When you are obsessed with worst case scenario, how can you expect the best case scenario?

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

# 'Institutional support essential for scientific innovation'

**Professor Quamrul Haider, a Bangladesh-born nuclear physicist and chair of the Physics Department at Fordham University, New York has carved out his name in nuclear physics by opening up a new horizon in the field. He, along with Dr. Lon-chang Liu, had predicted the existence of a new form of nuclear matter known as "eta-mesic nucleus" long ago. Their prediction was confirmed in 2008 through a complex scientific experiment done in Germany. In a time when research and innovation in pure and applied sciences have come to a veritable halt in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi scientists living abroad are making their marks in various fields. Prof. Haider believes that Bangladeshi students, teachers and scientists are meritorious enough to compete with their counterparts in any other country in the world, but they lack proper government funding and institutional incentives. Rifat Munim of The Daily Star engaged Prof. Haider in talks about his scientific work and how to overcome the problems faced by Bangladeshi researchers. Excerpts:**

**The Daily Star (DS):** Your research result has opened up many new areas in the study of nuclear physics. Would you please enlighten us about the precise nature of your research findings?

**Professor Quamrul Haider (QH):** I, along with Dr. Lon-chang Liu, staff physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, USA, was the first to predict the existence of a new form of nuclear matter, which we termed eta-mesic nucleus. It is composed of an electrically neutral eta meson trapped inside a nucleus and is 100,000 times smaller than previously discovered mesic atoms. We published our result in 1986 and followed up with several papers on the subject. An international group of experimental physicists confirmed our prediction in 2008.

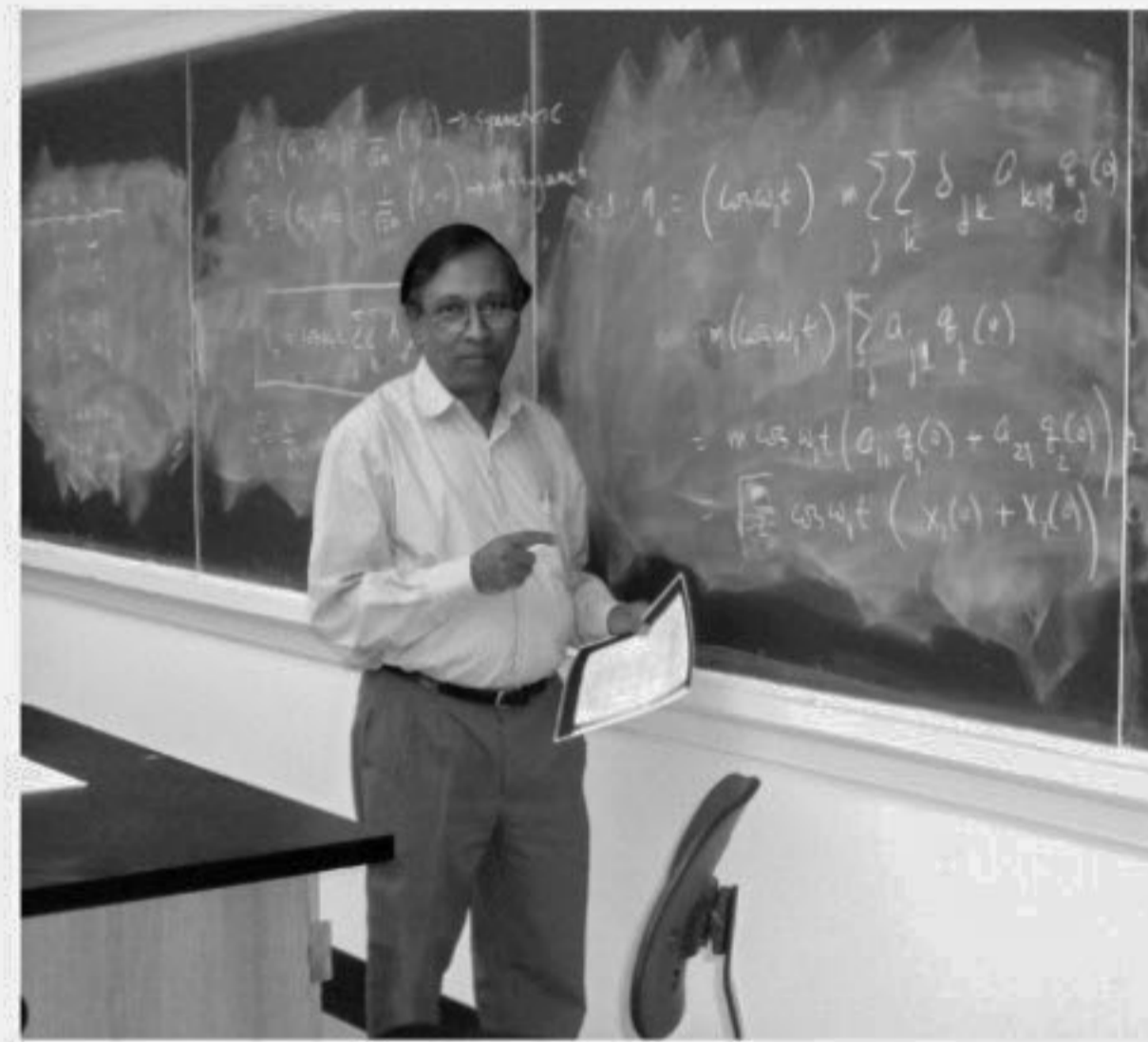
**(DS):** What will be the impact of this discovery in terms of practice?

**(QH):** Well, you cannot put a price tag on a scientific discovery. Basically, it's purely of academic interest and aimed at enhancing our knowledge about properties of nuclei and dynamics of nuclear reactions. For example, when Rutherford discovered the atomic nucleus did anybody have the slightest idea that his discovery would one day lead to the development of nuclear medicine or nuclear energy, or nuclear weapons, for that matter? All I can say is that our work triggered many new fundamental studies in nuclear structure theory. It gave rise to a new subfield in nuclear physics called "Mesic Nuclear Physics." Additionally, eta meson is an elusive particle and its quark content is not yet fully understood. However, as predicted by us, if eta can indeed be

bound inside the nucleus, it will add a new dimension to the study of its properties. The exotic nucleus can be used as a laboratory to probe the meson.

**(DS):** How did the opportunity to get involved with such a theoretical research come?

**(QH):** I finished my Masters in Physics from Dhaka University in 1974 and left for the United States in 1975. After earning the doctorate degree in Theoretical Nuclear Physics from Indiana University in 1982, I worked as a post-doc at Université Laval in Québec, Canada. In November 1984, I joined Los Alamos National Laboratory as a Research Associate. The lab, a big research institute where the first atomic bombs were developed under the auspices of the Manhattan Project, is situated in the mountains of New Mexico, USA. It was there I met Dr. Liu, a renowned nuclear theorist, who told me about experiments at the lab where eta mesons were copiously produced in pion induced nuclear reactions. We followed up on the experimental observation and showed through theoretical calculations that the same attractive forces that caused the production could lead to a bound state between an eta meson and a nucleus. We also determined which experiments would be likely to detect this new form of matter. Experimental confirmation of theoretical predictions is the bedrock of a physicist's work. Efforts to detect mesic nuclei were launched immediately at various labs in USA and Europe. The experiments performed during the last two decades did not yield any decisive result. Nevertheless, it showed that nuclear scientists took us seriously. Finally, in October 2008 a large group of experimental physi-



Professor Quamrul Haider

cists from Germany, Poland, India, Bulgaria, Slovakia and USA detected the eta-mesic nucleus at Forschungszentrum, one of Europe's largest interdisciplinary research centres, in Jülich, Germany. Their findings were published next year. I consider this to be the seal of approval of the research we have been doing for the past 25 years. With the availability of experimental data, Liu and I believe that we now have valuable information to further refine the theory of mesic nucleus. We are continuing our work on the subject and identifying new nuclear dynamics that may shed more light on the nature of mesic nuclei.

**(DS):** You had graduated from the Dhaka University. Then you studied in many other international universities. Now you are the chairman of Physics Department at an American university. You have a very sound knowledge of science education in Bangladesh as well as in other countries. Why do you think our Bangladeshi science students and teachers are not coming up with any commendable innovation?

**(QH):** In Bangladesh, tenure is guaranteed once you join a university as a teacher. You don't have to engage in scholarly activities; yet one day you'll get promoted. So, there is no incentive for teachers to work on new theories or experiments and encourage students to do the same. In American universities an assistant professor, hired after a world-wide search, is kept on probation for seven years during which time he/she must prove his/her research capabilities in the form of publications in high-impact refereed journals. We also look at the citations the articles are getting; it is a measure of the quality of the work. Student evaluation of teaching is very important. Service to the university and professional community is also important. External reviews of research are sought from anonymous referees. When it comes to granting tenure at the end of the seventh year, we consider all these things with special

focus on scholarly work.

Recruitments in Bangladesh, on the other hand, are based on nepotism and partisanship. Once recruited, you know that nothing can jeopardise your job. You don't have to prove anything and yet, you'll get promoted in course of time. What could be more ridiculous than this?

In my department at Fordham, faculty members are always engaged in scholarly pursuits because they know what ultimately will speak for them is good publications, quality teaching and things like that. We reward a productive researcher with reduced teaching load and merit raise of the salary. We also engage students in faculty research. The university provides funding for attending scientific conferences. So you see, institutional support is essential for scientific innovation. Bangladesh has meritorious students and teachers aplenty, but lacks institutional support. To quote Gray, in Bangladesh "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness unto the desert air."

**(DS):** What do you think our government should do to encourage research?

**(QH):** There should be a national science policy. Institutional support in the form of sabbatical leave, better wage, online journal subscription, travel money for participation and presentation of work at professional meetings are very important. The government should strengthen the educational institutions, provide sufficient research grants, reduce teaching load, and initiate a performance-based policy -- meaning if you don't produce, you won't get tenure or promotion or raise in the salary. In other words, there should be a carrot and stick approach for faculty members. Those who publish regularly and teach well should be recognised, promoted, given tenure; those who don't should either remain at the same position for years or shown the exit door.

**(DS):** There is a belief that writers and scientists from Asian and African countries do not get the same focus as their European and American counterparts because of the dominance of European media.

**(QH):** I disagree with this. Indian, Japanese and Chinese scientists are well-known all over the world. Just look at India. I know physicists at Tata Institute, Bhaba Atomic Research Centre, Saha Institute for Nuclear Physics, and other research centres in India and Japan, who are engaged in cutting-edge research at the frontier of science and technology. Why? Because there's that sense of competition and plenty of incentives to motivate them. I'm talking about encouraging research and scholarship. I emphasise, all you need is incentive, adequate government funding and institutional support.