

The politics of death, and the death of politics

AHRAR AHMAD

PIASH Karim passed away on October 13. He was an engaging and effective teacher who has left a legion of grateful students as his legacy, a distinguished academic who had made lively presentations and published well-received articles in national and international platforms, and an honest individual who tried to remain faithful to his intellectual commitments and moral imperatives.

But it was not his scholarship or pedagogy or personal charm that brought him to the national limelight. He found his métier, and used it with skill and resourcefulness, as a television commentator. In this he excelled. He was always civil, composed and thoughtful in his deliberations and contributions, and brought a new level of gravitas and analytical sophistication, as well as a personal style (crisp, low-key, substantive), to a medium that typically encourages hyperbolic excess and shallow chest-thumping.

We should all mourn the premature passing of an enlightened, articulate and complex man who was not afraid to speak truth to power, or even admit his own mistakes and political turns that he may have taken in his life. We should all mourn the fact that his many students will no longer have the opportunity to be inspired by him, or that his family, friends and admirers will be denied his warmth, wit and wisdom. But today, more than anything else, we should all mourn the sordid politics and the agenda-driven posturing that shrouds his dead body.

The first shot across the bow came from the initial obituary published in most of the newspapers. It made a pointed reference to his father who was supposedly a member of the infamous Peace Committees that had allegedly collaborated with the Pakistani military

regime during the War of Liberation in 1971. Why was it necessary to share this information? What relevance did it have in terms of our judgments and perspectives on Piash himself? What responsibility does Piash have for the political perspectives of his father? Did he ever, publicly, embrace, defend or promote them? Is this the new journalism now that permits the maligning of recently dead people with references to the sins and mistakes of parents who had died earlier?

From that inauspicious beginning, the discussion became morbid and turned into a dance of the macabre. There is no doubt that, from his own personal perspective, Piash had often found fault with the current government, and his criticisms were prickly and persistent. One can disagree with him. I myself did, on many occasions. But, it was a principled position. He was not a politician seeking personal power, or currying political favour. He was an intellectual who also had political convictions. He said these things because he felt he had to, even when it was inconvenient, controversial or personally dangerous. It would have been easier to head for the tall grass (as many of us do). But, intellectual courage and integrity prevented him from doing so. Piash kept the faith.

Does it not expose the deep insecurities, if not the bankruptcy, of the AL leadership that it sought to devalue him so immediately after his death and with such sneering impatience? Couldn't they wait for his body to be buried before beginning the onslaught? (The proposition that since he had opposed the War Crimes Trials, and Jamaat had opposed the War Crimes Trials, ergo, he must be a Jamaati, is not an argument, it merely demonstrates ad hominem malice. By this logic Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International must also be Jamaati, or since Noam Chomsky and al-Qaeda both

criticise US policies, Chomsky must be an al-Qaeda stooge). Moreover, did they have to deny him some respect and honour that many feel he had richly deserved? Why was a few hours in the Shahid Minar considered to be so threatening? In trying to demean him, did they not, inadvertently, weave for him the mantle of political martyrdom?

The BNP too perhaps overplayed its hand. In seeking to lay exclusive claim on him as one of its own, it reduced him from the public intellectual he was, into a party hack that he was not. The politicisation of the issue was swift and rabid, and suggested BNP's own insincere opportunism. Instead of the soft touch of a sensitive mourner, some people approached this with all the subtlety and refinement of a cage wrestler. Instead of celebrating Piash's many considerable achievements and virtues, it tried to play him up as something more illustrious and more heroic, and thus made him vulnerable to criticism and debate. Instead of providing sufficient space to allow those who may have disagreed with his politics, but respected his many personal and professional qualities, to participate in the grieving process, it became increasingly apparent that this was turning into a partisan show.

Then there was the surreal brinkmanship inherent in the Shahid Minar issue ("Gun fight at OK Corral"?). While the refusal to provide him with the symbolic honour was based on an obvious lack of graciousness and charity, the pressing of the issue from the other side (claiming a right that he did not really have) was, at best, naïve, at worst, cynical. After all, the most generous tribute to Piash would come not from where his body was placed or buried, but from the number of people who would come and grieve for him. Scoring political points over his dead body was unseemly, and the gamesmanship it

provoked reflected the moral poverty that exists in the country.

So this is what politics has come down to in Bangladesh today -- petty bickering over a dead body. Politics is no longer a site of contestation for different ideas, ideologies, policies, parties, and leaders. It no longer involves presenting alternative visions for the country. It no longer entails public service, seeking the general welfare, and inculcating democratic habits and attitudes. It is no longer related to upholding humanistic values, or the pursuit of justice, or respect for the rule of law, or tolerance for dissent, or the preservation of human rights and civil liberties, or concerns about public decency, national identity and social equity.

Politics has now degenerated into silly and simplistic attack-mongering (apparently, no patriotic Bangladeshi lives in Bangladesh anymore -- one is either a Pakistani Razakar conspiring to usher in religious extremism in the country, or an Indian daltal paving the way for Hindu hegemony). It is only an arena for Mafioso families contending for control over claimed jurisdictions. It has become, as Matthew Arnold had described, merely a "darkling plain ... Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night" for some temporary gain and material advantage.

Politics is no more a call to the "better angels of our nature" as Lincoln had suggested after the Civil War, but an appeal to the worst demons of our social rot. This is not politics. As many grieve over Piash's death, we should also lament the gross trivialisation and the eventual asphyxiation of politics in Bangladesh today. One is already dead, the other lies gasping for breath. May both rest in peace!

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To be "free" or not to be?

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

IT has been a tumultuous summer, leading to an uncertain autumn. Israel's atrocities in Gaza and the brutal killings of the Islamic State have plunged many of us into stunned bewilderment. Our hopes of a liberal democratic world, where all races and religions are allowed to coexist, have been rudely shaken. Faced with a dystopian situation many like me are consciously

seeking refuge and comfort in the arts. For art is not just a source of pleasure and relaxation, it can also provide stimulus for introspection and act as an agent of change.

Recently, I lived through a soul-searching experience after watching director Vishal Bhardwaj's new release, *Haider*. A modern adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the film introduces some twists in the story to highlight the human rights violations committed by the Indian army to suppress the separatist movement in Kashmir (during extremely troubled times in 1995). Bhardwaj skillfully interweaves the grief and suffering of people embroiled in a freedom struggle with the personal tragedy of *Hamlet*.

For me, however, *Haider* was not just a Shakespearean tragedy, neither was it solely about the arduous plight of the Kashmiris. The film was an emotional as well as a cerebral experience that made me reflect on the perpetual human struggle for freedom and dignity. There was also a sense of déjà vu since *Haider* left me reeling with memories of the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971.

It's been nearly forty-three years, yet I still experience a groundswell of emotions and cling to vivid memories. Sometimes people ask me rather brusquely to let go of the '71 phase of my life and "move on." Initially, I was confused by the suggestion, but of late I have been thinking hard about what "moving on" means, exactly. Does it mean that I should just blot out this chapter of my life or does it entail much more?

Haider provided me with some answers -- I had an epiphany of sorts. It helped me realise that "moving on" means that I cherish and treasure the positive outcome of the independence struggle and let go of the angst and trauma. Watching the fears and frustrations of the people of Kashmir on screen, it dawned upon me that Bangladeshis are indeed fortunate. Yes, we paid a heavy price but in exchange we were awarded the priceless gift of freedom. A freedom that has given us the right to talk, sing, love and worship the way we want to without having to watch over our shoulders. These are privileges that are denied to so many around the world. Bangladesh may be far from the utopia that the freedom fighters wanted to create, but it's a glowing example of a country that emerged from the blood and toil of its people.

As these thoughts flashed through my mind, I began to feel morose about the country's current state of affairs -- the raging political battles; the controversies pertaining to who is pro-liberation (no one has quite clearly defined the term), who is secular, who is liberal -- issues that continue to cause rifts in society. Why can't people rise above these differences and think of themselves primarily as citizens of Bangladesh?

The unpleasant incidents following the recent death of Brac University Professor Dr. Piash Karim are partially responsible for my frustration and disappointment. Rather than debate on whether or not Dr. Karim needs to be posthumously honoured at the Shaheed Minar, why can't his admirers focus on his contributions and highlight his achievements in a public forum? On the other hand, why has the country not established clear criteria for heroes who deserve a "Shaheed burial"? Why the bickering and haggling over a dead person, with both sides trying to score points on their patriotism? After all, there is no "one size fits all" definition of patriotism since it cannot be measured with a yardstick. And isn't that one of the freedoms that Bangladeshis fought for -- the right to have a view that is different from the person next door? Or even a viewpoint that deviates from the norm?

As *Haider* powerfully depicts, there are people around the world still struggling and making tremendous sacrifices for their mere existence and identity. Many would be grateful for what Bangladesh has achieved -- independence from a repressive regime. Bangladeshis will be undermining this achievement if they become autocratic in their beliefs and act like the very forces that they fought against!

Perhaps this moment in time -- when we are approaching our Victory Celebrations -- demands a thorough examination of the country's past history and present position in terms of its goals to create a free and tolerant society. A good start would be to ask some incisive questions: how far have we travelled toward the ideals we set out to achieve and where do we want to go from here?

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Gas pricing for captive power

IJAZ HOSSAIN

ENERGY experts and analysts have long been talking about good management in the energy sector. The principal element of good energy management is sound pricing. The importance of pricing has never been fully appreciated in Bangladesh.

Wrong pricing -- over-pricing or under-pricing -- can have many negative consequences, most important of which is excessive use of the cheapest fuel. Energy economists and analysts from Buet, BIDS and CPD have written extensively on fuel substitution, and have talked about the undesirable consequences of severely under-pricing fuel.

The most undeserving beneficiaries of such under pricing are gas based captive power producers resulting from the complete distortion and anomaly in the comparative cost of their power against industries that use grid power. The problem is best illustrated by the data below:

YEAR	ELECTRICITY COST		DIFFERENCE per kWh
	CAPTIVE (using gas)	REB (grid)	
2009	Tk.2.3/kWh	Tk.3.85/kWh	Tk.1.55
2011	Tk.2.3/kWh	Tk.4.88/kWh	Tk.2.58
2014	Tk.2.3/kWh	Tk.7.20/kWh	Tk.4.90

The dramatic increase in the difference between grid electricity and gas based captive electricity is clearly evident. Taking into account all expenses (depreciation, O&M and gas) the cost to an industry that produces its own electricity using gas was Tk. 2.30 in 2009, which has remained static because gas price has remained unchanged. In 2009,

the difference between grid electricity and captive power was Tk. 1.55 (a barely tolerable level); because of repeated price increases of grid electricity, in 2014 the difference stands at Tk. 4.90 (an intolerable level). Additionally, it must be remembered that grid power, especially in peri-urban and rural areas, where many industries are situated, tends to be unreliable, sometimes facing long hours of load shedding. Diesel generators have to be used, thus further increasing the total energy cost.

Energy is the prime mover of industry and growth. All industrial units using grid power have suffered from steep increase in power costs. To understand the full impact of this pricing anomaly one needs to look at energy intensive industries. One example is the steel industry. Steel mills require large quantities of electricity to melt scrap steel to produce steel billets. Distortion in the power cost of these two groups -- grid power users versus captive power producers -- has created a difference of Tk. 4,000 in the cost of production of per ton of steel. Other industries using grid power face similar situations of uneven competition. Unless the government takes immediate steps to rebalance costs for all power users, majority of industries will become sick and may eventually face closure.

In a perfect energy market, industries using grid electricity would simply shift to gas based captive power as an alternative to closure. The irony is that this is not an option at all, since there is no gas. Therefore, captive power based industries act like a cartel and manipulate the market.

The government itself suffers huge revenue losses by supplying under-priced gas for captive power. Assuming

1,000 MW power is produced from gas based captive generation (excluding fertiliser factories), subsidised gas sales are causing the government to lose over Tk. 10 crores per day when compared to what it could earn from producing and selling power to customers. That is Tk. 3,500 crores per year.

With serious gas shortage in the country, the government had rightly stopped giving new gas connections for captive power but, inexplicably, some new connections have recently been allowed. With a Tk. 4.90/kWh difference in power cost, how can any industry, whose competitors have captive power, be set up? This is an issue government planners have to take extremely seriously. This will certainly dampen new investments in industry. Is this what the government wants and will this help in achieving our goal of becoming a middle income country?

Since the government cannot ensure gas for captive power to industries, the logical course of action would be to rationalise the price of gas for captive power so that a level playing field is created between those that have captive power and those that have to use grid electricity.

Many examples of pricing anomalies that have created problems can be cited. Furnace oil was priced at Tk. 20 per liter for a long time because this was a by-product of Eastern Refinery, and also large quantities of it were available as bunker oil from the ships brought in to be broken down for scraps. In 2009, when the government decided to go for large scale deployment of liquid based power plants, they were forced to increase the price from Tk. 26 to Tk. 60 per liter to cut subsidy. The need to import high grade furnace oil for power plants thus disturbed the equi-

librium. As a result, several hundred industries in the western region of the country closed down because they could no longer compete with gas based industries in the region.

Another example is the introduction of CNG at an absurdly low price against the competing fuel (octane), which lured even those with expensive cars to shift en masse to CNG. If the allocated gas for CNG and captive power was supplied to BPDB they could run power plants having thermal efficiencies of 55% and more. The generated electricity would have benefited all industries and not just a handful of fortunate ones.

The government has achieved great success in power generation, and we are near self sufficiency in meeting our current power requirements. Huge new investments are in the pipeline for setting up large power plants. The time has come for the government to seriously rethink whether captive power generation, with heavily subsidised gas price, can be allowed to continue? While it evaluates its long term strategy on captive power, it must adopt some immediate measures:

- Rationalise and rebalance gas price for captive generation to bring parity in power prices with grid power users;
 - Establish the principle of linking future rises in grid power costs with matching rises in gas tariff for captive generation to maintain parity;
 - Stop providing new connections for gas based captive power generation.
- After all, why should the government give away Tk. 3,500 crores per year to a limited few and severely weaken and damage the industrial base of the country?

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QUOTABLE Quote

The universe seems neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent.

Carl Sagan

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS	DOWN
1 Bug-squashing sound	1 Divided
6 Battle souvenir	2 Caller's need
10 Penna. city	3 Singer Ronstadt
11 Timber wolves	4 Pub drink
13 Solitary sort	5 North Carolina native
14 Time's 2012 Person of the Year	6 Incline
15 Neither Dem. nor Rep.	7 Corn core
16 Bunny move	8 Ear-shaped shell
18 Bar topic	9 Love story
19 Japanese ritual	12 Twain's Tom
22 Victor at Manassas	17 Mine rock
23 A single time	20 Steep drop-off
24 Spring month	21 Car part
27 Ranch animal	24 Means of approach
28 Sheet music symbol	25 Conspirator
29 Couple	26 Game official
30 Office ritual	27 Get by
35 Summer in Paris	31 Kick out
36 Marks a ballot	32 Alleviates
37 Boxing's "Greatest"	33 Watchful
38 Get naked	34 Poker pot
40 Map within a map	39 "little teapot..."
42 Note from the boss	41 Dir. opposite SSW
43 Hagar's dog	
44 Genuine	
45 Irritable	

Yesterday's answer

C	O	V	E	C	A	T	S		
J	A	P	A	N	A	C	R	E	S
A	M	E	N	D	S	E	I	N	E
D	E	N	E	U	V	E	B	O	A
E	T	E	S	I	D	E	A	R	M
D	O	D	G	E	S	P	L	A	Y
E	R	A	S	E					
S	P	I	N	V	E	E	R	E	D
T	O	O	T	S	I	E	E	R	A
R	O	O	A	S	K	S	F	O	R
A	L	I	E	N	E	L	U	D	E
P	E	N	N	E	R	O	S	E	S
D	E	E	R	S	P	E	D		

CRYPTOQUOTE 8-25

SMD KU MQQCKQAIK QU NBMQ LHQALO OMD; KU OQMVC BMO CTCH FCCV SVQ VS QU M LHAQAL.

- WCKM OAFCYAVO

Saturday's Cryptoquote: AN INFALLIBLE METHOD OF CONCILIATING A TIGER IS TO ALLOW ONESELF TO BE DEVoured.

-- KONRAD ADENAUER

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

WHY DO YOU KEEP YAWNING? I DON'T KNOW

IT MUST BE CATCHING

HENRY by Don Trachte

HELLO!