MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

A KING FOR ALL

A foreigner's perspective

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AVING visited Thailand for over five times during my lifetime, I would like to believe that I learnt quite a lot about the country and its culture. Its booming ly, King tourism industry and ever growing clothing market are attractive to travellers and foreign investors alike. Amidst the topsy-turvy journey of Thailand into the modern epoch of the 21st century, a guardian remained constant. A beacon of light who guided Thailand through its best and worst periods, King Bhumibol Adulyadej served as the sovereign ruler for seven long decades. That light has now faded

Every time one walks into a theatre in Bangkok and indeed around the entire country, what preludes the movie is quite fascinating for foreigners to observe. A short film showing the king travelling throughout the rural areas of Thailand, portrays this American born man as a divine demi-God. What is even more interesting is that it creates an innate sense of adulation for the king, even to the average Bangladeshi like me. When you walk through the streets of the capital, you see a picture of the king in almost every shop. His birthdays are a day of national celebration, where people from all sides of the political divide show up and sing praises of the king. Although I do not know whether this will continue for Bhumibol's heir, it is safe to say that no one in Thailand was more loved and admired by the people then their head of state.

So what do I know about Thailand? What do I know about politics? What does a 21-year-old University of Toronto student know about foreign kings and their legacies? Well firstly,



A portrait of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej at the Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok.

never do I claim to be an expert on these issues nor am I well-educated about the life of King Bhumibol. In fact, his name hasn't even been mentioned once in my history or political science courses. But that is where his greatness lies. He touched my heart without being in anyway remotely associated with my life. And that is exactly what he did with the people of Thailand. He reached out to them, became the people's king. Personally overseeing and funding rural development projects in an

underdeveloped Thailand in the mid-20th century may have been a drastic measure designed by the Thai establishment to boost public confidence, but it worked wonders. Thais saw their king working hard, and felt it was their duty to serve him by working hard themselves. The king's love for jazz and his interest in photography made him seem contemporary to the average Thai.

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PHOTO: EPA great statesman. Having said that, it

would be surprising to know that Bhumibol in constitutional terms had no political power. Yet in Thailand's many political conflicts, both the Thai people and politicians looked up to their king for guidance and stability. The 1992 image of the Thai Prime Minister and the man trying to overthrow him, kneeling before their king, as he commanded them to end the political turmoil has gone down in history as one of Bhumibol's most incisive moments. For many, the

controversial Lèse-majesté (based on Thai Criminal Code Section 112, making it illegal to defame, insult or threaten the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent) might seem like a farce to democracy. And indeed, in all theoretical sense, it is. It prevents individuals from criticising the king and has been used by Thai governments to punish political dissidents. Nevertheless, it is unjust to consider that the man known to be the greatest unifier in Thailand was personally responsible for employing this controversial policy. In fact, even those who want monarchies around the world to be abolished, commonly agree that Bhumibol's sense of duty to his people gives him much deserved credibility. What is there to criticise about him? Yes, the concept of a monarchy is something which I personally do not approve of, yet it has worked magnificently in Thailand. And the only reason it has done so, is because of the efforts of their king.

King Bhumibol touched the hearts of his people, and he touched mine. Seventy years of serving a nation and its people, even amidst the luxurious life he did lead, is not a matter of joke. I only wish we learn about public service, loyalty to the people and dedication from this truly modern king. And yes, maybe it is time for Bhumibol's name to be in my history and political science books, because men like him should be remembered.

A king of duty, a king of the people - the heart and soul of Thailand. His legacy must live on. May King Bhumibol rest in peace.

The writer is a student of Economics and International Relations, University of Toronto.

Living in the now



truly believe that happiness can flow from small things. Time spent with loved ones, an uplifting word from a casual acquaintance, a chance meeting with a long lost friend; all these seemingly mundane things can make us happy. To this list of things I must add school and college

reunions. These events, although always satisfying, follow an interesting sequence. As we cross major milestones in our lives, our relationships and interactions with friends also undergo a simultaneous transition.

At the 10-year class party, everyone is out there to impress. Despite the prevailing spirit of bonhomie, each one tries to outsmart the other with success stories about doting spouses, super intelligent children, prestigious careers and material acquisitions. In contrast, there are the idealists, dreamers and revolutionaries who talk of building a more equitable and just world. Gradually water finds its own level and personal connections are renewed with like-minded peers. As for the others, promises are made to meet again, knowing that it will happen a decade later since everyone will be immersed in the struggle called 'life'.

Interestingly, the 20-year class reunion is more relaxed because for most, life has reached a plateau or ambitions have tapered off. You can let your hair down and have a meaningful conversation with an old classmate about aging parents, rebellious children and missed career opportunities. A long-lost female friend may even unburden herself about her husband's suspected philandering. This usually happens when she feels a sense of camaraderie, but at the same time knows you are unlikely to spread the story since you are not part of her social circle!

There is a noticeable change in the interactions at the 30-year class party - all of us are carefree and lighter in outlook. It's almost like reverting to our childhood and youth. The sense of competition is mellowed and we are more



comfortable in sharing life's joys and woes. It's like pressing the refresh button and starting all over again with renewed vigour and energy. We do not erase all our memories, only the ones that create obstacles in bonding together once again. This is a joyous phase because we meet real people with no labels or tags attached.

With the passage of time, my relationships with old school friends have undergone this gradual transition. However, it's not just my relationships -there has been an overall change in my attitude toward life. It's as if the carefree, youthful aspects of my personality have resurfaced from a subterranean past. No more mountains need to be

climbed nor oceans to be crossed. I have simply unchained my thoughts and started enjoying the simple pleasures, with more intensity than ever before. I relish each sip of morning tea like the time when my mother offered me the first cup as an acknowledgement of the fact that I had "come of age". I take in the pristine blue beauty of the sky as if it's a special gift from nature only for me. I no longer view the thinning of the trees in autumn as a sign of aging, but as the promise of new leaves sprouting next spring. Rather than reflect on my mortality, I cherish each day as if it's a new beginning. Consequently, I feel younger sometimes I even delude myself into thinking that I look as young as I feel. But recently, a short exchange with a young girl made me realise that well - that I am getting old after all.

At a recent dinner our host introduced us saying: "Hi Milia. This is... She is an aspiring singer. I thought you could share your experiences with her since you are a pro." I asked the young lady what genre of music she was interested in. When she said "Rabindra Sangeet", I felt an immediate connection and started reminiscing about Santiniketan, Chhayanat, my music gurus -Kanika Banerjee, Nilima Sen, Wahidul Huq - the impact of Tagore's songs on the independence movement, etc. She listened attentively, but when I mentioned my first TV performance, which happened to be live, she interjected: "Oh My God! That must have been ages ago. How does it feel to be part of a history when television was black and white and there were no sophisticated recording techniques? You must write about it some time. For posterity...". "Yes, I should" I mumbled and walked away.

I felt dejected for a brief moment, wondering if indeed my worth is only of historical interest. Luckily, my positivity resurfaced since I realised that my happiness is not derived from lost glory or a promising future but from living in an unencumbered present.

In that vein, I will continue to embrace the little joys of life that come my way each day while waiting earnestly for the next class reunion. Is it the 40th or 50th? I forget. But does that matter?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

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Quotable Quote



OSCAR WILDE

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

44 Stand

DOWN

2 Stick

5 Intuit

9 Rings

6 Globes

45 Bridge costs

1 Wolf's cousin

3 Hiking path

7 Soothing plant

10 Tender areas

24 Balloon contents

17 Pitch's kin

22 Contrived

8 Pol's place

4 Go astray

46 Tenth president

ACROSS

1 Richmond's River

6 Fires

11 Find Charming 12 Texas City

13 Make Butter 14 "Iliad" author

15 Writer Follett 16 Church topper

18 Gallery fill

19 Anvil's place 20 Capp and Pacino

21 Spring 23 TV's Philbin

25 Descartes' conclusion 27 Decline

28 Like some beer

30 Unseen problem 33 Fitting

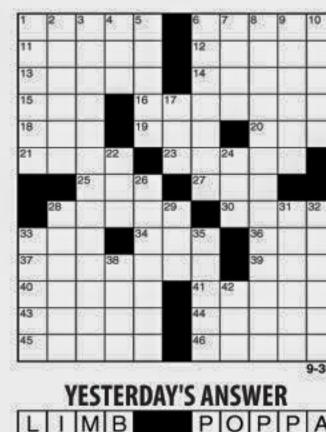
34 Uno doubled 36 Dambuilding org.

37 Roofed proch 39 Game caller

40 Have -- to grind 41 Happy, e.g.

43 Messy places

26 Folly 28 Willing to try 29 Seed holder 31 Disinclined 32 Set electrician 33 "Halt!" from a salt 35 Egypt's Anwar 38 Skating jump 42 Twisted



POPPA LIMB PIPEUP ODOR AVENGE ELEVATOR IMITATOR TATTOO OKAYSBLAZE SLATED ANIMATOR EDUCATOR BUSTED MINE INCA USURPS EYED

BEETLE BAILEY

SCREECHIL

WHAT KIND?

TUNA AND PEA.



BABY BLUES

WHAT ARE YOU MAKING, A CASSEROLE,

MOM?

by Kirkman & Scott YEAH, (SORRY.)

