

Of history and the magnum opus: A tribute to Kamal Lohani

SHAKIB LOHANI

HIS clothes were always pressed. Perhaps a peculiar thing to remember fondly, but it's true, his clothes were always pressed. I do not remember exactly when the white, special-cut, loose-fitting punjabi-pajama ensemble became synonymous to Kamal Lohani (Dulal *bhai* to us), but you would have always found him in the same ensemble without fail, be it his home, a cultural event, weddings or old pictures. And sometimes with a shawl draped over his shoulders. His ensemble alone symbolised his moral strength, charm and simplicity—and that too, all at the first sight.

In fact, Kamal *bhai* was quite adamant about his ensemble. Once he refused to wear a suit in order to participate in the Commonwealth Head of States meeting (1979) in Lusaka, Zambia as a selected member of the presidential entourage. Consequently, he was dropped from the list. At the time, he was working as the executive editor of *Dainik Barta*. But there was a rare sighting of Kamal Lohani in trousers, when he played the character of a middle class teacher in the drama "Ujan Paban", directed by his very close friend, the famous director and playwright late Abdullah Al Mamun.

A multifaceted, larger-than-life personality, Kamal Lohani belongs to the same ranks as Fateh and Fazle Lohani. In fact, having lived a longer life than the brothers and his rigorous contribution to the country's journalism and culture, Kamal Lohani is the magnum opus of the Lohani family. The language activist and freedom fighter navigated life with an astounding commitment to justice and uncompromising principles.

I always wondered when did he exactly start to foster his courageous courage to battle for the Language Movement and the Liberation of

Bangladesh, and I think it must have been from a very early stage of his life.

His father, Musa Khan Lohani, took him to his aunt, Salema Khanam Peara in Calcutta for better education opportunities. At the time, his aunt was teaching in a school with the renowned poet Begum Sufia Kamal and Fatema Lohani (Fateh and Fazle Lohani's mother). Kamal *bhai* remembered how he had to take shelter in trenches with cotton plugs in his ear when the

complete his education before pursuing politics. But nothing could really sway Kamal *bhai* away from politics. He got admitted to Edward College in Pabna and became a disciple of Marxism. And during this time he mastered the ability to command people's attention to his pro-liberation slogans and lectures.

At one point, he is said to have left for Dhaka with only Tk 15 from his uncle to pursue his calling of rebellion and patriotism. Education remained



Kamal Lohani.

PHOTO: SHANKOR SAWJAL

Japanese aircrafts bombed Calcutta in World War II. Perhaps it was the close proximity to war at an early age which inspired his thought, ideology and rebellious voice.

A brief timeline

After the 1947 partition, Kamal Lohani came to East Pakistan to live with his uncle, educationist Tasadduk Lohani (my father). He got heavily involved with politics in the 1952 Language Movement, just having passed the SSC exams from Pabna Zilla School. This was also the time when the uncle-nephew relationship faced its own challenges because his uncle wanted him to

incomplete. He joined *Daily Millat* in 1955 with help from his cousin Fazle Lohani, marking the start of his journalism career. In 1957, when Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani formed the Pakistan Awami Party, Kamal Lohani enthusiastically joined.

Kamal Lohani got married to a remarkable woman in 1960. Dipty Lohani, was not only his life partner, but a collaborator and co-fighter. From taking care of the major portion of financial responsibilities to hosting hundreds of journalists, cultural activists and secular politicians, she did it all with so much grace. The couple felt a responsibility to the masses and

dedicated their life's work to it.

It was in the late 1960s during the autocratic rule of Ayub Khan, when the first cultural organisation in opposition to imperialism was born—"Kranti Shilpi Goshthi." It is a big part of Kamal Lohani's imprint on Bangladesh's cultural activism.

"Do not come alone in the bloodshed. Loneliness means daunting fear, Loneliness means the shadow of monsters On the extinguished body of the Sun Do not float alone in the bloodshed. Burn in the shining dream's spear And take us all with you..."

A translated poem written by Ashim Kumar Das which he dedicated to Kamal Lohani in 1993 in a Rajshahi programme honouring him. The poem reappeared in 2004 in one of Kamal *bhai*'s books titled "Shomoyer Shahosh" (Time's Courage), a memoir to commemorate his 70th birthday.

A force of nature at home too

Beyond the accolades such as *Ekushey Padak* (2015), published books, the incredible legacy of journalism (spanning six decades) and cultural activism, beyond Kamal Lohani's public life stood our Dulal *bhai*. He stood tall and strong, a guardian of the family for so many, many years. For at least four decades I have seen how active he remained in his professional life, but at the same time, managed to remain connected with extended and immediate family members. His house would always be abuzz with people, especially on occasions such as Eid (he absolutely loved having people over).

Kamal Lohani's ability to love seemed limitless—country, people and the arts—there never was any semblance of restraint to how much he loved. Even his health complications could not deter the force of his personality—it was not until much later that his children were able to hold him back from attending cultural meetings and television talk shows out

of concerns for his health.

His health deteriorated in the last few years with a body held captive to diabetes, lung problems and high blood pressure. But he still prevailed. Even when he started to partially go blind, he pushed his limits for his love to read and write. At one point, a person started to write down what Kamal *bhai* dictated.

Kamal Lohani was never the one to say "no" to any reason to engage. As recently as three years ago, he enthusiastically agreed to go to a studio to record recitals for my second album. One of my fondest memories of him is his recitation of a poem called "Jelkhanar Chithi", written in jail by the (Marxist) Turkish poet, playwright and lyricist Nazim Hikmet, and later translated to Bangla by Subhash Mukhopadhyay (Kamal *bhai* had his own illustrious jail experience).

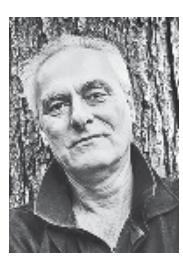
It was not just his enthusiasm and the quality of recitation, but his gallant presence. The man standing in his white ensemble, reciting to his heart's content while he pushed through all his physical limitations, reminded me of the Kamal Lohani the country knows, and reminded me of Dulal *bhai* who would always jump at any opportunity to engage with family.

Despite his three children's best efforts, we lost our Dulal *bhai* a month ago today on June 20, 2020 to health complications exacerbated by the coronavirus. As we try to mourn the death of our family's magnum opus under trying circumstances, I pray that we all continue to be inspired by this formidable Bangladeshi's legacy who just always happened to wear a pressed, white punjabi-pajama ensemble and live a purely honest and multifaceted life.

.....

Shakib Lohani is a writer and recitation artist. He currently works as a communications consultant in the pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh.

The China-Iran Deal It's not about business but geopolitical poker



JAMES M DORSEY

HOBLED by harsh US sanctions and a global economic downturn, Iran has discovered a new opportunity: hot air that carries messages to its opponents. China, albeit far less economically

impaired, sees virtue in the business too.

A proposed 25-year humongous China-Iran cooperation deal has proven to be good business. Realms of media reporting and analysis and commentary by pundits serves to ensure that the two countries' messages are delivered loud and clear.

The two countries have provided the evidence to keep the story alive: Numerous agreements signed by Presidents Xi Jinping and Hassan Rouhani during the Chinese leader's visit to the Middle East in 2016 would, if implemented, expand economic relations between the two countries by a factor of 10 to USD 600 billion and significantly enhance military cooperation.

The agreements, signalling a potential Chinese tilt towards Iran, were concluded at the time in anticipation of significant lifting of some and easing of other US sanctions as part of the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear programme.

Those hopes were dashed when US President Donald J Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2018 and returned to the warpath with the introduction of crippling sanctions. China has since by and large abided by the US restrictions.

Iran appeared this month to put flesh on the skeleton with the leaking of a purported final draft of a sweeping 25-year partnership agreement that envisions up to USD 400 billion in Chinese investment to develop Iran's oil, gas, and transportation sectors.

The problem is that there is nothing final about the draft and that the draft constitutes little more than the floating of a trial balloon.

That is just fine as far as Tehran and Beijing are concerned even if both countries would likely opt to pursue cooperation on a far grander scale once geopolitical circumstances were more conducive.

For now, both countries have suggested that there is a long negotiation path to conclusion of an agreement, let alone implementation.

That does not mean that there is no upside to be had immediately.

By fuelling talk of an imminent agreement, Iran is signalling Europe and a potential Biden administration after the United States November presidential election that US and European policies threaten to drive the Islamic republic into the arms of China.

It also allowed Iran to take a swipe at Saudi Arabia, suggesting that when the chips are down it will be Iran rather than the kingdom that China turns to.

China capitalised on Iran's hot air business by allowing it to flourish and boost messages Beijing was directing towards Washington and Riyadh.

Officially, China limited itself to a non-committal on-the-record reaction and low-key semi-official commentary.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, a wolf warrior or exponent of China's newly adopted more assertive and aggressive approach towards

diplomacy, was exceptionally diplomatic in his comment.

"China and Iran enjoy traditional friendship, and the two sides have been in communication on the development of bilateral relations. We stand ready to work with Iran to steadily advance practical cooperation," Mr Zhao said.

Writing in the Shanghai Observer, a secondary Communist party newspaper, Middle East scholar Fan Hongda, argued that an agreement, though nowhere

China's response also amplified its message to Gulf states echoed by scholars with close ties to the government that the People's Republic's interest in the Middle East was not a strategic priority.

These scholars suggest that the economic downturn, which impacts China's economic ties to the region, could persuade Beijing to further limit its exposure if Gulf states failed to find a way to come to grips with Iran in way that would dial down tensions.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

.....

China's response also amplified its message to Gulf states echoed by scholars with close ties to the government that the People's Republic's interest in the Middle East was not a strategic priority.

These scholars suggest that the economic downturn, which impacts China's economic ties to the region, could persuade Beijing to further limit its exposure if Gulf states failed to find a way to come to grips with Iran in way that would dial down tensions.

Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami last week inaugurated the track-laying for the first 628 kilometres of the line that ultimately will link Chabahar to Afghanistan.

Iranian officials said Iran would fund the rail line itself but both China and Iran have repeatedly expressed an interest in linking Chabahar to Gwadar, the Chinese-backed Arabian Sea port, some 70 kilometres down the coast in Pakistan.

The economic downturn as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has revived doubts about the viability of Gwadar, a crown jewel of the approximately USD 60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's single largest Belt and Road-related investment.

In an indication that the United States does not see a potentially game-changing China-Iran deal as imminent, the Trump administration has so far stuck to reiterating its long-standing policy.

"The United States will continue to impose costs on Chinese companies that aid Iran, the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism," said a US State Department spokeswoman.

.....

Dr James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He is also a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute and co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute of Fan Culture in Germany.

"For China, the Middle East is always on the very distant backburner of China's strategic global strategies... Covid-19, combined with the oil price crisis, will dramatically change the Middle East. (This) will change China's investment model in the Middle East," said Niu Xinchun, director of Middle East studies at China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), widely viewed as China's most influential think tank.

Iran this month, in an interesting twist that could indicate China's

appetite to play the Iranian card any time soon, dropped India as a partner in the development of a rail line from its Indian-backed deep-sea port of Chabahar because of delays in Indian funding. The Trump administration had exempted Chabahar from its sanctions regime.

Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami last week inaugurated the track-laying for the first 628 kilometres of the line that ultimately will link Chabahar to Afghanistan.

Iranian officials said Iran would fund the rail line itself but both China and Iran have repeatedly expressed an interest in linking Chabahar to Gwadar, the Chinese-backed Arabian Sea port, some 70 kilometres down the coast in Pakistan.

The economic downturn as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has revived doubts about the viability of Gwadar, a crown jewel of the approximately USD 60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's single largest Belt and Road-related investment.

In an indication that the United States does not see a potentially game-changing China-Iran deal as imminent, the Trump administration has so far stuck to reiterating its long-standing policy.

.....

Dr James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He is also a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute and co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute of Fan Culture in Germany.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Digging tool
- 6 Genie's offering
- 10 Perp zapper
- 11 Elbows on the table
- 12 Indy winner Al
- 13 Book of maps
- 14 Genesis name
- 15 Certify
- 16 Singer Orbison
- 17 Plopped down
- 18 Retiring
- 19 Ocean depths
- 22 Region
- 23 Take it easy
- 26 Plumber's collection
- 29 Yoga need
- 32 Vegas
- 33 Vein contents
- 34 Classroom need
- 36 Viral concept
- 37 Train stop
- 38 Overly eager
- 39 Like argon
- 40 Ham it up
- 41 Play group
- 42 Sent a copy
- 43 Vein contents
- 44 Classroom need
- 45 Viral concept
- 46 Train stop
- 47 Overly eager
- 48 Like argon
- 49 Ham it up
- 50 Play group
- 51 Certify
- 52 Singer Orbison
- 53 Plopped down
- 54 Retiring
- 55 Ocean depths
- 56 Region
- 57 Take it easy
- 58 Plumber's collection
- 59 Yoga need
- 60 Vegas
- 61 Vein contents
- 62 Classroom need
- 63 Viral concept
- 64 Train stop
- 65 Overly eager
- 66 Like argon
- 67 Ham it up
- 68 Play group
- 69 Certify
- 70 Singer Orbison
- 71 Plopped down
- 72 Retiring
- 73 Ocean depths
- 74 Region
- 75 Take it easy
- 76 Plumber's collection
- 77 Yoga need
- 78 Vegas
- 79 Vein contents
- 80 Classroom need
- 81 Viral concept
- 82 Train stop
- 83 Overly eager
- 84 Like argon
- 85 Ham it up
- 86 Play group
- 87 Certify
- 88 Singer Orbison
- 89 Plopped down
- 90 Retiring
- 91 Ocean depths
- 92 Region
- 93 Take it easy
- 94 Plumber's collection
- 95 Yoga need
- 96 Vegas
- 97 Vein contents
- 98 Classroom need
- 99 Viral concept
- 100 Train stop
- 101 Overly eager
- 102 Like argon
- 103 Ham it up
- 104 Play group
- 105 Certify
- 106 Singer Orbison
- 107 Plopped down
- 108 Retiring
- 109 Ocean depths
- 110 Region
- 111 Take it easy
- 112 Plumber's collection
- 113 Yoga need
- 114 Vegas
- 115 Vein contents
- 116 Classroom need
- 117 Viral concept
- 118 Train stop
- 119 Overly eager
- 120 Like argon
- 121 Ham it up
- 122 Play group
- 123 Certify
- 124 Singer Orbison
- 125 Plopped down
- 126 Retiring
- 127 Ocean depths
- 128 Region
- 129 Take it easy
- 130 Plumber's collection
- 131 Yoga need
- 132 Vegas
- 133 Vein contents
- 134 Classroom need
- 135 Viral concept
- 136 Train stop
- 137 Overly eager
- 138 Like argon
- 139 Ham it up
- 140 Play group
- 141 Certify
- 142 Singer Orbison
- 143 Plopped down
- 144 Retiring
- 145 Ocean depths
- 146 Region
- 147 Take it easy
- 148 Plumber's collection
- 149 Yoga need
- 150 Vegas
- 151 Vein contents
- 152 Classroom need
- 153 Viral concept
- 154 Train stop
- 155 Overly eager
- 156 Like argon
- 157 Ham it up
- 158 Play group
- 159 Certify
- 160 Singer Orbison
- 161 Plopped down
- 162 Retiring
- 163 Ocean depths
- 164 Region
- 165 Take it easy
- 166 Plumber's collection
- 167 Yoga need
- 168 Vegas
- 169 Vein contents
- 170 Classroom need
- 171 Viral concept
- 172 Train stop
- 173 Overly eager
- 174 Like argon
- 175 Ham it up
- 176 Play group
- 177 Certify
- 178 Singer Orbison
- 179 Plopped down
- 180 Retiring
- 181 Ocean depths
- 182 Region
- 183 Take it easy
- 184 Plumber's collection
- 185 Yoga need
- 186 Vegas
- 187 Vein contents
- 188 Classroom need
- 189 Viral concept</