

100TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF AHMADUL KABIR

Honouring an Institution



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It is hard to imagine that many years have gone by since the passing of Ahmadul Kabir (Monu Bhai to most of us). If you make it into your 80s and have remained a vital presence virtually upto the end of your days, you qualify to be designated as an institution. Monu, however, had more claims to being an institution than owed to his vitality and longevity. He represented a tradition in our public life that is now in danger of becoming extinct. He entered politics without any expectation of personal gain. He came from a social background where he had no strong financial need to make a livelihood from politics. In fact, he invested his personal fortune in supporting political causes that had little scope of prospering, and thereby propelling him into high office from where he could recoup his investments.

In the 1960s, he could have prospered by joining the Ayub Muslim League and could have walked into the cabinet in Islamabad or Dhaka anytime he wanted. But he chose to contest the election to the East Pakistan legislature in 1962 on the ticket of the National Awami Party (NAP), where he remained one of the most vocal spokesmen for the opposition. In the historic 1970 election to the Pakistan National Assembly, he contested and was defeated by Tajuddin Ahmad for the Ghorasal seat. After liberation, he could have joined the ruling Awami League, since he was well-known to Bangabandhu and much of the party leadership, but chose not to do so. After 1975, successive ruling parties would have been more than happy to have Monu Bhai join their ranks and would have offered him a cabinet post of his choice, but he chose to sit in the opposition benches when elected to the second and third Jatiya Sangsad.

To spend half a century in politics in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where Monu Bhai's uncle was once the chief minister of East Bengal, where he could virtually address every cabinet member of consequence in the national and provincial legislature by their first name and as *tumi*, without deriving political benefit from these relationships, makes him quite unique to the point of being labelled a political eccentric. He remained all his life on the "left," interpreted in its broadest sense. He was actively involved with the Jukta Front in their historic defeat of the Muslim League in 1954, and was a treasurer of the Krishak Samity. In 1957, he participated in the founding of NAP, which brought together the progressive elements of Pakistani politics with those who were also keen to promote regional autonomy, and was elected as a member of its national executive committee.

He remained with NAP, and when it split between its Pro-Moscow and Pro-Beijing components, he sided with the Moscow faction that in

the then East Pakistan was led by Prof. Muzaffer Ahmed. However, his brother-in-law, Syedul Hasan (murdered by the Pakistan army in 1971), was close to Maulana Bhashani who, when visiting Dhaka, usually stayed at his home. Monu Bhai, thus, continued to maintain excellent relations with many of the stalwarts of the Bhashani NAP even when the political divide was quite deep. Monu remained loyal to NAP, but when it fell apart in the 1980s, he constituted his own party, which could at best be termed a political fragment.

Monu's political identity and stature, however, did not derive from his political affiliations, but was much more personal. He continued to command influence, whether in



Ahmadul Kabir (1923-2003)

or out of parliament, or in his family constituency in Ghorashal, and could always draw upon the respect and connectivity he maintained across the entire political spectrum, first of Pakistan and then of Bangladesh. Before 1971, Monu's home was a caravanserai of visiting politicians from West Pakistan, many of whom stayed with him when they were in Dhaka or who ate at his superbly cuisined dinner table. All the top leaders of the West Pakistan NAP, such as Wali Khan, Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, Ataullah Mengal, and Mahmud Ali Kasuri, were regular visitors to his home.

Indeed, because of his capacity to bring diverse political figures together and his proverbial hospitality, Monu Bhai could reach out to a much wider constituency of politicians than those with whom he was politically linked. In this capacity, Monu was an important nexus between politicians not just of East and West Pakistan, but of varying political persuasions – a role he played right down to his last days. Thus, some of the most interesting and at times important political dialogues and even negotiations took place around Monu Bhai's dining table, where Laila Kabir was often an active participant in the heated discussions. Today, very few people

remain who retain the authority of Monu Bhai to bring contending political elements together to discuss politics in a civilised environment.

Monu Bhai had his own ideas and idiosyncratic views on politics and economics that were sustained by a rather wide and eclectic reading list as well as a rich body of experience. He was quite opinionated and often impatient with views he disagreed with, but he was always open to discussion.

Since I was many years his junior, not just in years but also in exposure to politics, I learnt much from him, but also had many disagreements, which he generously tolerated from a younger friend. When I joined hands with Kamal and Hameeda Hossain in 1969 to publish the weekly journal *Forum*, Monu Bhai generously put the services of the *Sangbad* press at our disposal to print the paper. I vividly remember spending late nights with Hameeda at the *Sangbad* office reading the final proofs before *Forum* was about to be printed, and Monu Bhai dropping in on us with words of advice and good cheer.

Monu had the stature and maturity to appreciate that politics was not a profession but a vocation. He was a true democrat who rejected an absolutist vision of politics, and recognised that you must listen to a variety of views and give space to dissenting opinions if democracy was to work. He was a genuinely secular person in the true sense of the term. This did not mean he was irreligious, but that he passionately believed that religion should not be abused for political gain.

His vision of politics was fully reflected in his more enduring contribution to Bangladesh's public life in the form of the daily *Sangbad*. Under Monu Bhai's patronage, *Sangbad* was a paper that gave a home to progressive journalists and offered them freedom to express themselves when most outlets were closed to them for political or commercial reasons. This tradition of committed journalism associated with *Sangbad* remained integral to the sustainability of progressive ideas in Pakistan and Bangladesh at a time when the political climate was hostile towards radical ideas. In the process, *Sangbad* helped to influence the consciousness of a generation of Bangladeshis who came of age during the period of Pakistani rule.

Over the last half century, few progressive papers could financially survive, and *Sangbad* did so largely because of Monu Bhai's courage and willingness to invest in his own beliefs. It is appropriate that *Sangbad* survives Monu Bhai and that his son Altamash Kabir (Mishu), today the managing director of *Sangbad*, continues to perpetuate the family tradition.

In an era when secularism has been erased from our constitution and is challenged in our society, when progressive thinking is being exorcised from our intellectual life amid globalisation, and a democratic culture is under perpetual threat by those who are sworn to uphold democracy, Monu Bhai's passing is not so much a requiem on a vanished age as a dirge for our vanquished hopes.

This article is part of a collection of tributes to Ahmadul Kabir.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Is ‘Faraaz’ just another movie?

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AM HASSAN and NAZIFA RAIDAH

The answer is a “yes” and a “no.” Yes, it’s just another movie that will lose significance as soon as a few weeks go by. Then again, it’s not “just another” movie. It is a lesson in horrific storytelling that revisits wounds that still bleed at the mention.

The Holy Artisan terror attack was a tragedy that many of us grew up with and lost our innocence to. There is merit in asking whether an Indian filmmaker, with no connection to Dhaka, had any right to recount the story that impacted thousands of lives he will likely never meet. Further, one must contextualise the movie to where it’s being released – India, a country that remains largely polarised with a populist government using Hindutva to persecute minority Muslims. Despite it not being director Hansal Mehta’s intention, it will play into the Indian government’s narrative that Muslims are the ideological, and perhaps geographical, “other.” In times like these, we should remember that everything is political, and the inherent fear of the “other” will likely propel ticket sales to *Faraaz*, feeding existing biases.

One can also wonder if the art is accommodating the victims and not turning their grief into a battering ram for box office profits. If we dissect similar instances in the West, a slate of 9/11 documentaries and archival movies – especially in the first five years after the tragic incident – moved forward with the blessings of the victims’ families. Many directors noted that they would not have commenced work had the families objected to how the story was focusing on the truth, contributing to its enduring legacy.

In general, it’s common for filmmakers to seek the consent of individuals or families who are depicted in films based on real-life events, especially if the portrayal could be seen as (in) sensitive or controversial. Mehta has had a long-standing reputation of doing autobiographical films, which, frankly, he has executed well. In *Shahid* (2013), he bases the film on the life of human rights lawyer and activist Shahid Azmi. *Aligarh* (2016) was a film inspired by the real-life incident of Dr Shrinivas Siras, a professor who was suspended from his job because of his sexual orientation. Then in 2020 came *Scam 1992*, a web series based on the life of stockbroker Harshad Mehta and his involvement in the securities scam of 1992, and *Chhalaang*, a sports drama film inspired by the true story of a physical training instructor in a government school.

How is it that such a seasoned director did not seek consent from the victims’ families when making *Faraaz*? Ruba Ahmed, mother of Abinta Kabir, one of the victims of the Holy Artisan attack, filed a case just before the pandemic to stop the movie. When no word was heard on the film’s production, she breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she wouldn’t have to revisit the trauma of losing her daughter on the big screen. Then two years went by and Mehta emerged with a fully finished film. There were hardly any promotions or campaigns last year, which was odd, given that’s what

one would typically expect before a film’s release. Why this secrecy? The director’s general disregard of the victims’ families’ emotions puts into question the extent of sensibility he might have applied into making the film itself.

In this regard, Ruba Ahmed’s argument against Mehta strikes the most relevance, “Nobody knew what happened behind those doors, nor can anyone tell what happened.” To pick and choose a hero and then highlight that speck of heroism as the most significant aspect in a hostage situation is probably not the most sensitive or sensible act that one could’ve expected from a veteran director.

There’s also the question of how the attackers will be represented. One of the attackers was a student of a private university in Bangladesh, who later transferred to Malaysia, where he was likely radicalised. After the media revealed his face to the public, many in Dhaka were in denial and shock,

When movies commercialise traumatic and culturally significant events like the Holy Artisan attack, the onus shifts on the filmmakers to introduce a humanising force that unites everyone in grief, pain and disgracement, while simultaneously restoring dignity by leveraging the truth in storytelling. Else, we keep our societies open to the enduring pedagogy of fear – instead of unity – furthering social polarity and the fear-based cognitive dissonance that does more net harm. Will ‘Faraaz’ and ‘Saturday Afternoon’ end up causing more harm commercialising trauma? Only time can tell.

either for knowing him personally or knowing of his life’s priorities even days before his unexplained disappearance.

He used to be another regular guy with mundane Monday problems, and with the English Premier League dominating his world. On the verge of his graduation, when he was supposed to be worried about his midterms and securing a job, how was it that he found himself worried about waging a “religious war”?

While the Holy Artisan attack reduced him to just another statistic, forever painting him and – just by virtue of association – his family as the “inherent evil,” it will not be unreasonable to expect pop culture to represent him and his surroundings in a way that represents all of us. For this attacker, too, was once one of us, before radicalisation put a wolf’s teeth in that lonely boy. Can an Indian filmmaker, making the first move on this story, go in-depth into the character of urban radicalisation that underpinned

IS’ prime recruitment strategy in Bangladesh? Or will he dilute it with a trailer and dialogues that sound reminiscent of Pakistani soldiers in movies like *Border* or *Lakshya*?

These cultural and community intricacies bear significant weight on projects such as these, galvanising more support for local productions to tackle local stories of seismic proportions. Not addressing these wounds not only tells a one-sided story, but also disrespects families who neither had anything to do with the attackers’ radicalisation, nor had any idea what really went down below.

However, there is a greater analysis of fear that becomes pertinent every time a terror attack is commercialised for profit. While pop culture invests its energy and big dimes into the representation of conquering fear, terrorism – and its enduring legacies – are different.

It’s more than just enhancing and enabling stereotypes – it’s about how terrorists actively work to create their identity through violence. Any social response that is mildly aggressive only feeds into their ideology, creating a never-ending, vicious cycle that breeds radicalisation, especially when terrorist activities are low.

It is not pop culture’s responsibility to rehabilitate the image of terrorists, radicals or religious fanatics. But when movies commercialise traumatic and culturally significant events like the Holy Artisan attack, the onus shifts on the filmmakers to introduce a humanising force that unites everyone in grief, pain and disgracement, while simultaneously restoring dignity by leveraging the truth in storytelling. Else, we keep our societies open to the enduring pedagogy of fear – instead of unity – furthering social polarity and the fear-based cognitive dissonance that does more net harm. Will *Faraaz* and *Saturday Afternoon* end up causing more harm commercialising trauma? Only time can tell.

What can be said for certain is that there is something like “too soon,” and there definitely is a wrong way to tell a story. But with meticulous research, one can separate the truth from political fiction, and bring comfort to a varied demographic reliving their trauma while they watch it on a big screen. So, if the question is, can artists explore culturally traumatising events? Absolutely; creative avenues should be afforded to filmmakers who exercise the highest care to craft stories that hold up to the standards, and it is not a process previously unheard of. Many victim families opposed movies regarding the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, but eventually agreed to the production once they were made privy to the research process, and when the plot and the sub-plots avoided significant dramatisation of events to protect the sanctity of lives lost.

Popular culture’s representation of these events helps narrate micro-stories that often don’t see the light of day. It’s not just a simple conversation about freedom of speech – all the information is out there for any keen person to view. But it’s about piecing all that information together to present valuable insights about an event that had ground-breaking significance to you, your family, your culture, your ambitions, and your future.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Fixed shoes
- 6 Pub pastime
- 11 Merge
- 12 Sung drama
- 13 Spotless
- 14 Daughter of Leda
- 15 Words on a candy heart
- 17 Break off
- 18 One, for Juan
- 19 Conductor Eugene
- 22 Signing need
- 23 Freshwater varieties
- 24 “— Amore”
- 25 Verb in an O’Neill title
- 27 Screening org.
- 30 Grassy

expanse

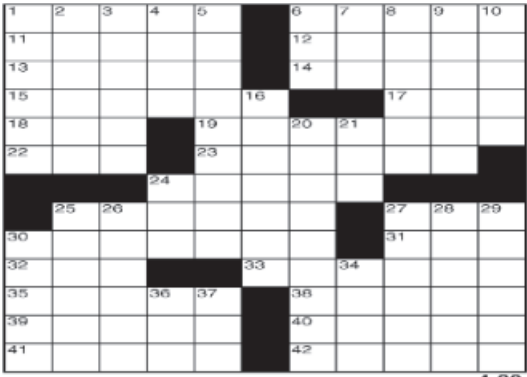
- 31 Equip
- 32 Ump’s call
- 33 New Orleans cooking stvle
- 35 Lama’s land
- 38 Safe spot
- 39 Custom
- 40 Bit of history
- 41 Suit material
- 42 High homes

DOWN

- 1 Absorb, like a sponge
- 2 One way to shop
- 3 Rests atop
- 4 Greek vowels
- 5 Cub Scout leader
- 6 Cry from

Homer

- 7 Zoo beast
- 8 Let up
- 9 Market directions
- 10 Yellow-gray
- 16 Unpredictable
- 20 Protective sort
- 21 Switz. neighbor
- 24 “I don’t need the details,” for short
- 25 Liner trip
- 26 Granola treat
- 27 Treasure stores
- 28 Hushed
- 29 FBI employees
- 30 White House acronym
- 34 Roof feature
- 36 Nest sight
- 37 Golf need



SATURDAY’S ANSWERS

