



VISUAL: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Why we can't get enough of aliens



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

April 26, apparently, was Alien Day. Before your imagination runs wild (which it is supposed to on this occasion), this was not a day when the first alien was discovered on Earth or when aliens celebrated their domination of our planet, or when they declared their “alienable” rights in the galaxies. It is a day for the celebration of science fiction, especially in films that have captured the fascination of many humans. Held on 4/26, it is a reference to LV-426, the moon where a human crew discovers aliens in the 1979 Ridley Scott film *Alien*. Thanks to the abundance of sci-fi films, many of us have grown up with that irresistible fascination for life outside Earth and a nagging desire to believe in its existence.

It is interesting, though, how the word “alien” is used in a country where many of the most famous films on aliens have been born. In the US, an alien is not just an extraterrestrial; it could simply mean someone from a foreign country. So an illegal alien (the lowest rung in the immigration ladder) is a foreigner who got into the US without legal documentation or stayed longer than permitted by their visa. A legal alien on the other hand, is a foreign-born person who has all the right documents to be in the US. Remember how Sting famously announced his immigration status: “I’m a legal alien. I’m an Englishman in New York”?

Other than that curious deviation, in general, an alien refers to a being from another planet. And it’s not just sci-fi movies that harp on extraterrestrials coming down to Earth, usually with sinister purposes (though sometimes they are cute little fellows who just want to go home).

The Pentagon, for years, had projects to investigate “military sightings of UFOs” (now known as “unidentified aerial phenomena”). In fact, just this February, after all the excitement over “Chinese balloons”

and other unidentified objects, a US Air Force general said he would “not rule out aliens or any other explanation,” though other defence and intelligence officials have said that the military has not yet found evidence of extraterrestrial activity in the US. Well, of course they have to say that, silly. It’s classified information.

Now that one thinks of it, even our own land could be a site of alien activity. Remember the alien abductions in films like *The X-Files* where humans were taken and then sent back, traumatised and with amnesia? Well, this could explain all the unexplained disappearances of people for days and months, after which they “reappeared” in far-off places, usually near the border, looking confused and disoriented. Most of all, they never talk about what had happened to them, just like those stupefied human abductees who can barely explain anything about their time aboard the alien ship.

In most sci-fi movies, the ill intentions of the aliens are amply displayed – how they just want to suck out our life force in order to survive, invade our planet altogether as their own abode is dying. This could explain the unsolved murders that keep adding to our repertoire of grisly events. The Sagar-Runi murder case, for instance, the probe report of which could not be submitted for the 97th time on April 9. If the concerned law enforcement agency has failed for 97 times to come up with some sort of deduction from the last 11 years of investigation, does this not sound a little “science fiction-y”? Other unsolved murders continue to pile up, with no clues regarding who could have carried them out. Sounds suspiciously like alien aggression.

Speaking of aggression, if any of you have seen *Mars Attacks*, you will know just how vicious and sarcastic little Martians can be. Not to mention, ugly as sin. Initially,

when the humongous-headed Martians arrive, the people of the world (which basically means the US) herald their coming as they would that of a messiah. People from all walks of life travel thousands of miles to welcome them with open arms and doves that symbolise peace and friendship. Only the intentions of these little green men are not as noble, as is soon revealed when the officials of the welcoming committee are blown into smithereens with a ray gun by a cackling Martian, triggered by a hippie setting free a dove. After a lot of mayhem and destruction, a young boy saves the day when he inadvertently plays a favourite song of his grandmother’s, whom he has rescued. The yodelling sounds of the song “*Indian Love Call*”, that the boy plays in the car, is by default the only weapon to annihilate the marauding aliens – the melody causes their slimy green brains to explode. The hidden message in this: it is music (denoting love and soft power, perhaps?), not state-of-the-art arms, that can conquer the enemy and save the world. Superpowers of the world, which are so infatuated with war and sophisticated weaponry, should take heed.

Science fiction may stretch scientific phenomena for dramatic effect and to ensure box office hits, but many things in sci-fi films have predicted future scenarios – like holograms, smartphones, smart watches, and eye glasses that can be used as computer screens. Whether we will ever encounter little green or grey men with creepy eyes and bulbous heads, or amorously shaped beings with superior intelligence, is something that at this time will remain within the confines of sci-fi films and literature. But the idea of life outside our planet is something that will fascinate scientists and ordinary people alike. There is something hopeful and humbling about thinking that there are living beings besides the ones we are familiar with in our earthly abode.

Meanwhile, there is that strange smell wafting from the kitchens, sending many a human out on the streets of Dhaka. Titas Gas says it’s because of high pressure of gas in the pipes and the idea that there are major leaks is baseless. Maybe it’s just aliens breathing.

Dr Zafrullah’s real utopia

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MIRZA HASSAN

With the passing of Dr Zafrullah Choudhury, one of our finest socialist visionaries and activists has ceased to dream and act. Along with Muhammad Yunus and Fazle Hasan Abed, Zafrullah was a global persona in Bangladesh’s domain of development and social change.

His socialism was cosmopolitan (inspired by Latin-American revolutions and socialist practices, China’s cultural revolution, and the radical social democracy of the 60s in Europe), pragmatic/concrete (using existing state and social institutions) and not merely oppositional or movement-centred (although he enormously contributed to these for decades – financially and logistically), and based on the proto-hegemonic radical humanist discourse of Maulana Bhashani.

More importantly, Zafrullah’s socialism was *useful* in contrast to ones offered by the dominant leftist parties of the country, characterised by theoretical obscurantism,

early 80s was a cognitive shock, to say the least. We were stopped at the main gate by smartly dressed female security guards and, horror of horrors, I immediately saw women drivers parking their jeeps. For a moment I felt like I was in *Sultana’s Dream*, the feminist utopian novel of Rokeya Shakawat Hossain. Dr Zafrullah was indeed one of the earliest advocates and implementers of positive discrimination policies for women, and such practices were constitutive of his real utopia. As is well known, he was also a great champion of male solidarity with feminist causes and eagerly committed resources for feminist activism.

The national drug policy of 1982 that Dr Zafrullah and his comrades conceived, which was soon adopted by the state, was an attempt to establish his real utopian vision on a national scale. The drug policy was essentially a manifesto of emancipatory reforms, which helped build emancipatory alternatives to health capitalism. A constitutive element of this policy was the de-commodification of healthcare, whereby life-sustaining services and other basic necessities (education, housing) would be de-linked from the profit-seeking market logic. The drug policy was enacted despite resistance from

surgery and decided to set up the facility at GK hospital, charging patients a minimal fee. His own cataract surgery was performed at Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital, despite strong reluctance from the surgeons who did not want to take risks with his eyes. Zafrullah’s point was, “If I do not trust GK for my own eye surgery, how can I convince others?”

Back in the early 80s, he took grave reputational risks as a socialist activist when he used dictator General Ershad to formulate and implement the drug policy. Such an entirely strategic decision generated adverse political consequences for him, but he never veered from his transformative vision. Most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, he risked his life by exposing himself physically while conducting numerous meetings in his quest to develop and promote cheaper knowledge-based solutions to the virus. Unfortunately, his noble efforts were sabotaged by those very local pharmaceutical bourgeoisie who greatly prospered thanks to his drug policy of 1982.

Now that he is gone, the million-dollar question is: who is going to carry forward his post-capitalist visions and protect and nurture the priceless institutions he built?



GK as a real utopia combines a vision and a method.

PHOTO: GONOSHASTHAYA KENDRA ARCHIVE

fractiousness, political irrelevance, and their inconsequentiality to the daily lives of the masses. It was useful because he was spectacularly successful in establishing a real utopia – the Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK). To quote radical sociologist Erik Olin Wright, “Real utopias transform the no-where of utopia into the now-here of creating emancipatory alternatives of the world as it could be in the world as it is.”

GK as a real utopia combines a vision and a method. The vision includes desire for a radically inclusive health system and the rejection of “capitalist realism” – an ideology (masquerading as a scientific approach) claiming that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system and it is impossible even to conceive a coherent alternative to it.

Dr Zafrullah conceived the capitalist health system as a dystopia. His vision was predominantly influenced by Cuba’s health system. The real utopia as a method points towards an effort to go beyond a desired vision and ground it in the local life of the community, institutionally specifying the pathways to realise the vision.

My first trip to the GK back in the

powerful adversaries – especially multinational drug companies. But over the successive decades, its progressive components were neutered or eliminated entirely, thanks to our political and state elites’ capitulation to the interests of commercial elites, both local and foreign. The current drug policy, alas, is nothing but a pale shadow of Dr Zafrullah’s deeply transformative vision.

As a radical institutional builder and reformer, Dr Zafrullah believed that one can only generate people’s trust in one’s visions and action if one has skin in the game. That is, one must show through her behaviour that she sincerely believes or meticulously follows what she preaches. This is particularly true for alternative system builders battling the hegemonic ideologies and institutional norms masquerading as common sense. Dr Zafrullah was a role model in this regard.

For his own treatment, serious or otherwise, he always turned to GK and later to Dhaka-based Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital. When I met him a couple of years ago, he told me that he was appalled to see private hospitals charging very high fees for a simple cataract

Unfortunately, our anaemic and progressively diminutive left – politically, intellectually, and socially – failed miserably to shoulder this responsibility in the past decades, and I do not expect them to do better in the future. Given the miserable state of our health system, characterised by regulatory capture by medical business elites, unbridled commercialisation of health services, toxic influences of partisan doctors’ associations, and the impotence of the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA), there is an urgent need to return the drug policy to its original form and replicate GK-type institutions across the nation. Inspired by the radical vision of Dr Zafrullah, we need to voice demands for decentralised health services, robust regulation of health capitalism, and community ownership/democratisation of health services.

Our progressive and socially conscious young generation, more attuned to the radical sensitivity of the 21st century, should come forward and fight for the emancipatory vision of Dr Zafrullah. I believe this would be the most fitting tribute that we can pay to the great socialist.

\$ /Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

wondrous
1 Applied gently
7 Bushy do
11 How some drugs are taken
12 Lethargic
13 Deep red
14 Coyote sound
15 Constricted
17 Support
20 Dancer
Castle
23 Swelled head
24 Subsequently
26 Pole worker
27 Water cooler
28 Pea's place
29 Sticky sweets
31 Singer Yoko
32 Work byproduct
33 Hearty dish
34 Strangely

DOWN

1 Friend of
Dopey
2 "Roses — red"
3 Saloon
4 Eye action
5 "Frozen" queen
6 Fabric worker
7 On the beach
8 Item on a window-sill
9 Join the crew

10 Symbol of wisdom
16 Ceremonies
17 Sugar source
18 Radiant
19 Brewing need
21 Nary a soul
22 Supply with funds
24 Mislead
25 Trick taker, often
30 Copy senders
33 Ridicule
35 Young boys
36 Inking
37 Guest's bed
38 Bustle
40 Relieve (of)
41 Apple sampler
42 German article

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WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	T	H	E		G	R	A	D	E
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