

[By Muhammad Badar Alam]

Active reactive

"It defies the laws of thermodynamics," says Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy in a measured baritone – neither defensive, nor aggressive – as he talks in a television show about a car reportedly powered by water. He takes great pains to explain, without changing the pitch and the tone of his voice, as to what the laws of thermodynamics are and how Agha Waqar, the inventor of the so-called water car, vainly claims to have challenged them. A little later in the discussion, tempers are fraying and the argument is subsumed under a cacophony of accusations and counter-accusations. "Agha Waqar is a fraud; he must be arrested and tried for hoodwinking people with his water car that simply cannot be," Hoodbhoy is able to convey these words across the audience above the noise — his voice raised and agitated and his tone clearly belligerent.

This is quintessential Hoodbhoy — a scientist by training, a polemicist and

activist by choice. As he can alternate between the two within minutes – sometimes in the same minute – he either evokes homage or elicits hatred, depending on who is talking about which side of his personality.

His long-time friend and fellow physicist Dr A H Nayyar calls him a "brilliant mind". Zakir Thaver, a Hoodbhoy fan by his own admission, says he once interviewed Steven Weinberg, co-recipient of the 1979 Nobel prize for physics along with Pakistani physicist Dr Abdus Salam and Weinberg said, "I admire [Hoodboy's] writing and have quoted him." He also asked Thaver to convey to Hoodbhoy that "I expressed my appreciation for what he does."

Damon Lynch, an American blogger and a doctoral student in anthropology in 2007 called Hoodbhoy a "modern Muslim hero" for taking up the cause of social, political and educational reform. "He could have easily been working in a prestigious Western university, living a comfortable lifestyle.



Instead he chose to work in an environment which is at times deeply hostile to his cherished ideas on science and humanity," Lynch wrote in a blog post.

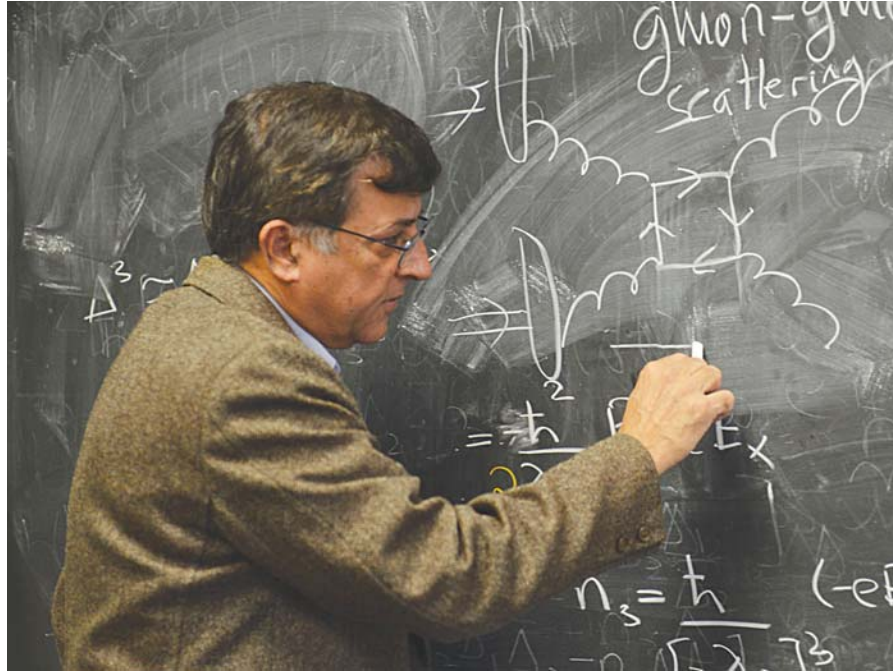
For the critics, Hoodbhoy is an egotistical publicity seeker who courts controversy for the heck of it. Some of his greatest detractors go to the extent of saying that he is rigid and arrogant, "imposes his opinion" on others and "intrudes into subjects in which he has no expertise." For a sworn opponent who happens to be a senior teacher at the Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad, where Hoodbhoy has spent 37 years teaching physics, "his activism is based on rhetoric rather than facts."

A junior teacher at the University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, is unhappy with Hoodbhoy for bringing religion into debates over education, critical thinking and scientific aptitude. "He drags religion into scientific and educational discussions," he says as he recalls attending a seminar on education where Hoodbhoy was the lead speaker. "Hoodbhoy seems to make it look like as if every problem has its origin in religion," he says, without wanting to be named to avoid controversy.

Hoodbhoy makes little effort to endear himself to those he cannot agree with. He never thinks twice before using the strongest possible words for people he wants to show in a bad light. Teachers who beat up their students are "sadistic bastards", Urdu historical fiction writer Nasim Hijazi is a "joker", Interior Minister Rehman Malik is "a venal hack and as crooked as they come", the government's "pants are soaking wet" and President Asif Ali Zardari has "plundered national wealth" like the disgraced Tunisian dictator Ben Ali. This prompts his camp followers to declare him an outspoken social commentator who fearlessly speaks his mind but his opponents see his unqualified denouncing of others as unworthy of a scientist.

Hoodbhoy's life story reinforces

Arif Ali/White Star



such binary opposites which have become a way of defining his academic excellence and his highly polarising political and social ideas in one go. He was born Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy to an Ismaili Muslim family which had migrated from Hyderabad Deccan to Karachi during Partition. His paternal grandfather had set up the first Ismaili Jamaat Khana in Karachi. Hoodbhoy briefly converted to Sunni Islam during his school days but ended up being a secular humanist, initially inspired by the writing of George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell which he started reading in his early teens. "I did not choose my country of birth or my religion. After all, I could have just as easily been born a Buddhist in Tibet," is how he explains his credo to the Herald. "I have a relatively detached view that enables me to look at all faiths ... without becoming emotional about any," he says. "The important thing is to be ethical and humane. That's what secular humanism is all about."

Hoodbhoy went to the best American educational institutions to study science, only to develop strong hatred for the American imperial practices ("when I left the United States in 1973 immediately after my bachelor's and master's degrees, I was so angry at the CIA-engineered overthrow of Salvador Allende that I thought I'd never return there," he tells the Herald in a telephonic interview). He has been involved in ceaseless activism on issues having nothing or little to do with particles of the matter and the laws of thermodynamics that he spent so much time studying. For the most part of his teaching career he worked at a government university but still he never saw merit in Pakistan's public sector education. He possesses a doctorate in nuclear physics which, in public imagination, is synonymous only with the nuclear bomb yet he has been a vocal champion of dismantling all nuclear weapons in South Asia in particular and the world in general. The list of opposites persist endlessly.

Hoodbhoy says he is a product of what the circumstances of his life have made him to be. "Many things go into the making of an individual: home, school, circumstances, and the people one encounters," he says. He describes how Eqbal Ahmed and Noam Chomsky were enormously influential in making him "aware of the problems of the time — imperial domination, brutalities against the Vietnamese and Palestinians and others, the culture of war in America, etc." Perhaps the most important

thing he learnt from them was that “intellectuals should be agents of change ... rather than passive spectators.”

Hoodbhoy’s penchant for activism, however, has been a double-entendre for him — quite literally: either a selfless pursuit of collective good, in the eyes of his admirers or a selfish desire to hog the limelight, according to his detractors. When his fans say he is uncompromising (he launched a scathing attack against the policies of the Higher Education Commission even though at the time it was headed by his close friend Dr Ataur Rehman), his foes interpret it as being stubborn (he told an interviewer that in 1982, he “had such a blazing fight on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon” with one of his American colleagues on a project that “it forever ended our relationship”). When Hoodbhoy’s friends say he has fearlessly challenged authorities “without worrying about personal harm or injury,” the latter immediately remind you that the job security he enjoyed because of the QAU, a public sector institution, allowed him to wage the battles he waged. “The moment he tried to do the same at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (Lums), the university management threw him out because a private university will not allow activism that does not go well with its ethos,” says the senior QAU teacher who has a history of differing sharply and openly with Hoodbhoy.

His activism is also sometimes seen as clashing with his professional responsibilities as a teacher. In a recent email exchange with Adil Najam, vice-chancellor at Lums, Hoodbhoy cites a series of reasons on why the university would not extend his teaching contract beyond December 2012. The first of these reasons alleges that his primary mission “seems to be to fix the world.” Hoodbhoy, the academician, is all tangled up within Hoodbhoy, the activist — so allege his critics.

A Lums student, who studied under Hoodbhoy in the last year or so, rubbishes these allegations and calls him “an excellent teacher who helps his students understand all the different aspects of an issue,” without projecting his own point of view as the only valid argument. “He encourages debate and dissent,” she tells the Herald but does not want to be identified because of the contract controversy. “Most Lums students would want him to be a part of the faculty because of his professional stature and teaching skills but they won’t say this to avoid becoming party to the conflict over the termination of his contract,” she adds.

Hoodbhoy himself insists that he maintains a clear distinction between his teaching and his activism. “I have never mixed politics with science in my physics classes. Even when I teach a political science course, I ensure that my students get exposed to all important opposing points of view as well,” he says. An academic, he adds, “should not be a propagandist inside the classroom.” But then he retorts: “If I want to fix my country or the world in my time that is my business. Outside of the classroom, I am a free person and can speak my mind on issues that move me.”

In a backhanded way, however, he admits that once in a while the teacher and the activist in him may be difficult to disengage. “Occasionally, as you might expect, it does become a problem,” he says. For someone espousing and working to promote liberal, pacifist, secular and rational ideals, such problems are milestones along the road rather

than obstacles in the course.

“Controversy is courted by people who want to make change happen,” says a young academic who has known Hoodbhoy closely for years.

This may lead to the next puzzle: why bother about the world if worrying about it creates only problems? Hoodbhoy’s answer is that he could not help it because of his exposure to political ideas during his studies in the US. “I was a Marxist in my philosophy. I

believed that socialism and then communism was the only way for our society to go forward,” he said in a 12-year-old online interview with Canadian academic Dr K Sohail. When Hoodbhoy returned to Pakistan as a 22-year-old fresh graduate, he “got involved with trade unions and went to villages to spread Chairman Mao’s message.”

The circumstances in Pakistan at the time were perfect for someone like him to attract a life-long bug for politics and activism. The country was bitterly divided along political and ideological lines following Bangladesh’s secession in 1971 and every public idea and institution was a contested territory. When he joined the QAU as a teacher in

1973, the then vice-chancellor of the university, Kaneez Yousuf, told him that she was “having problems with the Jamaat [Jamaat-e-Islami]. Maybe you can help us.”

Ziaul Haq took over power only a few years later, giving yet another impetus to Hoodbhoy’s activism. “We used to produce a magazine, named Amoor-e-Pakistan, and fight against martial law. We used to write slogans on the walls,” Hoodbhoy told his Canadian

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interviewer. "Zia said, 'we should get rid of this cancer of politics from QAU.' My friends were put in jail and tortured brutally." Hoodbhoy was lucky enough to have left for Washington just in time before the crackdown to complete his post-doctoral studies; he returned to Pakistan only in 1983.

Hoodbhoy says he could have stayed away from activism after that but "was shocked to see that the Islamisation of knowledge had taken place" in Pakistan by then. "If science and religion had been confined to their respective spheres, I would certainly have never entered into the fray," he tells the Herald and describes how it was a "big shock" for him "to enter a physics department whose chairman had calculated the temperature of hell and the speed with which heaven was receding from earth." So, he decided at the time to fight against this "by writing and speaking."

Many in the leftist, liberal and secular circles, however, find it difficult to endorse his entire ideology and methods of activism. A prominent leftist academician tells the Herald that he disagrees with Hoodbhoy "on many things, including his framing of the secularist agenda which I think should be part of a more holistic left agenda."

Another activist teacher at the QAU is more than just opposed to Hoodbhoy's political ways and means and sees them as vehicles of his personal

ambition. Hoodbhoy represents – and is supported by – a lobby of highly educated, urban, middle-class intellectuals who hate what the activist teacher calls a "native agenda" which seeks more power for those who have always remained at the receiving end of the centre's wrong policies in Pakistan. For instance, "Hoodbhoy has always challenged the Higher Education Commission [HEC] for its ineffective policies and bad management but he supported the demand that the HEC and higher education remain in the federal jurisdiction when they were to be devolved to the provinces under the 18th Amendment."

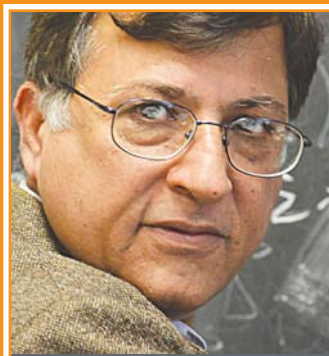
To some extent, Hoodbhoy seems to espouse an urban bias towards politics in Pakistan though admittedly in a different context. "To be sure there are scattered islands of normality in urban Pakistan. But these are shrinking," he told an interviewer for Viewpoint, an online magazine, after the assassination of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer in 2011. He also believes that the Muttahida Quami Movement which he sees as being "ethnically driven" – as well as Baloch nationalists – are secular but appreciates that their political appeal is narrow. "They constitute a tiny fraction of the population."

With respect to other political players, Hoodbhoy appears to be completely disillusioned with all of them regardless of whether their agenda is nativist or centrist. "One has only a choice between political parties that are bad, and those that are very bad. None call for a Pakistan that treats all citizens equally irrespective of their religion, sect, and ethnicity," he says in an email exchange with the Herald.

Having spent so much time and energy in fighting what can easily be called "lost battles" for secularism, humanism, educational and political reform, what does Hoodbhoy have to show for all the hostility he has earned? It is easy to point out his failures — or at least one of the biggest and the recent among them: Pakistan's most renowned private university no longer wants him to be a part of its faculty irrespective of the fact that no other living Pakistani physicist is as well known abroad than Hoodbhoy is and that he is a much sought after commentator for local and foreign media outlets on anything related to Pakistan.

Hoodbhoy himself is not effusive about his achievements. "I don't think I have done very much," he said in a 2000 interview with Sohail. "Dr Nayyar and I managed to save the QAU land from political predators," he says and then hastens to qualify even that by saying that they were successful "because of a fortuitous combination of circumstances, not the least of which was Benazir Bhutto's dismissal from office in 1996." Yet he does not sound bitter and defeated. "Think of a bee that's trying to sting a rogue elephant. Does it have a right to be bitter when it fails to deter the elephant from trampling a part of the jungle it was trying to protect?" he asks in an interview with the Herald.

Hoodbhoy once likened Dr Abdus Salam to the mythological figure of Sisyphus. "To me [Salam] is more of a Sisyphus figure: trying and failing, trying and failing," he said. This could very well be true for him as well but for him the war is far from over. "There's no harm in being frustrated, but it should be a positive kind of frustration that leads one to strive harder. The choice is between fight and flight. The latter is easy but only the privileged have the option. The former is hard, but it is a battle that must be fought," he says, and then sums it up with a big dollop of optimism. "Pakistan is by no means as bad as medieval Europe. If those people could escape their Dark Ages, surely we can escape these dark times." ■



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