

Indian Left: A farewell for Praful Bidwai

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Friends, there was no video livestreaming or any of that for yesterday's funeral. This is by no means a comprehensive account, and there may be much that has been inadvertently left out. It is just a brief recalling of that event using words in the old fashioned way, even as the memories of it are still fresh in one's mind.

The electric crematorium at Lodhi Road, Delhi, is a dreary place at the best of times (and it sees mostly the worst of times). But it has this magnificent Neem tree that is really very special. Its whorls of leaves give shade under a punishing sun and seem to embody solace for the grief-stricken and the promise of better days. It was under that tree, on a pedestal decked with red rose petals and marigolds that Praful's body was brought to rest awhile so that he could share for the last time a few moments with his closest friends as he had on innumerable occasions in the past. There was family too — his sister, Meera, and two nephews, Chaitanya and Nikhil — as well a congregation of those who valued what he stood for as a public intellectual, a communicator, and a human being. Meanwhile playing in the background in a muted way was the classical Hindustani music that Praful had always loved. The powerful voices of Kumar Gandharva and Mallikarjun Mansur unleashed streams of beauty and pain, as if they were being struck down physically by the departure that was to take place.

Around 300 people had gathered who formed a tight knot around Praful's figure framed by flowers, wreaths and a bowl of roses. He was wearing the shirt he used to wear on party occasions and his face had a certain air of tranquility and peace about it that was so greatly consoling for all those who were looking upon. It seemed as if he was just about to begin a conversation about governmental repression or trends in an election or why forest sinks are so valuable in an era of global warming or any of the innumerable topics that he could engage with endlessly during his famed morning telephonic conversations, or over some drinks and dinner (a conversation that may have also included an exposition on the finer points of Maharastrian cuisine as well).

Sonia Jabbar, a close friend of Praful, stepped forward to read a brief statement on behalf of everyone gathered there. She began with the words, "We are stunned by Praful's tragic death... our loss is at a personal level of course but also, very crucially, at a much larger social and political level." She also dwelt on the one cause among the many that Praful so passionately espoused, that of Palestine, and read out a statement from the Embassy of the State of Palestine.

Among those who paid their tributes to him by placing a handful of petals at his feet were the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, whose political progress Praful had been observing very closely and for whom he had had a store of advice (including ways to control motorized traffic in the city). Kejriwal probably did not know any of this, but he paused from a busy morning to come in and pay his respects, as did the minister of education, Manish Sisodia. Among many representatives from the county's Left political spectrum was Prakash Karat, Brinda Karat, M.A. Baby, D. Raja. Praful had engaged with them often and had mounted fierce critiques of their political positions on occasion. Social activists across the spectrum were also there, as were academics and representatives from the legal and cultural fraternity. Many journalists whom Praful had interacted with on a daily basis, and from whom he would draw insights and pass on perspectives were there. It was amazing how many of the mourners, in private conversations with us, recalled that they had "just talked to/met up

with Praful". All this is a testimony to his amazing sociability and engagement with friends.

As silence fell, music once again filled the air as the political committed cultural couple, Shamsul Islam and Neelima Sharma, who were by Praful's side, broke out into song:. "Lal jhanda le kar comrade aage badhte jayenge...Tum nahi rahe, iska gham hain par, phir bhai hum ladte jayenge" (We will raise the red flag and go forward...Even though the grief of your death is with us, we will continue the struggle...")

All too soon it was time for the last lap of this journey. His bier, carrying the banners of Palestine and the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (CNDP) which he had helped to found, was carried by his comrades, men and women. Ritu Menon lent a shoulder to it. Some of us followed and soon the procession found itself in the dark smoky interiors of the electric crematorium. Sorrow at the imminent parting gripped everyone gathered there, as Shebha Chhachhi and others raised revolutionary slogans in Praful's memory including the evergreen "Inquilab Zindabad" (long live revolution) and "Lal Salaam" (red salute). Amidst these voices of salutation, the body slipped into the cremation furnace.

Praful, much mourned, gone far too soon.

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