

Tribute» [By Saram Bokhari](#)

## In Memoriam: AR Nagori (1939 - 2011)



*AR Nagori*

**P**rofessor Abdul Rahim Nagori is no longer with us, and with his death, Pakistan has lost its most eminent voice in political art consciousness. His style was direct. It relied less

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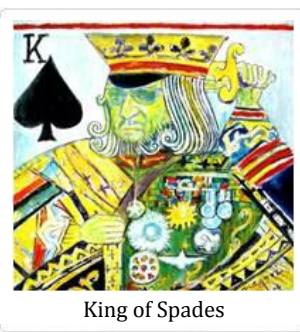
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on allusion and more on a direct pictorial display that was effective in getting his message across. In a country that has lived under the shadow of four military dictators, it is a feat to continue producing politically conscious work, when making beautiful figures or landscapes would have been the easier option. Nagori was not cut from that cloth.

A country that has lived under heavy censorship throughout its history, Pakistan has also been very good at producing artists with a conscience. Habib Jalib was the voice of the students in the 60s, penning couplets that are etched in the history of this country, or simply his most famous one: Aise dastoor ko, subhe be-noor ko, mein nahi maanta mein nahi jaanta. Or Riaz Shahid's Zarqa, Pakistan's first ever diamond jubilee movie, which showed the struggle between Palestinians and Western Zionist forces but was also a commentary on Pakistan, in particular the scene where actress Neelo (the director's wife in real life) is dancing, a reference to an early incident when the Shah of Iran on his visit to Pakistan wanted her to dance for him as a source of entertainment. Nagori will be remembered in the company of such people.



King of Spades



King of Hearts

Very few fine artists in Pakistan can claim that they are political artists, in the true essence of that term. This is not to say that most artists here do not have a sense of political consciousness or have not touched on social issues. For example, Ijaz ul Hassan's paintings are political, you see hope in his paintings but not directly, rather indirectly. A man who himself has been involved with trade union movements and student activism, Ijaz ul Hassan is well aware of his surroundings. Salima Hashmi painted against the nuclear test conducted by Pakistan; her series on social issues such as women are very well documented. As Faiz's daughter, one cannot question her political inclinations.

Nagori's canvasses show the true picture, and one glance can explain what message he is trying to tell via his palette and paintings. His three paintings, called the King of Spades, King of Hearts and King of Clubs, each depicting one of three military dictators of Pakistan, is a case in point. His King of Spades represents a dishonest lawyer, a person who is authoritative and not easy to get along with. He makes this King of Spades General Musharraf. Anyone familiar with his tenure knows Nagori is talking here about Musharraf's sacking of the Chief Justice.

**It is a feat to continue producing politically conscious work, when making beautiful figures or landscapes would have been the easier option**



Regrets of Mahatma

Nagori's King of Hearts, which has the face of the first military ruler Ayub Khan, is a commentary on that man's reign. The King of Hearts historically is also called the 'suicide king'. As history will tell you, Ayub Khan made more than a few suicidal decisions. Pakistan fought the 1965 war under his rule, a war that, according to the myth cultivated in this country, Pakistan won (we continue to celebrate Defence Day in September every year). It was also the centralization of the Pakistani state, as carried out by Ayub, that caused the alienation of East Pakistan and led eventually to its secession.

And finally Nagori's King of Clubs has the figure of General Zia. The King of Clubs represents a person who wants to control all mental processes. Zia did just that - whether it was through censorship or draconian laws, he tried to distort our society. He wanted it to become an "Islamic society" and today we can see the repercussions of his decisions.

But the national-political is not where Nagori stopped. His mind was equally cognizant of the social injustices thrust upon the marginal, especially women. His Lal Masjid series shows burqa-clad women attacking innocent women. He was the voice of protest against the treatment of women. Beena Sarwar describes him thus: "Irreverent, bold, and

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passionate - that's how I remember Nagori, who was very much part of the struggle - and particularly supportive of the Women's Action Forum - against General Zia's military dictatorship."



King of Clubs

In today's art there is a general shift away from protest. As a society we have become apathetic towards injustice. The new contemporary artists showing their work are not focusing on protest and if a political message is directly or indirectly being shown in art, it is because of the fad. There is no genuine engagement behind the work of art.

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In this respect we have our cartoonists to thank, who have kept our political consciousness alive through satire. Cartoonists such as Feica, Sabir Nazir, Zahoor and now the deceased Vai Ell (Yusuf Lodhi) have a history that should be celebrated. Feica and Sabir are both graduates of the National College of Arts, Lahore. If they had chosen to dwell exclusively upon the fine arts, I have no doubt they would have been considered among the very best this country has produced. But instead they chose a different path.

Feica's was the prominent voice against the military rule of Zia during the 80s, when censorship in newspapers forced editors to print blank columns out of protest. Sabir has been making cartoons for this publication for over two decades, and Zahoor is considered to be right up there as one of the very best cartoonists.

Vai El has a book of witty cartoons called Bhutto My Master. It is a collection of his satirical cartoons from the Bhutto period. Currently the book is out of print, and I do not know if any of his cartoons survive. In other countries, museums are built to document and preserve the work of their cartoonists, a fact that has not dawned upon us so far.



That is not to say museums are not being built to showcase the work of master artists, which is a commendable effort; but there are others whose



Missing Persons

abilities as artists should be lauded and made a part of our history. At the moment it looks like the work of these people will be forgotten once they are gone; and that will be a sad loss indeed.