

National flag carrier's sickening image

It urgently needs overhaul to function viably

BIMAN Bangladesh Airlines should get its basics right so as not to make a mockery of its high selling point: your home in the air. In the fiercely competitive world of civil aviation business where air travellers have a wide range of choices to pick from, the motto for the national airliner has to be this: either standardise and improve or perish.

So, the Biman's task is basically two-fold: one, standardise the services to make the grades with the other airlines to meet up with air passengers' expectations across the board; and two, improve on those to stay firmly in the business. For, we must know travellers do not choose an airline out of compassion for a developing country it has originated from; they demand their money's worth. How poor Biman's performance has been that our countrymen who should be normally inclined to fly Biman from a sense of loyalty to the national airliner are feeling increasingly disenchanted with it!

The other route is just going through the motions until such time as the whole structure crumbles under the weight of inexorable losses.

Anybody flying Biman, especially on its international routes, must have some frustrating anecdotes to tell. The tale of poor customer services begins with hassles regarding reservation, ticketing, confirmation and reconfirmation of seats. It then courses through flight delays, transit inconvenience and hotel accommodation hiccups before finishing through chain effects, such as business or private appointments falling through and effective *sojourn* having to be reduced or visa perhaps requiring to be extended.

Biman authorities seem oblivious of the fact that time is money.

We have heard of a Kolkata flight scheduled to reach Dhaka at 20.35 hrs local time landing at the ZIA at 3 am on the next morning. It is either mechanical fault or turbulent air pocket ahead of a flight that causes delays. But there is a serious need for improving the quality of announcement during such exigencies.

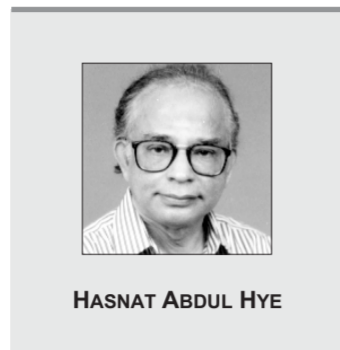
At first, nobody would seem to know what has gone wrong; then regrets are blurted out belatedly without assigning any particular reason for the delay. To top these off, there usually isn't just one announcement of the expected time of departure (ETD) and that of arrival (ETA), but a few to gnash your teeth in exasperation.

These are symptoms of Biman's serious ailment. And, we have none other than the State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin himself to diagnose the core illness. When a minister waxes so critical of the goings-on under his charge, how chagrined he must have been at these! But the authenticity of his evaluation makes it a compelling necessity for him to act on his own knowledge to bring about a positive change in the situation.

The minister has cited excessive trade unionism, lack of accountability among officials, misuse of power and funds and overstaffing as the reasons for Biman being a perennially losing concern. Needless to say, with 14 trade unions operating in the corporation, it is a thoroughly faction-ridden organisation devoid of any unified sense of purpose to be making it commercially viable. The decision-making powers of the ministry or the Biman top-brass have been practically hijacked by the trade unions. Otherwise, how routine transfers could not be made 'without consulting with union leaders' and, even a 'bearer could be made the manager of a motel'. Obviously, that is the height of trade union tyranny calling for immediate corrective action. Not only are there sinecures at home but also bloated overseas offices that account for Tk 2.5 crore in wasteful salary payments every year. Such malcontent has to be mercilessly weeded out.

Nothing short of a desperate medicine can cure Biman's desperate malady. The government must throw a challenge to the corporation daring them to live up to national expectations within a time-bound plan or voluntarily accept private sector take-over.

Of clear sky and clouds of war



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

TO the outside world India and Pakistan are dangerously on the brink of war. India says that there are no clouds of war and the sky is clear. Pakistan declares that it does not want war and will not be the first to start one. Surreal as it may appear, the world has been assured that what it is witnessing is nothing more than a game of war.

Even if a game it is very much like playing with fire. The players can burn themselves to death or injure horrendously with collateral devastation all around. When the war game involves a million strong army massed on both sides of border in an eyeball to eyeball confrontation the danger of a shooting war becomes all too real. The fact that the adversaries are nuclear powers turns this prospect into a chilling nightmare. It is not that the two countries, locked in a battle of nerves, are not aware of the cataclysm looming on the horizon. But if both are knowingly playing the high stake game it is because they are prisoners of their history. The macabre dance of death seen from time to time in Kashmir is a replay of the greater tragedy of partition that took place in 1947. Kashmir is the unfinished chapter in the saga of partition written in blood, sweat and tears. The outside world, particularly the one represented by big powers, has maintained studied indifference to the dispute over Kashmir even though it led the two countries into three wars. Perhaps it was fondly hoped that time, the great healer,

would resolve the problem. But events have not turned that way and the confrontation over Kashmir has continued to be ratcheted up with the risk of another round of war becoming ever more close.

Development and possession of nuclear weapons by the two arch-enemies have now awakened the world to the catastrophe that the unsolved dispute might engulf the sub-continent with. The events of eleventh September last year with

mobilized seven and half lakh of its army along the border with Pakistan it was a case of calculated brinkmanship. The objectives of this war game seem to be two fold: India expected Pakistan to stop supporting the militants in Kashmir in default of which there would be war. Secondly, on the basis of this risk of war India hoped to galvanize support from the coalition led by America to stamp out terrorism through coercive diplomacy. Her brinkman-

Moreover, it is argued that Pakistan herself being a victim of terrorism cannot be branded as a terror state. India is not impressed by these explanations because she is single-mindedly pre-occupied with Kashmir. It is what takes place in Kashmir to challenge her authority that influences her views about Pakistan. It strongly believes that the source of cross border terrorism is in Pakistan and unless it is destroyed through pressure on Pakistan or a

hasten a change in the coalition's policy. In keeping with this strategy the rhetoric of bellicosity has also changed. Addressing the troops at the frontline the Indian Prime Minister exhorted them to be prepared for a decisive war. The jingoist outburst was meant as much for Pakistan as for the arbiters of decision in world affairs. This open invocation of war was soon tempered by metaphorical observations about there being no clouds of war and the sky being

to cave in. This being the strategy Pakistan is prepared for the long haul. But if India starts a war, losing patience or accidentally, Pakistan will retaliate. Being out-manned and out-gunned it will be forced to use nuclear weapons. This is the doomsday scenario, which appears increasingly likely given the prolonged confrontation and impasse along the border.

If the big powers hope that risk of war can be averted through counseling restraint on both sides, they are not being practical. The stage for that has passed. It is high time for third party mediation or adjudication to resolve the problem once for all. For this the root cause has to be addressed. Here several alternatives are present by way of solutions. The first is to call a plebiscite where the Kashmiris on both sides give their verdict about the future status of their territory. Most likely, they will vote for independence, which may be seen as victory for neither India nor Pakistan. There is a UN resolution in this regard, which can be dusted off for implementation. The second alternative is to formally recognize the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, with some territorial adjustments, as the de jure border. Such a formalization of the LoC will be rigid and will not allow for free movement of population across the border. The people in the two Kashmiris will enjoy autonomy guaranteed by constitution. The third alternative is a variation of the second under which people on both sides would move freely across the border. All these alternatives are known but have not been discussed with seriousness. These should provide a framework for mediation by big powers. A solution based on any of these alternatives can be the basis of a lasting peace. The people of the sub-continent are anxiously waiting for a clear sky without clouds and lightning. So should the rest of the world.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

If the big powers hope that risk of war can be averted through counseling restraint on both sides, they are not being practical. The stage for that has passed. It is high time for third party mediation or adjudication to resolve the problem once for all. For this the root cause has to be addressed. Here several alternatives are present by way of solutions...A solution based on any of these alternatives can be the basis of a lasting peace. The people of the sub-continent are anxiously waiting for a clear sky without clouds

the need to have a global compact against terrorism have added a new dimension to the crisis. The flurry of diplomatic activities initiated by the big powers in the recent past when the crisis exploded in the wake of the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament and currently seen now is obviously aimed at diffusing the tension. But the crisis has reached a stage where merely turning the adversaries from the brink will not be enough. Nothing short of mediation, even adjuration, can retrieve the situation from spiraling out of control. If there is any lull it is likely to be temporary after which the crisis will be back with greater ferocity.

Present belligerence notwithstanding, the declarations by both countries about refraining from war can be taken at their face value. Their statements are not double entendre or prevarication. They do not need outsiders to tell them that even a limited war will be costly both in human and material terms. Armed with nuclear weapons they may be tempted or forced by accident to take the war to directions where Armageddon awaits. So, it is quite plausible to believe that when India

ship is not so much directed at Pakistan's contumacy, as it is to nudge wavering America into action. But apart from general rhetoric against terrorism and advising Pakistan to refrain from supporting cross border terrorism America has not so far obliged India by forging a common alliance against terrorist targets in Pakistan. After the latest attacks by militants in Kashmir American response has been more direct and its criticism of Pakistan's sabre-rattling through missile tests has been harsh. But still it falls short of the action that is expected by India. Obviously, Pakistan has not outlived its usefulness to the coalition, particularly its leader, America. Whatever may be its long-term policy America will not alienate Pakistan anytime soon.

On the other hand, America can claim that by bringing Pakistan on board against terrorism not only the Afghan war was won successfully, it was also possible to persuade her to adopt a hard-line against internal extremist groups. Ban on several extremist groups and arrests of their leaders are seen as proof of this policy of coaxing and cajoling.

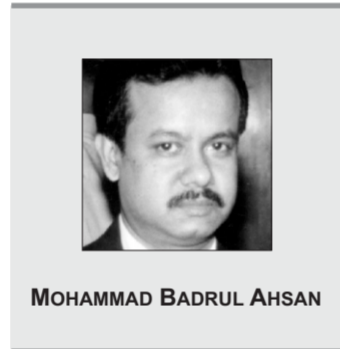
concerted attack the wound will continue to fester. Pakistan's attempt to describe the armed attacks on army positions and civilians as acts of freedom fight launched by indigenous militants does not wash with India. Whether there is actual incursion by armed fighters from across the border or not, there is little doubt that without some support from Pakistan the bloody insurgency in Kashmir could not continue so long. The fact that Pakistan openly admits its support for insurgency in Kashmir and the declaration by President Musharraf that "Kashmir is in our blood" establish her involvement in Kashmir, in one form or other. Though this support is sustained by local militants this is abatement of terrorism in the eyes of India. The failure of the coalition, particularly America, to take note of this is extremely frustrating to her. Small wonder, that it has accused the big powers of using double standard in attacking terrorism. Apart from naming and shaming the coalition India has embarked on a strategy of repeated brinkmanship, each successive one more belligerent than the previous one, to

clear. But the poet-Prime Minister of India also added enigmatically that there could be lightning even in a clear sky.

One may fault the Indian Prime Minister of embarking on verbal equivocation. But even with a modicum of sympathy one can appreciate the precariousness of his position. India does not want to plunge the sub-continent into a war that may end up in nuclear holocaust. But it also cannot absorb the destabilizing attacks by militants in Kashmir with equanimity. It expects the outside world to unite with her, which will force the militants to retreat and Pakistan to stop giving support (in whatever form). Within a coalition, a limited war against destabilizing targets would perfectly suit her goals. But this begs the question: Is the outside world, particularly America, willing to go along with her in the campaign against terrorism?

For Pakistan, war is not a choice nor of overriding interest. It is happy with the intermittent militancy in Kashmir, which keeps the problem simmering and causes such destabilization as might force India

Oceans between them



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT ended as if it had never started between them. They called it over in the calm that prevails over a ruffled sea in the wake of storm, and then vowed not to see each other again in future for so long as they lived. He pleaded with her to change her mind so that they could remain friends for the rest of their lives. She said it could happen only over her dead body.

So when he saw her in the crowd many years later, he was not sure if he wanted to go up to her to talk. Her last words rang inside his head like the wail of siren in a disaster. She looked plump and pensive in the afternoon light, and slithered into the thick of people before he could make up his mind. He looked in the direction she went as if the deepest layer of his life had just peeled off and carved a vacuum into the air.

He stood in the crowd for a while as people going past him jostled and jolted him. He felt numb in his head and heart, his feet heavy with the

burden of the cruelty that he had become a complete stranger to the woman who was once the jewel of his heart. For the first time in his life he realized that one could be lonely in the crowd, that one could feel empty despite the concourse of life throbbing around him.

Yet there was a time when she had promised to live and die for him, when she flustered like a fish out of water if she couldn't see him or speak to him. Nothing stands still in

eyes reflected the depth of an ocean, and her smile captured the luminescence of a thousand stars. He compared her long flowing hair to drifting clouds, which brought cool shade over his head in the scorching heat. He used to ask her to breathe on his face as he slowly inhaled the redolence of fresh yogurt, which, he believed, was the smell of her innocence.

She would say he had lost his mind in his love for her, and he

face with her all on a sudden? Would she speak to him ever again? Did she mean it when she said that it was going to happen only over her dead body? Where did the love between them go? What happened to the emotions that once churned oceans between them?

Her plump and pensive face flashed before his eyes as he tried to guess how she must have been passing her days. Friends have told him that she never got married, that

when neglected for a period of time. A sudden urge overtook him to find that woman and ask her if nothing was left of the love, which once churned the oceans between them. Was that love still left inside him? He pondered in his mind as people moving in helter-skelter pushed and nudged him. He disinterred his soul from the tomb of time, and dusted off the debris of memories, which had piled up on it. He stood face to face with himself, something he feared to do ever since they had vowed not to see each other again. He closed his eyes and saw a pale and emaciated face looking at him with weary eyes.

It occurred to him that someone had abruptly driven an icicle into his heart, leaving him to gasp for breath. He looked for a place where he could sit down to absorb the pain, and the crowded street suddenly appeared desolate to him. The weary eyes gave way to the constricted likeness of the woman whom he saw only moments ago. She looked as though she had choked herself on an insoluble lump of sorrow, desperately struggling to breathe again.

He wept bitterly for her, and heaved a sigh as though he wanted to release that woman from her captivity. The sun was going down on the eastern sky and the crowd on the street had become sparse already. Every man was unto himself, he said to himself, in a world, which was so densely populated.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Was that love still left inside him? He pondered in his mind as people moving in helter-skelter pushed and nudged him. He disinterred his soul from the tomb of time, and dusted off the debris of memories, which had piled up on it. He stood face to face with himself, something he feared to do ever since they had vowed not to see each other again. He closed his eyes and saw a pale and emaciated face looking at him with weary eyes.

life, he thought as he stood in the waning lights of the day, its sadness growing inside him as though the futility of life was forever locked in the cycle of sun and moon. Where did she go? The question circled inside his hollow chest like a summer wind whirling in the prairie at noon.

He had promised to love her in this life and in every life that came after it. He told her that she was a goddess he worshipped in the sanctum of his heart when he was awake and whose name he recited when he was asleep. He said her lips were made of rose petals, her

would say he had not yet loved her enough. They tossed coin to prove which of them loved more than the other, and often quarreled that one was not worthy of another. It all seemed so remote to him in the remove of years, her face, voice, eyes and smile faded in his mind like a fabric grown flimsy from excessive use.

He walked a few steps towards the direction she went as if she was still hiding in the crowd for him to seek out. Then a strange hesitation numbed his legs as her last words rang inside his head. What would he tell if he found her, if he stood face to

she decided to be in love with love itself like someone who remembered the fragrance long after the flower had died. She must have been sad and lonely, a certain inertia of her disconsolate soul he thought he had noticed when he saw her this afternoon. It seemed to him that she dragged herself along the way, staggering under the inordinate burden of what she had to suffer alone.

He once loved this woman, and today that love haunted him like an amputee is haunted by the ghost of his lost limb. People come together

tion.

If anything, this is what bothered him since they broke up. He had poured out his heart to her, and she had poured out her heart to him. One knew the other like the back of one's hand. They were open to each other's secrets, and hidden in each other's frankness. She loved everything he loved, and he hated everything she hated. What was the difference between the face of a stranger in this crowd and the face of that woman who disappeared a short while ago? All things seemed transitory and meaningless, even the deepest of human bonds rarified

OPINION

'Matir Moina' can be screened only outside Bangladesh: How strange!

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

THE feature film 'Matir Moina' had to traverse a tortuous journey before it being declared banned to be screened in its own country Bangladesh by the Film Censor Board (FCB) of the Ministry of Information. The stricture came only the other day to the dismay of the film-loving people and conscious citizens of the country. Strangely, the Information Secretary has said the BBC that there would be no problem if the film was screened at the Cannes Film Festival. It connotes that there is no harm if the people see the film outside Bangladesh but the problem lies in it being watched by the people within the country! We do not know if it has a parallel in the film history of the world.

There was enough row over the question of release of the film by the FCB. The eight members of the Board watched the film in its first screening. Six passed verdict that

the film might be released uncut. One refrained from commenting and the other put a note of dissent asking verification of recitation from the verses of the holy Quran as in the film.

The situation urged the Board to rescreen the film before the full bench to arrive at a decision. However, no rescreening took place. Instead, the Information Minister, the Information Secretary, the vice-chairman of the FCB, the DG of the Film Development Board and other officials watched the film. And in the subsequent meeting of the FCB considering the issuance of release certificate to the film it desisted from providing censor certificate under section 16 (5) of the FCB code. However, the FCB assumed self-glorification by saying that an appeal for further consideration could be submitted.

The film forbidden to be screened in our country cannot ordinarily be watched by us. Still some outlines of the theme of 'Matir Moina' have by this time

somehow reached our ears. The film dwells on our madrassah education. It spans 98-minutes portraying childhood of the director of the film Tareq Masud. He grew up in a village having had his education in madrassah at a time when mass movement rocked the

apprehension to treat its inmates with the weak links of our madrassah education because it may provoke protests from some quarters of our society. What will be the answer of the government if our enemies abroad argue that the very measure is self-proving that

In this age of information technology no stricture can hush up news. The example near at hand is that the government proscribed within the country the issue (April 4, 2002) of the Far Eastern Economic Review portraying Bangladesh as a cocoon of terror. But it proved counter-productive. The ban provoked men's curiosity and multiplied the readers. Willn't the government learn this lesson and give up repeating the same naive mistake?

society in late sixties.

Unfortunately the government ban on the film comes at a time when Bangladesh is struggling hard to erase its image as a fundamentalist, terrorist country as painted by a section of international press spearheaded by Far Eastern Economic Review reporter Brett Lintner. Freeing the film outside and fettering inside may corroborate to government's

there exist in our society hard-core religious fundamentalists intolerant of any criticism of their own lifestyle and social system and if that be made they are strong enough to hit back.

Instead of banning the film the government could use to form a public opinion in favour of conducting welfare reforms in the existing madrassah education system to keep it in line with the needs of

the name of protecting harmony of the people. We have every right to witness the picture particularly when there is no bar to it being screened in the outside world. It speaks of the above mentioned combine's ignoring the wishes of the people, underestimating their (people's) wisdom level and treating them with scant respect.

Truly, the letter of refusal to grant censor certificate to 'Matir

Moina' was issued in reference to the FCB presently manned by eight members, some being eminent intellectuals of the country. But the decision, in fact, must have come from above -- the top tier of the Ministry of Information. Noticeably, no scheduled rescreening of

objectionable in the film and recommended uncut screening of the film was simply whitewashed. Strangely, none of those six members was found protesting, let alone resigning from the FCB on ground of self-esteem. How could it so happen? Is it that our intellectuals are devoid of any sense of self-dignity or members of the FCB are drawn from amongst persons with 'unquestionable loyalty' to the government?

In this age of information technology no stricture can hush up news. The example near at hand is that the government proscribed within the country the issue (April 4, 2002) of the Far Eastern Economic Review portraying Bangladesh as a cocoon of terror. But it proved counter-productive. The ban provoked men's curiosity and multiplied the readers. Willn't the government learn this lesson and give up repeating the same naive mistake?

As information has tricked down, the film 'Matir Moina' has

received tremendous response from the French media and the film connoisseurs at the Cannes festival. They acclaimed the film for portraying Bangladesh as a land of great religious tolerance and wide cultural diversity. The film has painted Bangladesh as a liberal Muslim country and is a befitting reply to a section of western media engaged in maliciously describing the country as fundamentalist and terrorist.

The same flawed angle of vision that led the district administration of Sylhet to stop, to the utter disappointment of film-loving masses of the locality, the screening of the symbolic and significant storytelling 'Lal Shaloo' weighed on the government to impose a ban on screening of 'Matir Moina' within the country. When will the government be able to bail itself out of this sort of stale colonial mindset?

A R Shamsul Islam is retired Principal, Govt. Mohila College, Patna.