

Getting freed from pathogenic greed

SAADAT HUSAIN

MR. Harun ur Rashid, in his post editorial article in the Daily Star (June 26), lamented the bane of greed in our national politics. His allusion to the problem was thought provoking but brief. The problem is deep and wide-spread. It is not endemic to Bangladesh; many other countries have been afflicted by this scourge. Poor countries like Bangladesh can ill afford to bear the effects of the problem. As it happened, Bangladesh was unfortunately buffeted by this terrible malaise in the recent past.

Acquiring is a basic human instinct. People acquire material resources for consumption, investment, and bequeathing purposes. Consumption is broadly defined in this write-up. It includes not only consumption of goods and services of tangible nature, but also sensual pleasures, and utility derived from charity and emotional fulfillment. The essential requirement is that one has to consciously feel that he is getting perceptible utility from such activities.

Investment is a benign option for using one's asset; its outcome is value addition, provision of employment, and welfare augmentation of citizens. Investors, of course, earn profit, a part of which they save for further investment.

The prodigal will be interested

more in extravaganzas and wasteful expenditure. He may squander away huge resources without understanding its social and economic implications. His activities run counter to the interest of society and people at large.

How much money does a person need to lead a fabulously decent life in Bangladesh? I have discussed this issue with many people. If a person does not indulge in hard drinking, he can blithely maintain a family of six with a monthly income of Tk 100,000.

If he is a free -- wheeler type he will need more money, but not exceeding Tk 200,000 per month at any rate. If he needs more money, he is either an extremely bad manager or a wretched sucker deserving no sympathy.

On the contrary, his activities are suspect and should be closely watched; they may be linked to the criminal world, as happens more often than not. With a hefty surplus income at his command, a person may soon be tempted to buy influence to protect his income and indulge in self-aggrandisement.

He thinks he can get away with any thing, however heinous that action may be. As he gets deeper into these unethical or illegal activities, his appetite for money and material resources is whetted beyond limit.

Those who amass huge resources are likely to spend a part of it on undesirable activities, except

a few who are endowed with intense ethical values. The latter usually prefer to spend a part of their assets on charity. This is an acceptable proposition as it is based on good intention.

Some people develop a fixation, a mania, for acquiring money and material resources for the sake of it. They really do not know what to do with it, all they know is that they have lots of assets, and can spend as much money as possible whenever they want to.

They enjoy the kick that comes from a sense of ownership of huge assets. This may be called "minomania," a kind of psychological impairment that afflicts a human being selectively. We have heard of a first lady who collected a few thousand pairs of shoes, most of which she even did not have a chance to see. She just enjoyed the ownership.

This sort of ownership is a dead loss to the society because no one consumes the items and no benefit is derived from them, except the perverse psychological satisfaction of the owner. One may argue that perverse satisfaction is also a kind of satisfaction that benefits at least one economic agent; so it should be counted as a positive benefit to the society.

This is a flawed argument in that such benefit to a maniac comes at the cost of many other individuals, who are adversely affected in the process of acquisition of wealth by

the greedy exploiter.

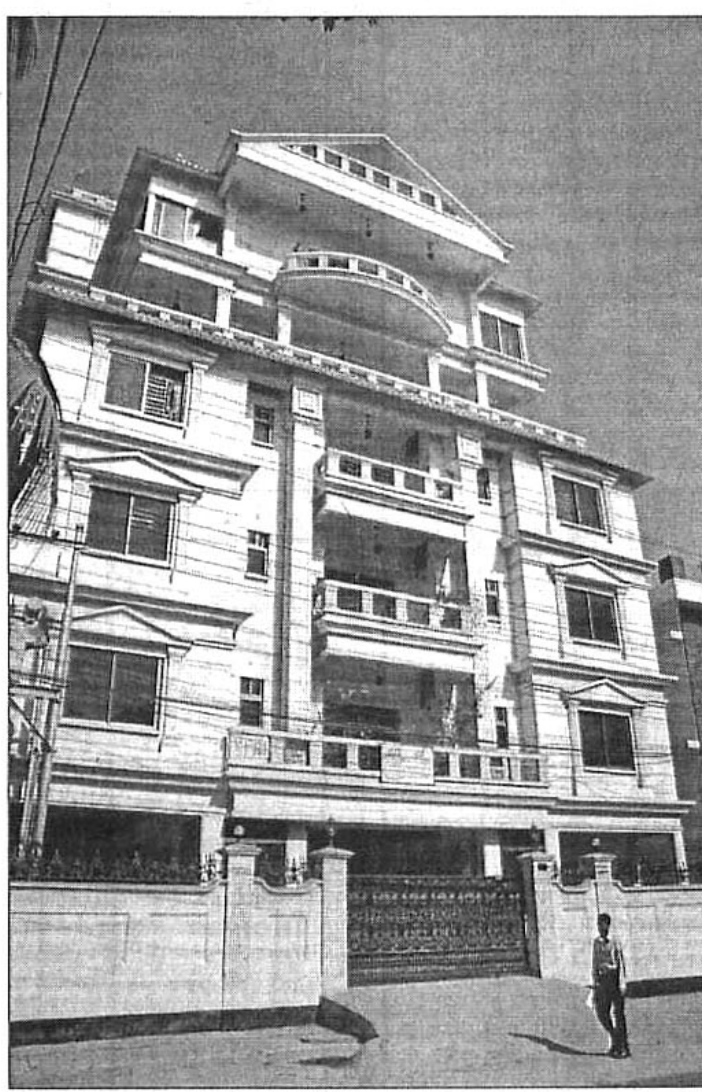
Somebody may derive benefit through satisfying his criminal instinct. Such a tendency has to be arrested to protect the life and property of citizens. The acquisition instinct also should not be allowed to cross its limit, lest it turns into a social opprobrium.

Left to itself, an extreme acquisition instinct soon degenerates into killer instinct, oftener than not in the figurative sense, though the literary sense is not ruled out.

It is reported in the press that some people have amassed wealth worth billions of Taka, stashed away at home and abroad. From my knowledge about the intelligence and education of some of these people, I have reasons to believe that they cannot even count five hundred sixty two thousand four hundred forty three Taka, let alone higher quantities involving millions and billions of Taka.

Managing a fund of this dimension is simply beyond their capacity. They trust some near and dear ones to manage it. All that they are interested in is the smooth flow of money and material whenever they need them.

Their prime consumption comprises acquisition of landed properties, houses, luxury flats, costly vehicles, clothes, ornaments and gizmos, and travelling abroad with friends and relatives when they go on a shopping binge. The fund managers and the cronies make sure that their whims and caprices are taken care of



during their visits abroad.

A few industries are also established in their names, though the real management authority is exercised by their cronies. Once out of these industries because of inadequacies and complications in the relevant documents.

Ownership of fabulous resources is prone to breed hubris and power hunger, which may in turn lead a person to persecute his opponents at any cost and in any manner he deems fit.

In extreme cases, he is ready to annihilate the rock-ribbed opponents. Acquisition of enormous wealth is, therefore, a potential source of big crime in the country.

In Europe, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, a movement has started for limiting the acquisition of wealth by an individual. The corporate executives who draw a staggering amount of compensation are the targets of this campaign.

The proponents of the campaign contend that a person needs only a limited amount of wealth to lead a decent life, to meet the need for his health security, for all types of sensual pleasures, charity, bequeathal, and old age comfort included.

The unnecessary heap of money is the source of many evil doings, they hold. The company and the society would be greatly benefited if the compensation package could be appropriately shaved off to a really

necessary level. A similar line of thinking is discernible in China as well.

Some political caucus has started questioning the extravaganzas, which is demonstrated by the filthy rich people in that country. Such extravaganzas are vulgar, and an affront to common citizens, and it should be severely restrained.

In our country, we have seen how unmitigated greed destroys the social fabric and what a great cost it imposes on the nation. Unearned income, huge unproductive wealth, and the concomitant power hunger, must be contained through concerted efforts.

The entrepreneur, the risk-taker, should have adequate incentive to go for productive enterprise, and be allowed to lead a high quality life as defined earlier.

He should also be encouraged to reinvest and earn normal profit, which should, however, be heavily taxed once it crosses the ceiling defined for an individual. In short, income should enable a person to lead a healthy, peaceful, secure, decent, benign, and joyful life.

It should not be allowed to push him into desolate idleness, or spur him into criminal pursuit. The world will be a much better place to live in if the problem of income obesity can be appropriately addressed.

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TIB'S DIAGNOSTIC REPORT ON BIMAN

Of clouds and silver linings

IMRAN ASIF

IT has been a tough one for the local counterpart of the Berlin-based organization. Even after a year of investigation and research, the gentlemen working on the report could not find the end of the tail of the ageing, and dying, creature. Consider the creature to be Biman, and the tail thereof being corruption and inefficiency, and you know why the end could not be found -- because there have not been any!

The research behind the diagnostic report by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) went between March 2006 - June 2007, and the researchers mentioned how difficult it was for them to be able to access information from Biman, especially till the end of 2006, thanks to the then ruling BNP government and the short-lived caretaker government (till January 11, 2007).

The truth always finds its way out, and more often than not ends up in the hands of the right people. The TIB researchers also got hold of enough information, and enough truth, to prepare a decent report despite the virtual "do not cross" line they had to face repeatedly at the ministry, and at Biman itself.

At the publication conference of the report by TIB on August 8, the discussants unanimously men-

tioned corruption as the airline's biggest problem. They also unanimously believed that if corruption can be driven out of the airline, it can thrive even in the ever-competitive world of commercial aviation of today. Through this article, I will reiterate some of the viewpoints expressed by a few of the discussants and add my own voice with theirs.

Dr. MA Momen, the Managing Director of the airline, admitted of the rampant corruption that had corroded the airline through almost its entire life. He also admitted his failure to uplift the airline's image and acceptance to the passengers -- the people who are essential for the airline's survival.

Between the lines, he also reminded us of a harsh truth -- that the chair of the managing director is not an easy one to sit on at Biman, for the entire control of the airline lies with the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, and the managing director would have to face daily heat, and struggle to bring about any change for good defying the directives from the ministry.

I personally believe, and expect most to agree with me, in saying that despite all the failures, he has one very important feature in his cap -- that being of having saved the airline from the collapse that was impending during September/October

2006. That collapse was allegedly a design by the then high-ups of the government, and Dr. Momen had done a brilliant, and daring, job to foil the plan.

But that is where the challenge for him just begins -- he must continue to be brilliant and daring for achieving sustainable success for the airline. In order to do that, he will have to dare challenge his own excellence, day in and day out.

Captain Nasimul Haque, the retired veteran pilot from Biman and former president of the Bangladesh Airline Pilots' Association (BAPA), emphasized on bringing sensibility to policymaking that will drive the nation's future in commercial aviation. He and many other pilots of Biman have been victims of ill policymaking by the "high-ups," who were also the ignorant of the highest order in the field of commercial aviation, and essentially only occupied important decision-making posts at the ministry and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

Numerous pilots, like Captain Nasim himself, were expensively trained by Biman, conforming to international standards, and from one government to another, many of these pilots who were extremely valuable assets were put off Biman simply because of political polarisation. I am not saying that unfit

pilots, or those with proven acts of irresponsibility on duty, were to be retained by Biman.

What I am saying is that if a pilot is deemed, unfit by the CAAB under certain criterion perimeter, then the CAAB should as well apply the same regulations for all international operators flying into Bangladesh, as far as passenger safety is concerned. Otherwise, politically knocking off expensively trained pilots should be considered a criminal offense. It is your money and mine, and we ought not to let scoundrels mess around with it!

Another pilot present at the conference, Captain Maqsood read out and excerpt from an e-mail by Boeing to Biman, where they explicitly stated that while they found Biman officials to be fairly rational and in comprehension of their responsibilities, Boeing's found the government officials to be "far from professional, and far from being transparent."

This is actually the result of the government's attempt with Boeing over the past few years to strike a hideous deal for aircraft, order which would allow them to pocket millions of dollars in the form of unsolicited commission. Boeing, as the largest exporter of the United States, and with the US Trade Advocacy Bureau doing its job did not need to please these officials and it is the greed of these

people that has deprived Biman to take advantage of what was then a very competitive fleet renewal offer from Boeing.

Eminent journalist Mohammad Jahangir stressed that exemplary justice must be served to those who, over the decades and from under their political umbrella, unleashed the endless practice of corruption at Biman, and has reduced the airline to what it is today. This is particularly important, because if it is not done the galloping corruption would only slow down for a brief period and soon gain momentum again. It is all known -- who abused Biman over the last at least 25 years, and how they did it. Taking them to task is now an imperative task by itself!

One of the very few respectable lawmakers from our legacy political parties, Col. (Retd.) Farooq Khan, stated that the airline ought to become more efficient in its operations, and should do better to serve the 7 million expatriate Bangladeshis around the world, who are considered as Biman's "captive" market. Well, efficiency is the name of the game in the airline business of today, and it does not end with operating the newest of airplanes. It goes deep down into managing operating costs, and none other than jet fuel represents the largest contributor of that cost.

Biman not only flies gas-guzzling

birds like the Fokker F-28 and the McDonnell Douglas DC-10-30 aircraft, it also buys very, very expensive jet fuel thanks to the country's prehistoric energy policy which levies absurdly heavy duty on jet fuel. As a result, the price of jet fuel here in Bangladesh is almost 50% higher than the current world market rates. So, while Biman does need to renew its fleet with newer airplanes, our government must also truly tune in to today's economic world and its dynamics.

As for the "captive" market of Biman, equaling to 7 million expatriate Bangladeshis, all I can say is unless Biman drastically improves its reliability (which again boils down to efficiency issues) and customer service, this presumed "captive" market will not stay under Biman's captivity for too long. These 7 million people, as customers, will compromise to a certain extent to fly their national airline.

But the service Biman offers now is bordering what is called "gross," as evidently seen in recent examples of canceling of flights without notice, and then leaving hundreds of passengers stranded at the airport without showing any signs of responsibility and decency. Biman must quit taking its passengers for granted, unless it wants to learn the lesson the very hard way that "customer is the king."

Biman recently underwent restructuring process, which helped reduce its heavyweight manpower, and has transformed itself into a Limited Company from its earlier status as a Corporation. And this is only like kicking-off on a hurdles race, with numerous hurdles to get over, which is the actual part of the game. What the report by TIB sums up, and what these gentlemen stated at the conference, are the hurdles that Biman will actually have to get over. Staying put after the kick-start would not look smart, really!

It has been stated in the reports that, after the restructuring, the government would own 100% shares of the airline and appoint a reputed international airline as its "operator," who would be free from government control and have complete liberty to plan, and control the airline's operations.

Now, the fundamentals of management states that the planning and controlling tasks of any enterprise of any scale are like the two blades of a scissor -- one complementing the other, and ownership essentially exercises them both. I would rather believe that the moon is just a big light in the sky, than to believe that the government will own the airline wholesomely without meaning to control it in any way!

Another alarming statement

published in different newspapers was that Biman, in its new form as a Limited Company, will have a Board of Directors consisting of bureaucrats -- largely or entirely. With due respect to the bureaucrats, I will reiterate what I had expressed in my earlier articles -- that running a commercial airline is not their job.

It is, rather, the job of people who have experience of the industry directly or indirectly, such as the travel agency owners, bankers, management consultants, and information systems specialists. The Board of Directors at Biman should be comprised of such useful and knowledgeable people, and let the bureaucrats do their job with their broader set of responsibilities of serving the nation.

Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, Chairman of the trustee, board of TIB, summed up the discussion saying that he and his fellow colleagues at TIB are still optimistic, despite all odds, that Biman will be able to succeed to become an airline with sustainable growth and profitability.

I am an optimist, and I do believe that every cloud has a silver lining. It has been a long 35 years of wait, and we all hope the sunny times will be here soon!

The author, currently an aviation industry consultant, has previously worked on projects with The Boeing Company, Honeywell Aerospace, and FAA's Operational Evolution Plan (OEP) in 2004-2005.

SHAB-E-BARAAT

Night of salvation

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE auspicious night of the 15th of Sha'ban, known as Lailat-ul-Baraat, and popularly known as Shab-e-Baraat in this sub-continent, is indeed a glorious and important occasion in the life of every God-fearing Muslim. Both the words, Lailat in Arabic and Shab in Persian, mean night, and Baraat means salvation or privilege. It is on this auspicious night of privilege or night of salvation that benign providence, in His infinite mercy, blesses each and every human being with a unique opportunity to receive the most coveted divine mercy.

Lailat-ul-Baraat has not been mentioned directly or specifically in the Holy Quran, but that does not, in any way, empower any Muslim to ignore or make little of the divine excellence of the night of salvation, simply because there are numerous authentic hadith and evidence which testify so eloquently to the fact that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself used to say special prayers on this holy night.

What is more, the Holy Prophet used to offer this prayer with inimitable dedication and unfathomable concentration. There are many hadith which very clearly indicate that the Holy Prophet not only said special prayers in this sacred night but also visited the graveyards and prayed for the departed souls. He

also instructed his wives to honour the sanctity and divine majesty of this blessed night.

It is not only the renowned traditionalists who champion the sacredness and excellence of the night of privilege, even a great and universally respected saint and scholar like Hazrat Syed Abdul Quader Jilani (RA), popularly known as Hazrat Bara Pir Sahib, testifies in his "Guniyat Talebin" that Bibi Ayesha Siddiqah (RA) herself heard the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) saying: "Allah opens the doors of mercy and grace for mankind on four nights -- the two nights of Eids, the night of the 15th of Sha'ban, and the night of Arafat. The doors remain open throughout the nights, till the fajr prayers."

Glorious incidents like these testify so brilliantly to the Holy Prophet's belief in the importance, sanctity, serenity and divine excellence of the auspicious night of privilege.

It is claimed that on the holy night of privilege the heavenly tree, Sidrat-ul-Muntaha, specifically mentioned in the Holy Quran (LIJI:4), is shaken to decide who shall die in the following year. "According to popular belief," says the Encyclopaedia of Islam, "in the night preceding the 15th of Sha'ban the tree of life on whose leaves are written the names of the living is shaken. The names written on the leaves which fall down indicate those who are to die in the coming

year."

Lailat-ul-Baraat, the night of quittance, is indeed a solemn and sacred occasion of divine excellence, which has to be celebrated in a befitting way, not through candles and crackers, not through mere halwa and roti, not through extravaganzas and merry-making, but through prayers and penance, as was done by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

It is true that hundreds and thousands of Muslims in Bangladesh celebrate this night through zealous and active participation in private and congregational prayers held in mosques. Unfortunately, however, there are many among us who, through sheer ignorance or utter carelessness, turn this auspicious night into a mere occasion of merry-making and gaiety, fun and frolic, forgetting the very essence of this glorious night.

There are some who think that crackers and candles are part and parcel of Shab-e-Baraat. Nothing can be farther from the truth. This awful custom, introduced by the Barmecides in Baghdad, simply because they were fireworshippers and loved fire even after they accepted Islam, not only disturbs the namazis and meditators on this auspicious night, but also leads to unnecessary wastage and prodigality, which are forbidden in Islam.

There are also some who try to equate halwa and roti with the

sacred night of privilege, claiming that the Holy Prophet lost a few teeth in the Battle of Uhud on the 15th of Sha'ban and, hence, people should not cook anything hard as a mark of respect to that historic incident. Some also claim that Hazrat Amir Hamza (RA) embraced martyrdom on the 15th of Sha'ban.

Both these claims are totally baseless, as both the incidents occurred in the month of Shawal and had simply nothing to do with the 15th or any other day of the month of Sha'ban. There is no harm if delicious halwas and other sweetmeats are cooked on this occasion, but let these be prepared only to be shared with the poor and the have-nots. The very spirit of such a noble and auspicious occasion will be lost if those who are affluent fail to share their good fortune with those who are less privileged.

Our duty on this night of privilege, or night of salvation, is not only to seek divine mercy but also to seek the path of goodness, kindness, upright conduct, and charity -- to be always on our toes to respond to the cry of the neediest, to stand by the word that is pledged, to bear true witness, to remove all artificial differences between man and man, and all causes of misunderstanding in our dealings with our fellow brethren in every sphere of activity, in every domain of thought.

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MIDDLE EAST

Deadly provocations

REUEL MARC GERECHT

TWO weeks ago, the Bush administration announced it may designate Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation -- the first time a foreign military body has received that label. Days later, a top US general in Iraq accused Tehran of training Shiite militants inside the country. The moves came at an already precarious time in US-Iran relations, and have greatly worried Washington's European allies, who see the steps as a prelude to war and fear they will make ongoing nuclear diplomacy with Tehran much more difficult.

Such fears are unfounded, however, and rest on several basic misunderstandings. For one thing, the terrorist label is nothing new, and thus will do little to change the current state of play. For another, Iran represents a much greater threat than Europe typically recognizes. It is not a status quo state that favors stability, as most pundits and governments portray it. Iran is, instead, a radical revolutionary force determined to sow chaos beyond its borders. Assuming that normal negotiations can bring it around is, therefore, a grave mistake. The mullahs don't want peace in Iraq -- just the

opposite. War may come, but not because negotiations break down. The likely trigger is an Iranian provocation.

Iran's bloody role in Iraq has yet to be widely acknowledged. But the clerical regime is killing US soldiers there. Sophisticated Iranian explosive devices wielded by Shiite insurgents are producing ever-larger numbers of US casualties. The brutal Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr is probably now responsible for about half of all US combat deaths. Sadr, who visits Iran regularly, has developed close ties to the mullahs. And Iranian Revolutionary Guards have started training his henchmen inside Iraq. Tehran also continues to back the Shiite Badr Brigades, the military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. This is increasing internecine violence in southern Iraq, where the feeble British presence has nearly collapsed. Bloody confrontations between the Mahdi and Badr gunmen are on the upswing.

As all this suggests, the widespread belief (shared by the Iraq Study Group, among many others) that Iran wants stability in Iraq is wrong. To understand Iran's true nature, remember Lebanon. During the civil war in the early 1980s, the clerics in

Tehran backed a variety of Lebanese Shiites before settling on the most radical of these groups, Hizbullah. Since then, Hizbullah has partnered with Tehran in conducting terrorist operations overseas, as well as destabilising Lebanon and threatening Israel. If Iran gains commensurate influence in Iraq now, it can be expected to have a similar effect.

Unfortunately, that's likely to happen unless the United States finds more effective ways to counter Tehran. The US State Department has labeled clerical Iran a state sponsor of terrorism for years now, so targeting a specific institution -- the Revolutionary Guards -- merely adds an appealing note of precision: the Guards have long given aid to a varied list of terrorists, including, quite possibly, Al Qaeda. They are the principal bearers of Iran's revolutionary torch and responsible for a wide range of activities including commercial and industrial enterprises and the country's nuclear-weapons program.

Simply singling out the Guards won't change much. It is unlikely to provoke a significant Iranian response, or to make US allies any more serious about sanctions. The Europeans remain hesitant -- and the Russians, Chinese and Indians unwilling -- to really coerce

Tehran. America's unilateral efforts, particularly its use of the international financial system to block Iran's access to dollars and credit, have proved more successful than many thought possible. But without greater international support, they probably won't force Tehran to moderate its behavior. The Europeans, who are among Iran's largest trading partners, must agree to biting measures -- something these states, which are as addicted to noncoercive diplomacy as they are to commerce, seem unlikely to do. In the meantime, the diplomatic process over Iran's nukes will crawl forward or stagnate but is unlikely to lead to war.

Washington can try to exercise soft power -- through sanctions, resolutions, diplomatic isolation and rougher rhetoric. But the Islamic Republic, especially its radical president and praetorian guard, are accomplished practitioners of hard power. They are unlikely to be overwhelmed by moderate tactics. Instead, they seem set to continue killing Americans in Iraq, waiting to see if and when the United States gives up and run for the exits.

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