

Plunder of public wealth by a minion

Zero tolerance for such a horrific manifestation of greed

THE matter is beyond every one's comprehension. It was a shocking revelation of stupendous proportion made possible by the efforts of the National Coordination Committee against Corruption and Serious Crimes. It relates to that of a Titas Gas sales assistant whose wealth amounts to, according to his own admission, 208 crores, but according to the Task Force not less than 2100 crores. Even 208 crores is an imponderable sum to accumulate for a person drawing a maximum monthly salary of Tk 4000.

Regrettably, this demonstrates the culture of corruption that has become so entrenched as to have permeated all the levels of the public sector.

The Task Force must be commended for having been able to identify the corrupt in the public sector corporations, particularly the service providers. Only recently, we had come to know about several hundred Titas employees of various denominations, willing to return their ill-gotten wealth amounting to several hundred crores. Most of these have been possible mainly because of patronisation by the powers that be. Interestingly, many of the accused are powerful CBA leaders or are in close link with them. They have used their clout as CBA leaders, whose job it was to advance the workers' interest, for self aggrandisement, to the detriment of the organisation.

There are several very pertinent questions that emerge from these revelations. How is it that these people have gotten away so long with their nefarious activities? Where was the official supervision that was supposed to have been exercised? What is distressing is that these people would have continued in their merry way of amassing illegal wealth had there been no 9/11? Is there no inbuilt mechanism to prevent such crimes? Either the officers placed over these people failed in their duty or that they colluded in the nefarious acts. On both counts officers holding position of responsibility must be called to account for their failure or collusion.

It is a good thing that the Task Force has focused on the public sector corporations. We feel what have been revealed so far is the tip of the iceberg only; there are many more such people who have amassed and are still busy illegally amassing wealth.

However, the work of the Task Force is at best an ad hoc measure. There must be inbuilt mechanisms organic to these institutions that will be able to detect, prevent and punish the corrupt. But the all-important thing is that unless we have conscientious people manning the system it will not deliver.

Saifuddin Manik no more

His honesty and love for the masses to live on

SAIFUDDIN Manik's death on Sunday, at the age of 69, will be mourned by all those who believe in the observance of decency in politics and care for morality and ethics. He was honest and dedicated to the cause of the poor, and, above all, he was a man of firm conviction -- something that emanated from his political ideology. Regrettably, such men are so rare in our political arena today that politics, little wonder, has lost much of its credibility as a noble calling.

Saifuddin Manik had a glorious career as a student leader and politician, and was associated with all the defining moments of our history, including active participation in our Liberation War in 1971. He was motivated by a deep sense of patriotism and commitment to the people. He was a product of the tumultuous 1960's when the very best sons of the soil joined politics to fight for the legitimate cause of the subjugated Bengalees.

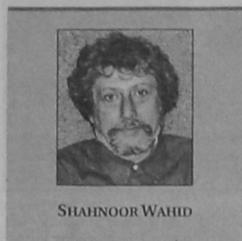
He was a truly multi-faced personality. A first rate sports organiser, he was a footballer of repute and his highly sporting attitude was reflected on all his pursuits during his lifetime.

He was never into politics of opportunism; he never deviated from his chosen path. He was a leftist right from the beginning and remained so till his death. The position of such politicians is usually not high on the popularity scale. But to Saifuddin Manik principles were more important than making progress along the corridors of power.

So, the death of a much-revered politician like Saifuddin is more than just losing one more individual from amongst us. Today, corruption is the gravest problem facing the country and the politicians themselves are accused of having patronised it on an unprecedented scale. Obviously, the nation is in desperate need of honest and clean politicians to rescue it from the abyss of irregularities and anomalies. The example that Saifuddin Manik set by leading a simple and honest life should inspire our upcoming politicians to place the country and its people above their own interests.

We condole his death and express our deepest sympathy for the members of the bereaved family.

Best-seller: "Titas Gas Success Story"



SHAHNOOR WAHID

DO you think I have stolen this money? This money comes from my business." -- Abdul Kader Mollah

Who knew we had a Golden Goose in the guise of a service sector that turned paupers into billionaires? This is no fairy tale or a movie script or a joke or a satire or a witticism or a novel or any *ashar* *golpo*. This is as true as that sun shining up in the heavens and you better believe it. This is a mind-boggling success story found in the current best-seller "Titas Gas Success Story." The proud distributor of this book is Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Co Ltd.

Excerpt of the story, that of one Abdul Kader Mollah, has been published in the Bengali daily Prothom Alo and English daily The Daily Star to paint a graphic picture of how a sales assistant of yesterday owns

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

In fact Titas, the Golden Goose, has made many more Mollahs millionaires and billionaires in last thirty years. Recent newspaper reports say about 130 officials and employees of Titas Gas are ready to return wealth worth over Tk 400 crores. Bravo, bravo. The only difference in the golden goose fiction and the real one is that while the greedy owner had killed the goose for all the eggs at a time, Titas employees keep the organisation alive so that they can have a golden egg every day. Long live Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Co Ltd.

wealth worth Tk. 2, 100 crore today. Move aside so-called tycoons of Asia. This Mollah character, when he started, did not have an industry or a private airline or one hundred ocean going cargo ships or shares in Harrods or Macy's or J.C. Penny. Neither did he have a magic wand or a lamp with a genie inside. All he had was a small job with a monthly salary of Tk. 4,000.

Now, didn't many of us start our careers with that kind of a salary (even less maybe) in the bygone days? Well, with Mollah it was a different ball game. He was not to be bogged down with such a meagre income. He kept his eyes, ears and claws open. He was quick to learn how and in which channels money travelled. So, he set his traps in the right spots and like a pucca fisherman, hauled in large catch after catch after catch. It was raw and sweet smelling cash money

that he hauled in every time he pulled his traps up.

Now, who is this Mollah chap and what did he actually do to amass that kind of money? Rob the salary van every month? No, brother. That's done by robbers. He ain't no robber! Have respect, man! He is a far superior player, who operated from inside and left no footprints behind. He was a leader, brother! And he was a friend of a respected (!?) CBA leader, didn't you know! Well, if you have no idea about CBAs in Bangladesh then we shall seriously question your sanity. Interesting, isn't it? So, how about having a brief look at the media reports (The Daily Star) about his wealth? Tighten your seat-belts, dear readers. Here it goes:

"Mollah has 15 industries that include Thermex Textile, Aduri Apparels, Thermex Cotton Spinning, Thermex Melange Spinning Mills, Thermex Home

Fabrics Ltd, Thermex Knit Yarn, Thermex Blended Yarn, Thermex Knit Composite, Aduri Washing and Printing, Aduri CNG Refuelling and Filling Station, Gazipur Gas Company, Padma Enterprise and Nakshi Textile Dyeing and Printing Industries Ltd.

"Mollah has a 5,536-squarefeet flat at Naya Paltan, a 1,800-sft flat at Shantinagar, a 2,899-sft flat at Dhanmondi, a 1,640-sft flat at Siddheshwari and a 1,450-sft flat at Kakrail in the capital. He has flats at Chamelibagh, Dhanmondi, Purana Paltan, Bailey Road, Gulshan and Banani in the name of his wife, daughters and other family members. There is a five-storey building on Sangeeta Road in Narsingdi in his wife's name.

Here is his list of cars. "Kader Mollah has 29 different kinds of cars, minibuses and lorries.

Titas the Golden Goose

"Kader Mollah joined Titas Gas as an ordinary employee in 1985 and retired voluntarily after 12 years as a sales assistant. During his service at Titas, he developed good relationship with a BNP-backed Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) leader (aha, there you are!) and ended up as a close aide to him. Although Mollah was a sales assistant, his colleagues said he used to work as a supervisor using his influence.

"Through his connections with dishonest officials (aha, there you are again!) Mollah developed close contacts with many industries. He used to provide these industries with illegal gas connections and played a role in reducing their gas bills, thus earning huge money in return (Hmmm, that explains. What more did he do?)

"Much of his income at the time would also come from controlling transfers and postings of Titas staff. With money pouring in, Mollah dreamt of setting up industries.

Mollah's former colleagues said none of his industries came under the enquiries conducted by Titas during the whole tenure of the BNP-led four-party alliance government (hush, hush, not so loud!).

"After his voluntary retirement in 1997, Mollah was mostly involved with commercial activities of Titas directly and indirectly. Mollah has a three-storey house at Tinishpur in Narsingdi town. He plans to build a swimming pool on the third floor of his house near the municipal stadium (so, future ministers and MPs will go there to spend a day...not a bad idea)."

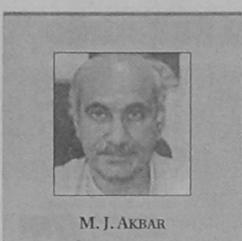
Well, that was the amazing success story of Mollah. Here is my advice to brother Mollah: Please go on yearly pilgrimage to the Titas Gas head office instead of going to any holy place. After all, Titas has made you a billionaire, isn't it?

In fact Titas, the Golden Goose, has made many more Mollahs millionaires and billionaires in last thirty years. Recent newspaper reports say about 130 officials and employees of Titas Gas are ready to return wealth worth over Tk 400 crore. Bravo, bravo.

The only difference in the golden goose fiction and the real one is that while the greedy owner had killed the goose for all the eggs at a time, Titas employees keep the organisation alive so that they can have a golden egg every day. Long live Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Co Ltd.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

A wealth of questions



M. J. AKBAR

I just may have discovered the solution to communal conflict. Greed. For a long while -- make that a couple of decades of reporting violence -- I was under the illusion that peace was a logical human need.

Conflict never made any sense, good, special or common. But when has good sense been the decisive criterion of human behaviour? The instinct of hatred needs a far more powerful antidote. It could have found its answer in greed.

One of the more remarkable facts of the last fifteen years is that there have been only two major communal riots in this period, the violence that followed the destruction of the Babri mosque; and the carnage in Gujarat after the Godhra incident. There have been minor incidents, but nothing horrific.

The Eighties were an endless litany of sorrow: Moradabad, Meerut, Bhagalpur, Delhi, to cite but a few cities from the top end of memory. Ahmedabad and Hyderabad were centers of endemic violence, not just one conflagration of slash-and-burn, but a daily drip of dagger and poison that ate into flesh and nerve.

The transformation could not have come because Indians, on some magical day, suddenly grew angelic wings under their armpits. The answer could lie in the new culture spawned by economic reforms that were put into play by P.V. Narasimha Rao and Dr Manmohan Singh a decade and a half ago.

Dr. Singh might be a doctor in economics, but Rao was a master in politics: he persuaded a "socialist-protectionist" Indian elite to appreciate the virtues of entrepreneurship and self-help wealth.

An industrialist friend was remembering the Mumbai of the Sixties and the Seventies. No one discussed bank accounts. That was considered crass and vulgar. Status had other attributes. These days, it seems the principal job of every public relations agency is to advertise the personal value of its client.

If you are not among the billions, leave the high table. Mumbai always had a stock exchange, but it was never quite the shock exchange that it has become today. Companies made profits, and money offered a reasonable return in the old dharma. The stock exchange has now become a rocket on steroids; it must continue to defy the law of gravity and never

come down. It is a lottery with no losers, as long as you have managed to get a ticket.

The moral of the story, or maybe the amoral of the story: Mumbai can either have communal riots or it can have a steroid stock exchange. It can't have both. Violence means a huge net loss. The movers and shakers of the city cannot afford violence anymore, which is extremely good news. Peace is not the absence of old hatreds; it is the presence of new desires. Long live money. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Is Gujarat an exception to this rule? Not really. Narendra Modi realises that he cannot get investment if Gujarat lives constantly on the edge, threatening to descend into bloodshed every month.

Communal riots were not born in Gujarat six years ago. For a decade in the Eighties, when the Congress was the only star in the political firmament, Ahmedabad suffered chronic, daily spells of rioting. It was a disease whose tentacles were wider than the breadth of the city. Violence is not a partner of profit.

It is a question worth investigating: has economic reform created a new mindset that can eliminate the noxious effects of India's worst curse?

There comes a moment in any investigation when one must argue against oneself. Every part of India is not booming in the manner of Mumbai and Gujarat. Why have communal riots come down elsewhere?

First, the exception: Bengal. The CPI (M) did not need economic reforms to learn the virtues of communal peace. Its ideology was secular. Bengal, a partition state with a history of communal conflict far worse than Punjab's, has been peaceful ever since the Marxists came to power.

There are those who still remember how the present head of the state CPI (M), Biman Bose, personally stood at Calcutta's street corners, along with his cadres, during the vicious pogroms of 1964, to prevent Congress thugs from setting Muslim localities to torch. The performance of the Left Front in Bengal is evidence that if a government wants to, it can always prevent communal tension from boiling over into a riot.

The mother of all paradoxes, of course, is that economic reform brought a hint of communal tension to Bengal in 2007, rather than reverse it. Being conscientious, the Marxists have begun to implement a radical educational-cum-economic

program for minorities, crafted by Prakash Karat and the Bengal party. This virtual manifesto could be the most important benefit that Bengal's Muslims have got since independence. In political terms: last year the Marxists in Bengal could not have escaped defeat. Elections this year will be a different story.

What of the great Hindi heartland, battlefield of a thousand complexes and indeed, complexions?

The easy answer is that the Yadav-Muslim alliance created by Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav ensured the peace that had disappeared during the previous decades of Congress rule. This is only partially true. What is certain is that these Yadav leaders honoured the compact with Muslims by ensuring their security.

The Congress in UP and Bihar took Muslim support for granted and then, without the least tremor of conscience, betrayed the community. But the Muslim vote has shifted partially, to Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh and Nitish Kumar in Bihar, and the old plague has not returned.

Mayawati and Nitish Kumar are not in the Congress, so they maintain the tradition of amity set by their predecessors. But the real answer may be in the behaviour of people rather in the predilections of politicians.

The agenda of the Indian voter has changed. He, and more importantly she, is no longer easily swayed by emotional appeals to crude forms of identity, whether it is religion or caste. Caste and religion peaked with Mandal and Masjid

between 1990 and 1992; fifteen years later, there are signs that both volcanoes are finally still.

Narendra Modi did not promise a temple at Ayodhya to win in Gujarat, and his attacks on Muslims were comparatively muted. He swept ahead on good governance. The Mandal maestros, Laloo and Mulayam Yadav, have been defeated. If Mulayam Singh Yadav is reviving in Uttar Pradesh it is because Mayawati is slipping on governance.

If Laloo Yadav is still in the dumps, it is because Nitish Kumar is delivering on governance. Obviously, this is not a uniform reality. India is too complicated a polity for one formulation to cover all electoral nuances. But good governance is the expanding talisman. The traditional talisman is dead.

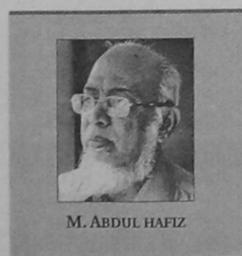
The voter now keeps a balance sheet in front of him. When he hears that the Indian economy has grown by nine percent he wants to know if an extra nine rupees has gone into his pocket for every hundred that existed. Tough question. But you can't get the right answer without the right question.

The poor may not want an insurrection against the daily millionaires of the stock exchange, but they are not going to be minused from wealth creation, or remain content with that infamous trickle that the World Bank has allotted to them, and which India's World Bank clients in the present government think is sufficient for the poor.

Wealth is like knowledge. If you do not share it, it disappears.

M. J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Hillary Clinton: Scaling Everest



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

EDMUND Hillary, the intrepid New Zealander who conquered the Everest in 1953 alongside Sherpa Tenzing died recently after enjoying a halo of global fame during his long life. It, however, caused some surprise when, during a South Asian jaunt, a former first lady divulged that she was named after the brave mountaineer, although there existed a chronological dis-

PERSPECTIVES

Nonetheless, her determined attempt to reach the pinnacle of power was likened by some to Edmund Hillary's feat in ascending the top of the Everest first. While that comparison may be debatable, it is true that no previous White House aspirant has come this far in the race after encountering so many dampers. What is less debatable is that Hillary Clinton had a near-death experience when she stumbled at the first hurdle in Iowa early last month. Yet, she refused to give up.

crepancy in her claim because she was already six years old when the Himalayan summit was reached. Ever as the claim was looked upon as something of an innocuous fib, Hillary Rodham Clinton took the line that her mother told her this when she (Hillary) was a child.

Nonetheless, her determined attempt to reach the pinnacle of power was likened by some to Edmund Hillary's feat in ascending the top of the Everest

first. While that comparison may be debatable, it is true that no previous White House aspirant has come this far in the race after encountering so many dampers. What is less debatable is that Hillary Clinton had a near-death experience when she stumbled at the first hurdle in Iowa early last month. Yet, she refused to give up.

Although the presidential campaign got underway a year or so ago, the Iowa caucus represented the first crucial test in

the somewhat convoluted nomination process in the US electoral system. The Democratic and Republican party conventions are scheduled to be held in August and September respectively during this year, but unsalable winners could emerge as early as February 3, which has been dubbed super-duper-Tuesday because it would feature primaries and caucuses in 22 states, including important ones such as California and New York.

After the reverses in the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, Hillary Clinton could still go on to win the nomination, but that would be as hard as scaling the Himalayas. Unexpectedly, she came third in Iowa, well behind Obama and Edwards. Her showing in New Hampshire had also been equally poor -- trailing behind Obama by a substantial margin -- almost sealing her fate. Her campaign team lapsed into total despondency, and almost all television channels showed images of her coming close to tears. The critics enjoyed her apparent loss of nerve.

The concerted assault mounted on Mrs Clinton stirred something deep down among New Hampshire's womenfolk, who seemed to reckon it as male chauvinism against one of their kind. This realisation resulted in an unexpected

victory for Hillary, although her margin over Obama was barely three percent. It was, however, a life-line of sorts for Hillary for the coming contests in Nevada and South Carolina soon afterwards.

There could be surprises galore in the US' presidential election with the introduction of many new factors in the multi-faceted exercise but, as far as Democrats are concerned, the contest is essentially between Mrs Clinton and Obama Barack. And, at the moment, even if Hillary appears to have the edge it all could end in tears -- given that the Clintons inspire revulsion among a large number of Republicans and distrust among the liberals in the Democratic camp. After all, Senator Hillary still bears the stigma of approving president Bush's Iraq campaign, and has

seldom been vocal about bringing back the American troops from virtually the jaws of death in Iraq's inferno.

Besides, Obama, her opponent, continues to be a formidable hurdle for Hillary, because his appeal is more bipartisan. That he refused to capitalise on his African-American identity won him considerable support in a far wider spectrum of the American electorate. Indeed, he showed wisdom in casting himself as a post-racial candidate. In the electoral circus, amid the jugglers and clowns, he has excelled as a tight-rope walker with speeches whose dearth of substance and gravitas is trumped by their eloquence.

There is widespread optimism that an Obama presidency would dramatically repair the tarnished image of America. It would also drasti-

cally alter the international perception of America as an arrogant and aggressive superpower, as well as America's image of itself. If Obama can make it to the White House, it would imply fulfillment of Martin Luther King's dream of a country whose citizens are not judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

All these factors with regard to Obama's candidature make him a formidable hurdle to be surmounted by Hillary Clinton to reach the White House, hitherto an abode for white supremacists. Even if Hillary can occupy it she will find it as difficult as climbing the Everest. However, it will vindicate her fond claim of her being named after the conqueror of the Everest.

Binj (rel) Hafiz is former DG of B/ISS.