

Of Biman, bags, and money

While airlines around the world have become increasingly meticulous in earning revenues from excess baggage, and in losing every bit of unnecessary weight to save on precious fuel, Biman carries thousands of tons of excess baggage, which does not even pay for one-third of the fuel used.

IMRAN ASIF

IN January, one bizarrely pleasant news was that Biman had managed to post a profit of Tk.19 crores for the fiscal year 2007-2008. Over the years, we had believed that "Biman" and "profit" could not go together in the same sentence, to ensure which we had very diligent people, from minister to briefcase-businessmen to clerical staff, employed at the airline!

The press regularly wrote about irregularities in aircraft leases and purchases, purchases of spares, selling of Biman's assets, et al. In each of the aforementioned areas of potential corruption, at least one external party was involved -- the seller or the buyer, who through reliable "connectors" and "connections" made great days for themselves. I am, rather, interested in talking about an unassuming area which allows corrup-

tion every day -- baggage!

Baggage? Baggage! Where no one else is involved but just the passenger and Biman itself. I will only elaborate on one example: the Hajj of 2008-2009 and the excess baggage carried therein. The potential loss to Biman in the form of internal corruption from this single source is more than the profit of just Tk.19 crore it has so jubilantly announced!

Biman carried 1,54,070 kilograms of excess baggage in the 33 dedicated Hajj flights. It also carried 1,08,470 kilograms of excess baggage in the 23 scheduled flights carrying pilgrims between. As per the rules set by Biman, each pilgrim passenger is allowed to carry 30 kilograms of baggage without any extra charge. Beyond the allowed 30, each additional kilogram between is officially charged 45 Saudi Riyals.

Therefore, Biman should have earned

69,33,150 Saudi Riyals from the 33 dedicated flights and 48,81,150 Saudi Riyals from the 23 scheduled flights carrying the pilgrims. The total revenue would have been a staggering 1,18,14,300 Saudi Riyals -- equivalent to over Tk.21.6 crore. Can you guess how much Biman has actually earned? Just 1,91,254 Saudi Riyals, equivalent to just about Tk.35 lakh, or just 1.6% of the potential total revenues!

Newspaper reports have alleged that Biman officials on Hajj duty at Jeddah had collected excess baggage fees without giving the passengers money receipts against the payment. What happened was that, for example, if a passenger had 20 kilograms of excess baggage, and was short of cash, these officials unofficially accepted an affordable sum from him, without transferring it to Biman. It is understandable that the majority of the pilgrims, being unfamiliar with air travel, may have heavy baggage on their way back home, so giving them a discount is only logical.

But even if Biman offered discounts for four-fifths of the total baggage carried and could collect revenues for the remaining one-fifth, it'd still be over Tk.4.3 crore. Even in the 2006-2007 Hajj season, Biman earned about 4,18,000 Saudi Riyals (over Tk.76 lakh) as excess baggage charges in the post-Hajj phase, and about 5,12,000 Saudi Riyals (over

Tk.93 lakh) in the 2007-2008 season. And this year's revenue is just 37% of last year's -- though there were more pilgrims this year!

Following a newspaper report published on January 6, 2009 in The Daily Ittefaq, Mr. Zahed Kuddus, Biman's MD and CEO, was given an internal report in which all this information was given. As of today, no action has been taken against anyone, including the top executives at the Directorate of Customer Services, which is the wing responsible for this matter. Do we, therefore, have any reason to believe that the heads of the customer services department, with support from the airline's top executive management, were not involved in this quick-and-heavy looting spree?

This looting is not just an occasional practice but a perpetual one, causing the airline to lose hundreds of crores year after year, and that too in an uncouthly manner. In December, 2008, the airport authorities at Riyadh warned Biman for leaving baggage abandoned in the open ramp area after its officials at the counters accepted more baggage than the DC-10 aircraft could take.

On December 24, 2008, after completing a flight from Jeddah to Dhaka, the pilot remarked on the de-briefing form that 3.5 tons of extra fuel were burnt due to hidden traffic load, meaning that the



Excess baggage means extra bucks.

cockpit crew was not given the actual payload of the aircraft before its flight from Jeddah. Not only is this an example of unscrupulous stealing of the airline's revenues, it is also a serious safety hazard because the pilots determine their takeoff settings for the flight based on a number of parameters, including the payload information given to them.

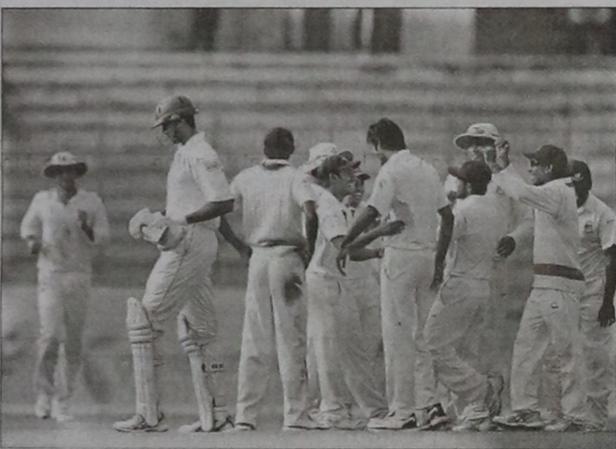
While airlines around the world have become increasingly meticulous in earning revenues from excess baggage, and in

losing every bit of unnecessary weight to save on precious fuel, Biman is having to carry thousands of tons of excess baggage for meagre revenues, which does not even pay for one-third of the fuel used. And some people seemingly just cannot help getting richer every time we fly on our beleaguered national airline!

Imran Asif, 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.

Bangladesh not yet fit for test cricket?

The lowering of the standards for their entry into test cricket is the reason Bangladesh and Zimbabwe do not measure up against other nations.



FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

ON December 27, 2007, the writer sneaked into the Mirpur stadium to watch the second day of the first test between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. I have to admit, the sole reason for my foray into a test cricket venue was to watch the world's greatest wicket taker, Muttiah Muralitharan of Sri Lanka, bowl.

I entered the stadium after lunch and was there until bad light stopped play. In that time, Murali took five wickets and Bangladesh lost nine!

I had watched test cricket at Dhaka stadium during the Pakistani days. The stadium used to be full. What struck me was that the stadium was not even 10% full! Wasn't the unbridled enthusiasm of

the fans a reason that Bangladesh was granted test status? At Taka 100, Taka 150 and Taka 500, the price of admission was not exorbitant.

We may be dreaming of a digital Bangladesh, but the scoreboard at the stadium is still manually operated! The spectators were cautioned not to offend the national, ethnic, racial or religious sentiments of the players and officials.

I asked my nephews and nieces how many wickets they thought Murali would pick up in Bangladesh's first innings. "Not that many," they answered, "because Bangladeshi batsmen will fall to other less deadly bowlers as well."

When I asked why Bangladeshi batsmen do not establish themselves before going on the attack, they said: "They

know they are going to be out soon whether they are on the defensive or on offensive; it looks better if they are out attacking!"

Murali said that Bangladeshis did not know how to build a big inning. He alluded to the lack of experience. That may be so, but lurking in everyone's mind is the worry that our cricketers may not have the requisite skills.

Sure, Bangladesh has beaten most test nations in one-day internationals. But the true measure of a team's caliber is its performance in a test. That is where Bangladesh has failed miserably. One test victory in nine years against a depleted Zimbabwe team does not inspire confidence.

Bangladesh has individuals with great talents, which they need to hone by playing in the domestic leagues of test playing nations, just as the Pakistanis had done in the 1960s and 1970s.

Without a formidable pace attack, victories in test matches are rare. Pakistan did not start winning until the emergence of Imran Khan. Right now, Bangladesh does not have a pace attack opponents fear. Bangladeshi batsmen do not know how to consolidate their advantage. One batsman is supposed to hold the fort at one end while the other goes on the attack, but both batsmen go on the offensive simultaneously, thereby losing wickets.

Not all batsmen are on form at the same time. Enormous responsibility rests on the one who is in form, but once he scores a hundred he throws his wicket away with the attitude, "I have done my part; now, the rest of you do yours!" The point is, "the rest of you" may not be in form; you are!

The hallmark of a good team is consistency. The trademark of Bangladesh is inconsistency. A horrendous one inevitably follows a good performance. A tremendous second innings in the first test was followed by a scandalously lopsided

loss (by 465 runs) in the second test.

The reason Bangladesh could not beat Sri Lanka in the final of the tri-nation competition was not Murali's bowling: it was Murali's batting! It took Bangladesh three attempts to beat Zimbabwe once in an ODI. If Zimbabwe's test status is in question, so should be Bangladesh's.

The chief architect of Bangladesh's 1997 ICC Trophy triumph in Malaysia, Gordon Greenidge, was fired after he said in 2000 that Bangladesh was not ready for test cricket.

In these columns the writer had echoed Greenidge's sentiments in 2000 and warned that Bangladesh had not attained test standard, and were it to take the leap into an arena it did not belong in, Bangladesh would be the doormat of test cricket for twenty years. Sadly, nine years later, it is becoming more and apparent that we do not belong.

Test status should be earned. Pakistan had to beat the visiting MCC in an unofficial series in 1951 before gaining it. Sri Lanka provided Pakistan and India stiff competition during unofficial tests in the 1960s and 1970s before gaining test status in 1981. The lowering of the standards for their entry into test cricket is the reason Bangladesh and Zimbabwe do not measure up against other nations.

Runs scored and wickets taken against Bangladesh are not comparable to those achieved against the top eight nations. Shane Warne pointed out that many of Murali's 769 test wickets have been taken against Bangladesh.

There are two-tiers of test playing nations; the eight who belong (Australia, England, South Africa, India, West Indies, New Zealand, Pakistan and Sri Lanka); and the two who do not (Zimbabwe and Bangladesh). There is no shame in leaving a club we do not belong in, returning only when we can.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and Daily Star columnist.



How to marry into a billionaire's family



WARNING: the information in this column is top secret. Only men should read it. There have been a series of high society weddings in Asia recently so I hereby reveal how Asian fathers get their sons married off.

Stage one

Father: Can we talk for a moment, son? All your cousins are married now, you know. You'll have to settle down yourself one day. Can I help?

Son: No, Dad. I'll decide who I'm going to marry and when I'm going to marry.

Father: Of course. I was just going to suggest you meet a nice girl I have in mind. That's all.

Son: No thanks, Dad.

Father: She's beautiful, she's intelligent -- oh, and she just happens to be the daughter of the richest man in Asia.

Son: Really? Wow. Okay. Well, I guess I could take her out to dinner or something, see if anything clicks.

Father: What a great idea! If there's anything I can do to help, just ask.

Stage two

Father: Thank you so much for seeing me.

Tycoon: You have precisely 30 seconds.

Father: That'll be plenty. I've only got one thing to tell you. I believe my son and one of your daughters are considering marriage.

Tycoon: What? Impossible. I know nothing about this.

Father: It was a surprise to me, too. They're going out later this week.

Tycoon: But who are you? And more to the point, who does your son think he is?

Father: My son is a good boy, young, single, smart and presentable.

Tycoon: Huh. So are a million other boys who would like to marry my daughter.

Father: True. But my son's a high-flier, just like you were when you were young. In fact, he's just about to start work as vice president of a major bank. He'll be the youngest vice president ever.

Tycoon: Really? Well in that case, maybe it's not completely out of the question. Saves me going out looking for someone, I suppose. Which bank?

Father: The biggest bank in Asia.

Tycoon: Let me think about this.

Father: If you and I give our approval, we would make your daughter very happy, which is the most important thing.

Tycoon: Of course. I guess we'd better arrange some sort of dinner between your family and mine.

Father: What's a great idea!

Stage three

Father: I want you to give my son a job as vice-president of your bank.

Banker: What? I can't do that. I don't know anything about him. Is he even qualified?

Father: He's shortly to become the son-in-law of the richest man in Asia.

Banker: He's qualified.

Father: My son can start work on Monday. What have you got available at the vice president level?

Banker: Not sure. There may be some openings in equities.

Father: Vice president of equities. What a great idea!

And that's it. Simple, isn't it? Now eagle-eyed female readers may have spotted something. At no point in this process are the wishes of the female considered. That's true. This is Asia. Women's opinions don't count.

But we are moving slowly towards female emancipation and may well achieve equality between the sexes in as little as four to five hundred years. Have patience, girls. And if you think I am being a sexist, let me remind you that it is not your business to think.

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Saint of the down-trodden

He was moved by the suffering of the neglected masses, who constituted a major portion of the society. He wanted to remove the unjust discrimination through persuasion. He struggled all through his life for social equality and unity.

KANAILAL RABIDAS MOHANTO

GURU Rabidas was born in village Gobardhanpur near Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, on a Magh fullmoon (February 9-10, 1376 CE), to cobbler parents -- Raghuram and Raghurani.

Cobblers belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, and more than 600 years ago they were treated as "untouchables" by those belonging to the higher rungs of the four-rung system. Being an untouchable child, Rabidas was barred from entering a school.

But he was a born learner and a genius. He could comprehend the scriptures by hearing from enlightened saints and others around him, while being active in the family trade with his father. He was a

very quick learner of that community trade, too. But he self-educated and enlightened himself to be a superb composer of hymns and author of commandments to free his community from the inhuman bondage imposed by the upper castes. His followers called him "Sant," meaning saint.

He was born in a poor family. Nonetheless, he rose to the position of great honour through a life of simplicity and piety. However, observing the gross injustice all around him, he happened to be more a humanist than a religious leader. In fact, he worked more for establishing human rights in whole of the society than preaching religious sermons. He saw that religion was already there -- more than one -- but very little of humane considerations.



Sant Guru Rabidas

He was moved by the suffering of the neglected masses, who constituted a major portion of the society. He wanted to remove the unjust discrimination in a non-violent way -- through persuasion. He struggled all through his life for equality and unity in society. He always envisaged a humane society in place of a caste-ridden one.

Sant Guru Rabidas was also revered and adored by many others beyond his

community for his broader view of the society and humane approach in preaching his philosophy. He left this mundane world for the hereafter in 1527 CE, giving the vast community of cobblers his name and dignity to live with.

Since then, the cobbler community of the sub-continent has been known as "Rabidas community" worldwide. A sizeable number of the Rabidas community also live in Bangladesh, distributed across most parts of the country. The seeds of change for the better that the Guru sowed for the community have led many through their pursuit of enlightenment and perseverance to positions considered much higher than their community trade.

But the majority in the community still suffers due to lack of attention of the authorities concerned. On this great occasion of Sant Guru Rabidas Ji Maharaj's anniversary, one hopes the authorities concerned as well as the human rights groups and civil society as a whole would extend their cooperation to the suffering section of humanity.

Master Kanailal Rabidas Mohanto is Director General, Bangladesh Guru Rabidas Dham Mission.