

Beating up on private universities



No justification for such brutality.

Whatever maybe the intention of the private university owners, from the government's perspective it looks to be nothing other than treating education as an economic product that has a saleable value -- so put a VAT upon it.

MOHIT UL ALAM

I was watching the NTV 8 o'clock morning news on July 28 when I suddenly saw a shot of a policeman beating a student. The student was already inside a police cordon, but this particular policeman made room for himself and dealt a couple of heavy blows on the face of the already wilting student. Again his colleagues made room for him, and again the policeman dealt another series of hard-hitting punches on the face of the student.

The cameraman must have sensed that he had happened to snap an act of police atrocity at its cruelest level. The camera was held steadily on the severely bashed face of the unfortunate student who by then had started to

throw up -- a clear clinical signal that his life was under threat. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that what I was watching was true.

It was true. I personally feel that, on the basis of what I saw on TV, an inquiry should be immediately made by the concerned authority to find out why such an atrocity took place, and the policeman should be identified and brought to book.

I feel that the student -- even if he had done something to annoy this particular policeman, which the camera hadn't probably caught -- was well inside the secured cordon made by his (the policeman's) colleagues, hence he (the student) was totally under their custody, and, therefore, he couldn't have been beaten, and beaten so mercilessly.

Being a father myself, I felt for the boy, and I could imagine the agony of his parents/guardians who might have happened to watch the same news clip. May God give our policemen the sense that even though they are the custodians of law, they cannot take law in their hands.

The incident took place sometime on July 27, when a section of private university students took to the street to protest a levying of VAT on their tuition fees. I'm not sure whether the government has levied the VAT on the private universities or on the tuition fees of the private university students.

Both provisions will be like a double-edged sword to the guardians of the private university students. If the government has levied it on the private universities, they will exact it from the students by raising their tuition fees. And if the second proposition is true, that the government has levied the VAT on the students' fees, then their present agitation on the streets has a deeply anguished logic.

One can clearly see why the finance minister has levied VAT on the private universities or on their students. Right or wrong, the prevailing

feeling in the greater section of the people regarding private universities is that they are doing business in the name of education.

The government may wish to see the private university sector become as profitable as the garment sector. The government may also see the entrepreneurship of the private university owners as being motivated by a desire to make a profit, and so it has decided to slap VAT on them.

Whatever maybe the intention of the private university owners, from the government's perspective it looks to be nothing other than treating education as an economic product that has a saleable value -- so put a VAT upon it.

Who will tell the government what forced the birth of private universities -- and not one or two but half a century of them in the span of 18 years. Not a paltry thing! Count the number of students; they outnumber those reading in public universities. The reality behind the growth of private universities had been formed and cemented not in spite of but because of the existence of public universities. The public universities have become like so many other things in our nation that exist, and simply exist, and nothing else.

Let me give a personal example to indicate the difference between the moribund existence of a public university and the dynamism prevalent in a private university. My eldest son entered a public university in 1998 and came out in 2006, with a session jam for three years at least.

On the other hand, my second son entered a private university in 2006 and, in 2010, he will complete his graduation with no loss in sessions or years. If it's satisfying for me, then it's satisfying for thousands of other parents and guardians.

I'm not a rich man but a middle-class service holder, like thousands of parents who have sent their children to private universities are. They have done it not because they can comfortably afford it, but because they see that their children would at least come out from the university in time and take part in the greater sphere of life sooner rather than later.

Time was not only a relative matter to Einstein, it is equally so for all guardians of private university students. We parents/guardians will be hard done by the levying of the VAT either on the private universities or on the tuition fees of the students.

May the government have a more tolerant view about education in general, and about the education in private universities in particular.

Prof. Mohit Ul Alam is Head of English at ULAB.

A chef with no hands

A minister inherits a bureaucracy but lacks the basic power of removing bad employees and hiring good ones. Thus, the minister cannot logically be held accountable for his or her organisation.

FAISAL HAMID

HERE is an American expression that accurately describes the stagnation of Bangladeshi government: too many cooks in the kitchen. Not only are there too many, but our cooks are pretty lousy and we are stuck with them.

Bangladeshi civil servants live in a dream world -- ultimate job security. Their positions are stable irrespective of how atrocious or non-existent their work may be. One bureaucrat described a situation to me where eight employees came to work once a month just to collect their salaries. The mechanisms for removing the unnecessary workers were so difficult to navigate that it ultimately cost less to keep signing paychecks.

The Ministry of Establishment handles promotions and grants them based on positive performance reviews. This process is antithetical to efficient organisation because the Ministry of Establishment is independent of individual ministers.

An organisation's success is dependent on its employees; bad employees lead to stagnation. The corporate structure is successful because it naturally works to employ the best people, with the best of the best in the highest positions. The head of a corporation has the mother of all incentives to make this process work -- profit. The end result is a very efficient and effective organisation.

A minister similarly has every incentive to make his organisation work -- votes. If a single department in the government has poor performance, it may derail the ruling party's election. An example of this is the controversial performance of the US Department of Education under President George W. Bush. A minister thus has the most incentive to ensure that his or her ministry is working.

Unfortunately, today's minister cannot exercise that incentive. Even the secretary, the most powerful bureaucrat in a ministry is not hired and cannot be fired by the minister. A minister inherits a bureaucracy but lacks the basic power of removing bad employees and hiring good ones. Thus, the minister cannot logically be held accountable for his or her organisation.

We lose basic accountability. The prime minister cannot fairly hold his or her ministers accountable. If the head of an organisation does not even hold the leverage of firing an employee for bad performance, he or she cannot deliver the fundamental incentive to employees for them to work effectively -- the assurance of keeping one's job. The result is stagnation. All employees will continue to work at a low level of performance, or may not even work at all. Their pay-check is all but guaranteed, even if they don't show up to work.

Bangladeshi development is moving along at a slow pace. Our growth rate is unacceptable and our government's failure to perform effectively has a major and undeniable role in this. We need to reform if we expect to develop before the next Ice Age.

Ministers need to have full control over their ministries. They need to be able to choose their secretaries and have a large influence over who gets the rest of the jobs in the ministries. If this happens, we clear up the too often confusing power relationship between the minister and secretary, which results in a loss of accountability. With these new powers, voters can comfortably know who is responsible for the performance of their government.

The fear for making such a move is that corrupt Bangladeshi ministers will just stuff their ministries with their own people. Let them. Let them give every first, second, and third cousin a post in their ministry. If these cousins happen to be wonderful workers, then nothing is lost.

When these cousins likely fail at their jobs, we know whom to punish at the voting booth and can be assured that the next minister will think twice before doing this same. We achieve accountability. If we don't make this move, we can expect more of the same.

Development is a long process and government is a necessary tool. However, if we want to engage the abysmal markers of our government -- corruption and inefficiency -- we must reorganise the structure of incentives at the top level. Ministers need control over their organisations to translate their incentive for votes into development.

We expect better from our government. Let us allow it to perform better.

Faisal Hamid is a sophomore at Yale University and an intern for Minister G.M. Quader.

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Biman again



I have deliberately taken the title of this article from the famous song of a very famous movie -- Superman. Despite the on-going slander campaigns against Biman, all the employees of the Biman family are in good stead and are united to stand as a body to take this airline both forward and upward.

MUHAMMAD ZAKIUL ISLAM

STATISTICS are good tools but, at times, they can be grossly misleading. Years ago, I read an item in the Reader's Digest. It went somewhat like this: The unemployment rate in Switzerland had gone up by 100%! That surely raised a lot of eyebrows. In reality, the number of unemployed might have risen, say, from 1000 to 2000 people! While such statistical statements are arithmetically true, they are intellectually corrupt.

When we say that Biman had lost 80% of the market share, it is so very true. But what we don't say is that the size of the market itself had grown over the years and Biman could not grow and build up its capacity in line with that growth.

In the last FY, Biman had carried about 1.2 million passengers as against 3 million by foreign carriers. With a fleet of only 8 aircraft, Biman has commanded 27% of the market share while competing with 21 other airlines, most of which are from the oil rich Middle Eastern countries and operating the latest and

most modern aircraft.

But that is not to suggest that Biman had nothing to do in all these. It was the owners of the airlines rather than the people in the rank and file of Biman whose onus it was to let the airline grow and build up its capacity.

The last time that the Biman tarmac welcomed a new aircraft was in the middle of the last decade of the last millennium when two Airbus A310s were added to the fleet. That's about 15 years from today. Indeed, air traffic has multiplied over the years. All the carriers that operated to Bangladesh flew about 22,191 frequencies, that is, about 60 flights per day on an average, handling a total of 4 million passengers annually.

Happily, a lot of time, attention and space are allocated to Biman by the print and electronic media, all for the right cause but, at times, for a wrong reason. An aircraft stranded at some Middle Eastern airport for even a minor technical glitch hits the headline and captures the scroll of the screen.

While the intense interest, unfathomable curiosity and the great sense of sensation is

understandable, what is not supportable is the irreparable dent it causes to the public image of this struggling national institution. Being a member of the Biman family, I may be accused of certain bias, but quietly frankly, as a reader and a viewer, I do not find much value in such news items.

Biman's image is under constant and relentless onslaught, day in and day out, by all and sundry. Some have likened it to a miserably torn rug whose ultimate future and manifest destiny is to get further tattered, and to be abandoned one day. Some of the erstwhile employees are already forecasting and getting ready for the final rituals of the airline. Thanks to them.

As a part of their sacred duty, they have also suggested ways and means to salvage this airline from its final journey, if possible! Everyone in Biman ought to be grateful to them. If Jamie Siddons or Gordon Greenidge could build and rejuvenate the Sakibs and Ashrafils, why can't an expatriate be hired to grow flowers in and around Balaka.

Whether such analogy between coaching a cricket team and running an airline is born out of a sheer lack of a realistic understanding or from benign sarcasm, I will leave it to the readers to judge. It is easier said than done. They are either oblivious of our work culture or have forgotten the tradition and commitment of the members of the Biman family to which they once belonged. Admittedly, many similar exercises were done in the past. The end results are for everyone to see.

One allegation against Biman is that we are

over staffed -- the aircraft-to-manpower ratio is much too high as compared to the international standards, it is claimed. But let me tell you that it would assume an astounding proportion if we were to oblige every request that we receive from the same sources.

Admittedly, we have problem areas within the organisation. Our fleet is not the best in world, our marketing boys may not be the smartest of folks in town, our purchase system may not be as efficient and the engineering may not be as fast. There are also complaints about the reservation system, in-flight service and overall handling.

But Biman has an invaluable possession. We have an experience of long four decades of running domestic and international operations with a strong infrastructure in place, though deviations are there. We are in the process of procuring modern aircraft for our fleet, which will be backed up by a modern and state of the art IT system for reservation, marketing, inventory and revenue management.

By the grace of Almighty, we have one of the best safety records, which are based on the uncompromising position of both the airline and the CAAB on training and licensing procedure of our pilots and engineering personnel. As a member of IATA, we have also obtained certification of EASA and are in the process of acquiring international standards for our MRO.

Unfortunately, the views which are generously emanating from different directions about the present state of affairs of Biman are grossly flawed. Isolated cases of abuse, corruption and delinquent behaviour, once detected or reported, are promptly dealt with.

Demand for salary and pay hike is not a hitherto unknown or celestial phenomenon which has descended upon Biman alone -- it is a common scenario in any industry. And there are accepted industrial and labour laws, norms and principles through which such issues are dealt with. But in the case of Biman, these matters are given undue coverage, and uncanny twists and turns.

Here is an admission. I have deliberately taken the title of this article from the famous song of a very famous movie -- Superman. Despite the on-going slander campaigns against Biman, all the employees of the Biman family are in good stead and are united to stand as a body to take this airline both forward and upward.

For that what we need is the ordinary Bangladeshi citizen, albeit with extraordinary zeal, enthusiasm and commitment to serve the national flag carrier. Biman has no shortage of such a "Superman."

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"We all have to make sacrifices. I'm sacrificing your position."