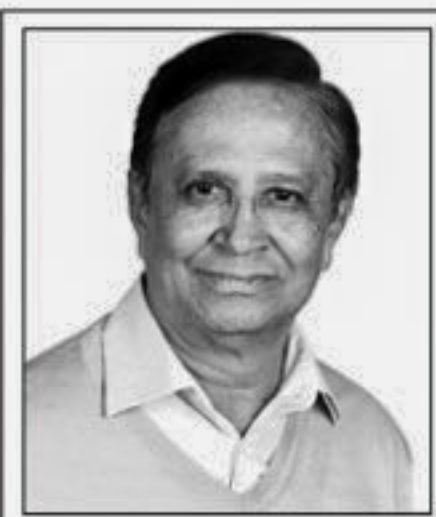


PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Obsessed with history ...



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

OBSESSION with history and sprightly interest in it are as different as cloudy and sunny outlooks. The first can work

Our history has been stained in blood, political narratives successively strewn with lies in progressive regularity heaping one set of prevarications of self justification upon another as the people choked under dead weight of deceit, depravity, denial and hopelessness.

up emotions into a frenzy bordering on morbidity. On that route we are led to disorientation from matters at hand, a rather heavy price to pay. The second, on the other hand, can be an inspirational trigger of positive impulses for constructive engagements and creative outcomes.

Our memorialisation of historic events has been more of the melancholic than of the joyous. Understandably, because of the sacrifices underlying it and sometimes due to attempted but repeatedly aborted undoing of the values established through the national attainments.

The festivity or celebrative aura of the occasions has invariably been blemished by a stodgy diet of owning and disowning campaigns the people were forced-fed on.

There are as many days as there are rituals, recalls of historic turning points and divided observances. We are a nation caught up in the past, in a quicksand of time, as it were, risking to lose height under magnetic pressure.

Otherwise a physical world phenomenon but acting out on our mental domain.

So where do we get the benefit of a sense of history, that other nations prize as a precious gift? We have at best a confused sense of history and, worse, a convictionless one.

Our history has been stained in blood, political narratives successively strewn with lies in progressive regularity heaping one set of

prevarications of self justification upon another as the people choked under dead weight of deceit, depravity, denial and hopelessness.

Today's self-bleeding society hardly comes as a surprise, if we see it through the lens of history. For we are heir to a blood-soaked history left by ambitious, irresponsible, reactionary people who have had blood in their hands.

It reminds: sale proceeds from Tony Blair's book on war that he

offered to a British soldiers' fund have been rejected by them saying the author's hand is stained with blood. How many of the books germinating through our history should we be discarding to oblivion?

Slightly off-track perhaps but an instructive page from British history nonetheless: Lord Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) established what he claimed "puritanical rule," opposed to cavalier lifestyle of the royalty (he executed Charles

I) by the force of arms. He is despised in Britain even to this day.

A little tiff, conflict of interest, rejected love advances, even plain rivalry and feuding, demolish the opponent or finish him or her off -- that appears to be the rule of the game. No tolerance, no time to heal, no mediation, no negotiation, no mercy, just go and kill -- seems to be the order of the day.

The menacing cruelty and brutalisation that we see all



KARL LEHR

around is the signature of abomination through the societal order top down. Remember the brutal murder of hapless school-teacher Arifa, chopped to profuse bleeding by a butcher's knife in broad daylight, with horror coursing through the tender nerves of the terrified fleeing students; Hena's raped body exhumed to reveal a collusive scandal, or a couple's brutal murder in a city home; and the murderous assault on an AL leader and his driver! Can these be isolated from the tainted continuum of our history?

Still the government functionalities persist in claiming that law and order situation is better than ever before. In the process, as reality is not faced up to, so is the fire of impunity stoked.

Even in pathologically militarist Pakistan a country with a history of coups and countercoups the uniformed adversaries did not spill a drop of blood to take turns to usurp power. Judicial murder of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, assassination of Benazir Bhutto, preceded by the first Pakistan prime minister Liakat Ali Khan's murder, were the hand-maidens of basically military misadventure against political leaders.

But in our context, the coups have been dastardly and bloody. Bangabandhu's diabolic assassination along with his most members of his family, four Awami League leaders killed inside central jail by hooded killers sent on a mission by Khandaker Mushtaque and his gang, assassination of Ziaur Rahman who himself came through a blood-stained path -- the list is long.

Indeed, it is longer with the extra-judicial murder of many a senior army officer, including that of Col. Taher. Besides, Brig. Khaled Musharraf, Lt. Col. Haider and

Col. Nazmul were killed off by ordinary soldiers in frenzied circumstances. General Manzoor faced a lethal retribution for his alleged role in assassinating Ziaur Rahman, all wrapped in mysterious circumstances.

Thus many truths are encrusted by hushed up layers of prevarication and outright lies with all manner of traces, clues and evidence swept deep under the carpet. Ours is not a reconciled nation, it badly cries out to be one that has settled its accounts with all dark forces including the perpetrators of war time atrocity and crimes against humanity.

On war crimes trial, we have just about begun a process. After long 40 years in the backdrop of many collaborators jailed in the immediate aftermath of national independence and charge-sheeted under the Collaborators' Act were granted amnesty by a post-1975 government which had repealed the law. The trial must be brought to an effective conclusion in all respects, that will save some of the national conscience that was striped away.

Overall, we would do well for our future generations if we consensually agree to have an overarching truth, conviction and reconciliation commission that is cross-party with adequate civil society representation guaranteeing sustained repair work on the national psyche within a stated timeframe. Only that way the nation can settle its accounts with the past and receive the momentum to move ahead, out of the political mire.

We deserve to see it happen within our life time so that our progeny is not condemned to a replay of the ordeals that the nation had collectively experienced.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

Yunus: Beyond the politics

SAFWAN SHABAB

The news of Dr. Yunus' ousting from Grameen Bank is deplorable. At a time when Bangladesh is hosting its biggest global event, the government has decided to publicly shun the nation's most prominent global citizen. Thank you dear politicians for taking us to another low.

It is unclear why there has been so much controversy recently around Grameen and its financial practices. Yes, similar to any other financial institution, Grameen is open to criticism for its modus operandi. Maybe some bureaucrats and speculative journalists are right to argue that the Grameen model charges excessive interest rates. Perhaps they are right to debate that Grameen uses unfair coercion to ensure repayments. Perhaps they are right to be concerned at recent allegations of Grameen's misuse of foreign funds.

But as an ordinary citizen, this author will claim that the same Grameen model has paved the way to financial independence for millions of Bangladeshis. It has done exactly what our politicians and bureaucrats have failed to do in the last 40 years. If Grameen has run a financial system parallel to our inefficient public banks, then it probably has done the right thing -- it has offered credit to those our politicians have happily ignored. And the act of integrating so many Bangladeshis into the financial system has to be attributed to the vision of one man -- Dr. Yunus. None of the valid criticisms of Grameen can justify the vilification of its leadership. But thank you dear politicians for belittling this nation's most innovative financial product and the creative mind behind it.

The intervention of the government in "removing" Dr. Yunus is itself questionable. Grameen's (well-documented) 2009 Annual Report cites that Grameen members hold 95% percent of Grameen Bank shares while the remaining stake is held by the Government of Bangladesh. While the author is no expert on Bangladesh's corporate laws or about the often-invoked 1983 Grameen Bank Ordinance, Grameen is arguably a private financial entity. Its independence from government interference and more specifically, political maneuvering, is precisely what has allowed it to respond to market demands and cater to its

borrowers in a manner that balances stakeholder interests.

The government has to take the responsibility to explain why, as a minority owner of the Bank, it has the right to remove its most competent manager. If it fails to do so, it will blur any distinction between public and private entities. At a time when our nascent capital markets are marred by misleading companies and public regulators (equally incapable of protecting shareholder interests), Grameen's public profile, audited financial reports and relative accountability ought to be a benchmark for our corporate culture. But thank you

Here is a man who has steered clear of politics and made a fortune -- not for himself but for millions of unheeded, poverty stricken Bangladeshis. He withdrew from his lone attempt to enter politics in 2007 soon after he issued his public letter.

dear politicians for getting your priorities wrong -- once again. The Board of the Grameen bank consists of 13 members: the managing director, three members including the chairman nominated by the government, and nine members elected from the borrower shareholders. The borrower-shareholder model is unique to Grameen. In borrowing and saving with Grameen, not only have millions of impoverished Bangladeshis gained access to credit, but they also gained ownership of the only bank who would deal with them. And with that, they have earned a democratic right and their spot as corporate stakeholders.

The writer will not claim that he is well-versed on how these shareholders elect Grameen's nine board members. However, he will argue that such semblance of corporate governance is still more representative and

responsive than any of the means by which our politicians themselves are elected and choose to govern. If anything, such a creative offering by Dr. Yunus and his team has created wealth in the form of public equity for millions who had been otherwise left to their own means and dismal social security. But thank you dear politicians for trying to hide your own incapability by smearing another's success.

If the author has been rambling here, he apologises. But he would like to ask what has been the official reason cited for this government interference. The central bank claims that Dr. Yunus has passed the legal age limit to head a bank in Bangladesh. But it has to be questioned how the Bangladesh Bank can set age limits for the management of a private institution. Even if the all-knowing government can (legally?) enforce an age bar, the writer is befuddled by the actual parameter of this bar -- 60 (as the press claims).

If this arbitrary number is somehow the threshold beyond which Bangladeshis are physically incapable of running an entity, a majority of our current cabinet ought to be happily retired by that same measure. For a man who is arguably one of the nation's most experienced banker, a visionary and the public face of Grameen, Dr. Yunus' position is well justified. Thank you dear politicians for bending your own rules as you feel convenient.

Here is a man who has steered clear of politics and made a fortune -- not for himself but for millions of unheeded, poverty stricken Bangladeshis. He withdrew from his lone attempt to enter politics in 2007 soon after he issued his public letter. He decided his mission was best served outside the spheres of our vindictive politicians and its ailing bureaucracy. He has helped put this country on the world map and befriended pioneers around the world who have implemented his vision. Here is a self-made professor of economics whose journey started at a field project in Chittagong and landed him and his country its lone Nobel Prize. But thank you dear politicians for failing to understand his significance.

And finally, thank you dear politicians for failing us -- one more time.

Safwan Shabab is a freelance writer.

20 rules of the road for Asian drivers



SURVIVED your latest business trip to un-urbanised parts of Asia? Congratulations. It may be luck, or you may have been lucky enough to have absorbed the information you need to know to keep alive.

Here are the 20 Unwritten Rules of the Road for going off the beaten track in Asia.

- There are no rules.
- Except for the golden rule which is: Cows get priority.
- All traffic drives on the left. Except for traffic which drives on the right. And the traffic which drives in the middle.
- Instead of seatbelts, wear a garland of flowers or a feng shui amulet, which offer better protection.
- If you are driving a truck, paint "No Kiss" or "Horn Please" on the back.
- Might is right.
- Instead of driving in a manner that ensures you arrive at your destination alive, set up a small shrine. This ensures the worst thing that can happen to you is that you get to heaven faster.
- You should only ever overtake on the right. Or the left. Or over. Or under.
- Multi-tasking while driving is compulsory. Beginners may wish to drive, chew betel nut and talk on a mobile phone, while advanced drivers should do all three plus enjoy a three-course meal, drink a bottle of locally brewed wine, sing a karaoke song and watch television.
- Signalling before you turn is considered bad form. Surprises are more fun.

- When driving at night, headlights should be kept (a) at full beam to blind oncoming drivers, or (b) switched off (see reference to "surprises" in Rule 12).
- Checking to see if there is any oncoming traffic before pulling out to overtake is considered the behavior of a "wuss".
- You'd be surprised how many vehicles can fit abreast on a two-lane highway.
- If the road is blocked, the hard shoulder may be used as a road. If the road and the hard shoulder are blocked, the pavement may be used as a road.
- Do not run over pedestrians, cyclists or scooter-riders, unless necessary.
- But remember, there are no rules.
- Except the one about the cows.

Frenchman Didier Fayolle wanted to update this column's suggestion that French men like to drive with a Gauloise (a stinky cigarette) in one hand and their passenger's leg in the other. "Gauloises are not the trend any more," he said. "But having your hand on the passenger's knee still is."

A note on driving from the Lonely Planet Guide to India: "The normal driving technique is to put your hand firmly on the horn, close your eyes, and plough through regardless."

Reader Vince A. says that drivers in Manila do stop when they see red traffic lights. "Unfortunately, they're looking at the traffic light at the next junction rather than the one they're approaching," he said.

Prize for the dumbest traffic campaign goes to the Hong Kong Government, for: "Hong Kong's Aim: Zero Traffic Accidents." In other words, they have blown taxpayers' money on a campaign that is (a) impossible to achieve and (b) guaranteed to fail in the first hour. Way to go, lads.

For more, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com