

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Prime Minister, please listen ...



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

I am keeping out of the PM's adverse criticism of the civil society and the press at the inaugural of the International Congress of Social Philosophy (ICSP) last Friday. For, this is a beaten track. It is noteworthy though, the PM's uncharitable remarks came on the heels of the formation of a platform called Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (CMDHR). Never mind her premature combativeness against the new move, I am latching on the positive vibe in the assurance she held out to the press and perhaps even to the civil society that she would be open to "constructive" criticism or suggestion from them. That encourages me to put in a word of advice to her, if I may.

One wonders who or what the prime minister listens to before making a decision: Her clutch of advisers, or her own instincts? The question arises because some of her latest decisions came as a bolt (or shall we say, a thunderbolt) from the blue! The cutting of the Dhaka City Corporation into two and doing away with the caretaker government are obvious cases in point.

Both were adopted, not just in cloak-and-dagger fashion but also being uncomfortably oblivious of the consequences to follow, let alone failure to read the public mind that's been palpably averse to any precipitation of a fuller blown political storm through an introduction of new controversial issues.

Speaking of her words, sometimes people wonder whether she has lost touch with reality or a

miscommunication has developed between her and the people with a divider raised by vested quarters. Try as people with no axe to grind but some pressing professional agenda might to reach her, they find it a mission impossible to get to her, thanks to the barriers put up by so-called inner circles.

In the not-so-hoary a past, rulers would have a spy network, set of close confidantes to check on the sleuth's versions; or they would travel incognito to collect first hand information about the conditions of their subjects, their grievances and in short ascertain how well or badly they were being looked after.

Let's see what are the mechanisms a head of the executive in modern times, especially in a democracy, can depend on for reliable feedbacks to be ensuring good and effective governance she was mandated to provide.

The feedback mechanisms can be broadly conceived in three categories: The PM's party channels including MPs, local bodies, territorial administrations, and government intelligence agencies are grouped in one. In the second group fall the civil society including think-tanks, the media,

both electronic and print, parliament oversight bodies, National Human Rights Commission and Information Commission as far as implementing RTI act goes. To the third category, but not necessarily in that order of importance, belong the opposition and other political parties but which are treated as pariah by a ruling party in our political culture.

Experientially, those in group one put up versions or tend to say things that a government

wishes to hear rather than what would provide useful data for the administration to operate efficiently for the public good. Even though there may be a correct assessment, say of rising or falling popularity, or the effect of a policy in operation on people, depending upon the maturity of the government

it will sift the information and hold on to whatever is positive-sounding discarding the negative. Rather taking any cue for correction there will be denial mode or blaming the past for a present day failure.

There is a large independent, party-neutral and professional component to the second group, namely the civil society and the media which though may

enjoy intellectual confidence of the political parties could not expect spontaneous cooperation from them. Everybody seems to have something to hide.

On balance, the most useful instrument that the PM can bank on to get to know the real-time facts as opposed to make-believe and attune herself to the realities on the ground accordingly is the ordinary people if she means to serve them better and pointedly.

It is our suggestion, therefore, that the PM earmark at least a day per week for hearing out individual public grievances or listening to small groups having similar problems to get addressed. Instant decisions where possible should be given or notes kept on issues for follow-up and quick redress. A special cell needs to be opened in the PMO to deliver service or guarantees for it, on demand.

If former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi could follow this practice in such a vast country as India why can't our prime minister?

The PM has her question hour in parliament but this can only be fractionally beneficial in a virtually oppositionless Jatiya Sangshad! Would it be little self-advertising to say that independent media and civil society are a friend both to the government and the opposition. And these friendships are not mutually exclusive. The PM will only stand to gain by interacting frequently with the media.

Let me conclude with a gem of a quote from Tony Benn, 82, the retired British statesman socialist politician: "I want to leave plenty of time for discussion: I have heard myself speak before."

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The need to overcome pernicious greed



DR SAADAT HUSAIN

ACQUISITION is a basic human instinct. People acquire material resources for consumption, investment and bequeathing purpose. Consumption is broadly defined in this write up: it not only includes consumption of goods and services of tangible nature, it also includes 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 more 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 the people at large.

How much money does a man in need to lead a decent life in Bangladesh? I have discussed this issue with many people. If a person does not indulge in hard drinking, he can maintain a family of six with a monthly income of Tk.150,000. If he is a free-wheeling type he will need more money, but not exceeding Tk.250,000 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 criminal world as it happens more often than not.

With a hefty surplus income at his command, a person may soon want to buy influence to protect his income and indulge in self-aggrandizement. He thinks he can get away with anything, 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.

Someone may develop a fixation, a mania, for acquiring money and material resources for the sake of it. He really does not know what to do with it, all he knows is that he has lots of assets and he can spend as much money as possible whenever he wants to do so. He enjoys 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 did not even have a chance to see. She just enjoyed the ownership. This sort of ownership is a deadweight 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 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 tendency has to be arrested to protect the life and property of citizens. Acquisition instinct should not also be allowed

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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 figurative sense though literary sense is not ruled out.

It is known from various sources that some people have amassed wealth worth billions of taka at home and abroad. From my knowledge about the intelligence and education of some these people, I have reasons to believe that some of them cannot even count five hundred sixty two thousand four hundred forty three taka, let alone higher quantity 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 the fund. All that they are interested in is to ensure smooth flow of money and material whenever they need them.

Their prime consumption comprises acquisition of landed properties, houses including luxury flats, costly vehicles, clothes, ornaments and gizmos, travelling abroad with friends and rela-

tives when they go on shopping binge. The fund managers and the cronies make sure that their whims and caprices are taken care of during their visit abroad. A few industries are also established in their name though the real management authority is exercised by their cronies. Once out of power, they soon lose control over 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. Over-acquisition of wealth is therefore a potential source of big crime.

In Europe, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, a movement has started to limit 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 limited amount of wealth to lead a decent life, to meet the need for his health, security, all types of sensual pleasure, 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 will be greatly benefitted if the compensation package can 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 filthily rich people in that country. Such extravaganzas is 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 fabrics 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 enterprises, he would 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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IN MEMORIAM

Jalal Alamgir: Remembering a brilliant academic

M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM

THE death of Dr. Jalal Alamgir, a young Bangladeshi academic, was a real shocker. He died on December 3 while swimming in the sea in Phuket, a Thai holiday resort. He was a proud faculty of the Political Science department at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA, and a Fellow at the South Asia Initiative, Harvard University. In Bangladesh, Dr. Alamgir was affiliated with the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS), Brac University.

It was barely a month ago that I first met Dr. Alamgir at IGS. Our next encounter was during the last few days of November when a large number of academics and intellectuals from different parts of the world gathered in Dhaka for a three-day long conference on "40 years of Bangladesh: Retrospect and Future Prospects." It was during this meeting that I had the opportunity to exclusively interact with him and get to know his writings. He was heavily involved with the conference in various capacities, sharing his thought and insights and provoking new ideas.

Being an economist, I was particularly interested in interacting with Dr. Alamgir on political theories as I struggled to understand some issues concerning Bangladesh's governance and institutions. He was both fervent and prudent while sharing his thoughts on such matters but always very modest in revealing his own contribution in those areas. Nonetheless, the conversation I had with him was very enlightening. This prompted me to look at his works that are available on the internet. I was taken aback to see the width and depth of his research output.

Dr. Alamgir contributed to a number of critical areas such as democratisation, economic globalisation, international relations, South Asian politics and constructivism. His papers have appeared in some of the leading peer-reviewed journals. The length of his publication list is literally longer than my arm. His essays have appeared in some of the leading regional and global dailies. He ran a popular blog on globalisation, risk, and forecasting.

Dr. Alamgir, who received a doctoral degree from Brown University, USA, had a sound understanding about South Asia's political economy. His book titled *India's Open-Economy Policy: Globalism, Rivalry, Continuity* is a noteworthy contribution. Many experts think that his book is the first major exploration of Indian political economy that follows a constructivist approach. In his book he argued that India's open-economy policy was made, justified and continued on the basis of the idea of openness more than its tangible effect. The edition was selected by Asia Policy for its 2008 Policymaker's Library and nominated for the prestigious Coomaraswamy Prize.

His untimely demise is a great blow for researchers and intellectuals who have an active interest in politics, and particularly in the study of political economy of Bangladesh. He will remain a huge source of inspiration for the new generations of Bangladeshi scholars who have been striving to transform the country from a "limited access" to an "open access" society.

I wish I knew Dr. Alamgir more intimately to write on other aspects of his life. Unfortunately, I don't have a time machine to remove this shortcoming. Thomas Campbell, a Scottish poet, who is primarily remembered for his sentimental poetry on human affairs, once famously observed that "to live in hearts we leave behind is not to die." Barely 41, Dr. Alamgir has left behind a rich academic legacy and a large following, myself included. I am sure that he will be living in our hearts forever through his varied academic and social contributions. I join others, including the IGS family, in praying for his eternal peace.

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