

# Of wealth and land ...

SHAHNOOR WAHID

There is law regarding illegal amassing of wealth and buying and selling of land. There is law regarding land ownership ceiling. Zamindari is a thing of the past. Then what motivates some people including those politicians today to own wealth and land beyond their need? Is it because they lack social status so they want to have it through owning all that, like the protagonist in Tolstoy's story?

IT'S not a good idea that even you do not know how you have created so much wealth! One thousand crore...two thousand crore...and still growing...! That again in only five years! It's even worse if those guys from the anti-corruption office start breathing down your neck, making it even pinker than what it already is. Now, the worst case scenario is you being escorted to jail for owning wealth worth thousands of crores of taka, and you fail to explain the source!

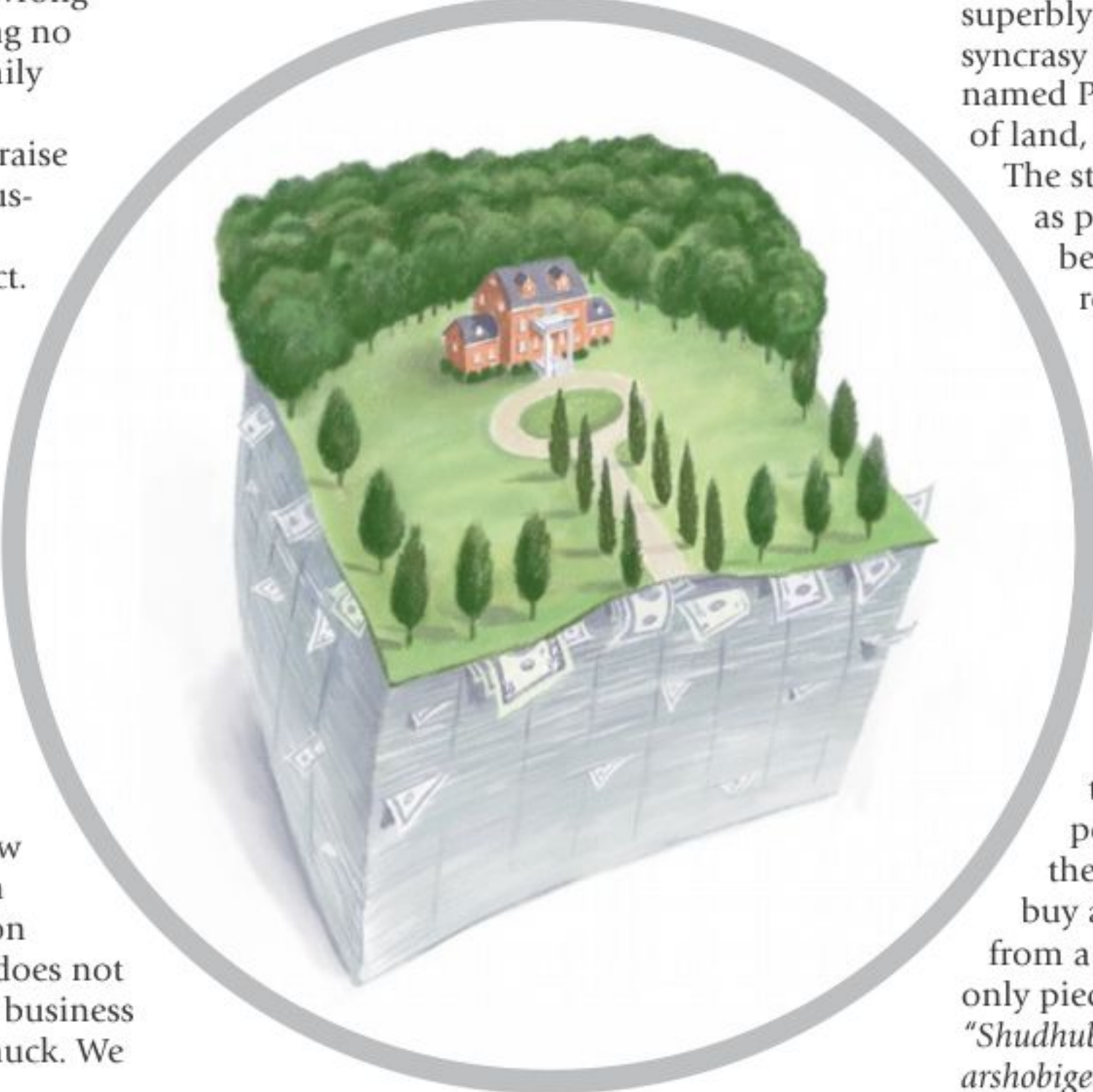
But we can explain! We know that your wealth and its earning processes are downright illegal! There is no legal means under the sun to earn that kind of wealth in five years. So, naturally one day you will have to face the music. You see, everything starts to go wrong when nondescript men, like you, having no past record of genuine business, or family inheritance, suddenly start to become rich...richer...and richer. You begin to raise lots of eyebrows. Neighbours start to suspect. Distant family members start to suspect. Local hoodlums start to suspect.

On the other hand, when genuine businessmen and industrialists earn that much wealth the long and hard way there are accounts books to support their claims. If those nondescript guys earn thousands of crores in questionable ways in only five years, those genuine businessmen earn them in twenty or thirty years. No wonder they can sleep well at night. Their business activities are transparent and accountable, thereby leaving no doubt in the minds of the people, and the NBR fellows, about how they make money. Yes, there may be an occasional hiccup, a slight manipulation here and there in some cases, but that does not always land them in jails. Our genuine business world is not filled with that much of muck. We have reasons to be proud of it.

Now, what about those nondescript men turned *crorepatis* in five years? Why are they running to and fro to prove how honest their earning is? Why do they fumble when talking to the media? This craze of becoming millionaire overnight, of not knowing when and where to stop in their frantic bid to amass wealth, somehow reminds me of the story of Ali Baba and Forty Thieves. I know you all have read that story many times over. A clever Ali Baba calculated how much of the gold coins he could carry at a time when he entered the cave of the robbers. He knew he could not raise the suspicion of the neighbours by becoming filthy rich overnight. So, he took a little of the gold every time he went in and became richer slowly and steadily. But his greedy brother Kashem wanted to have all the gold all at a time to become the richest man in the locality. He started to stuff

his pockets and bags with all the gold jewelry and coins he could lay his hands on. He didn't know when to stop. Ali Baba sensed danger and asked him to hurry up before the robbers returned. But Kashem went berserk and wouldn't listen to him. Ali Baba fled to save his life. Kashem got caught by the robbers and lost his gold, and his life along with it.

In a free economy everyone has the right to do business and earn money and wealth. But even in a free economy there are guidelines for business, and laws to check foul play. There is something called business ethics and other norms and practices that must be followed by all businessmen. Business does not mean looting the country's wealth. Our genuine businessmen work from dawn to dusk to earn their money. One wonders whether those nondescript men who earn millions overnight



respect any kind of law, rules and regulation, ethics or morality.

From numerous media reports we see that most of these "overnight wealthy" people have this insatiable hunger for buying up land with the ill-earned money. They feel it is safe to invest in land for its appreciation value. A former state minister, a "law maker," bought up 2,865 acres of agricultural land in five years. He has possibly beaten the record of some erstwhile *zaminders* of the last century. Many other lucky politicians now own hundreds of acres of land and thus turned "mini *zaminders*" themselves. Land, though in short supply in this country, seems to be in great demand. Everyone wants a big, big chunk for himself. The long queue for land gets longer every time a new government is installed. The very notion of

owning acres and acres of land has this giddy effect on some people. It starts with a fairly civilised desire to own a piece of land, say 5 acres. But soon the desire turns into hunger to own 100 acres. And then the hunger keeps growing and they crave to own 500 acres or even 1,000 acres. Oh! We have just heard the story of 2,000 plus acres. God All Mighty! If more and more politicians turn '*crorepatis*' in their five year tenure and start owning 2,000 plus acres of land each, together they will buy up all the land available in this country! Instead of the US, now Bangladesh should come to be known as the 'land' of opportunity!

This pathological frenzy for buying up land makes one think aloud 'how much land do these people need?' This expression reminds me of Tolstoy's short story titled, *How much land does a man need?* The great novelist superbly sums up this particular human idiosyncrasy in the story where the protagonist named Pahom says to himself: "If I had plenty of land, I shouldn't fear the Devil himself!"

The story ends like this: "He stays out as late as possible, marking out land until just before the sun sets. Toward the end, he realises he is far from the starting point and runs back as fast as he can to the waiting Bashkirs. He finally arrives at the starting point just as the sun sets. The Bashkirs cheer his good fortune, but exhausted from the run, Pahom drops dead. His servant buries him in an ordinary grave only six feet long, thus ironically answering the question posed in the title of the story."

Rabindranath Tagore also immortalised man's greed for land in his poem, *Dui Bigha Zamin*. In the poem, the rich *zaminder* uses all kinds of tricks to buy a piece of land measuring two bigha from a poor man named Upen. That is the only piece of land Upen had. It goes like this: "Shudhubighe-dui, chhilomorbhui, arshobighechherine/ Babubolilen, 'bujhechhoUpen, e jomiloibokine.'/ Kohilamami, tumibhu-shhami, bhumir onto nai/ Cheyedeckhomor ache borjormoribarmotothai/ Shuni raja kohe, bapu, jano to hey, korechhibagankhana/ Pele dui bigheprosihe o digheshomanhoibetana." Many more real life stories like this have been written with blood and tears in this country through generations.

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# Half a democracy is no democracy at all

ANAM A. CHOUDHURY

THE country's educated elite always wanted it to be seen as a progressive, democratic country and a serious regional player. Unfortunately, at this point in time, viability of our democracy is threatened by gradual corrosion of moral standards among our leaders. The sense of crisis is everywhere, reflected in public cynicism about politics and politicians. The legitimacy of this government has been tarnished, both at home and abroad.

The government, in forlorn hope, is trying to pursue stability at the expense of democracy, and will achieve neither. People who think they do no wrong are the worst because they never learn. They seem to have an extraordinary psychological blind spot about the moral outrage their actions or inactions have caused.

The western countries are urging Bangladesh to keep the electoral environment free and fair, and emphasising the urgency of finding a political formula that works. The behaviour of the ruling party, however, does not inspire much confidence that it is ready for a constructive engagement to end the political gridlock and foster political reconciliation with the opposition parties.

Unsurprisingly, some of our top brass fumed that foreign aid and assistance didn't give donor nations the right to interfere in our internal affairs, though they don't want to understand that the problem in question is not with donor countries, but with their own people.

Policymakers of the ruling party may be aware of the risks involved in allowing midterm snap poll. Traditionally, economic issues have been the major concern of our voters. Inflation, unemployment, rising crime and corruption rates will surely influence on voters' decision. The police have been particularly unsuccessful in clearing up some of the most controversial crimes. This has led to a decline in levels of public confidence in the ability of the police to maintain law and order.

Moreover, this government is very scared of dissatisfied protest votes. Voters have relatively little information on specific policy questions. There is always, in the public mind, the lingering suspicion that even though they are being served the truth it is not necessarily the whole truth.

On the other hand, the opposition parties have so far failed to find new issues with major appeal. If Khaleda Zia and her alliance win the election, it will not be her triumph but rejection of the AL by dissatisfied voters.

Perhaps Islam is the only convenient rallying cry, a very powerful weapon in the hands of some of our political parties to win the hearts of the voters. Although this characterises most of the Muslim world, Bangladeshis are more moderate in their views on religious issues, mainly because of our rich cultural heritage, and only few violent hearts will heed the call of jihad.

In many Muslim countries, Islamists are the largest political force. The danger of the Muslim Brotherhood in the saddle lurks in many Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Syria as well as in monarchies Jordan and Morocco.

Pakistan is often seen as a classic example of the perils of a weak and misgoverned state. Afghanistan led to the rise of the Taliban and allowed al-Qaeda, the terror franchise, to turn into a global menace.

We shouldn't allow our country to drift with the tide. The time has come for both the BNP and the AL to take stock, look ahead, and reach some long term agreement as to what sort of Bangladesh they want to see. There is no room for parochial politics in this regional landscape.

As Asia is known as the engine of global growth, our policymakers should develop a coherent action plan to promote deeper regional integration. We should deepen reform, open-up and advance our neighbourhood diplomacy, build economic corridors and find an effective regional role for Bangladesh to realise its full potential and ensure employment for its millions of workforce.

If European nations can voluntarily dissolve their sovereignty or share their sovereignty for close European cooperation and integration, why we can't gladly embrace Chinese "belt and road" initiatives? President George W. Bush once asked Hu Jintao what kept him awake at night. Creating 25 million new jobs a year was the Chinese president's reply. It is no wonder that China has become the world's second largest economy under the Communist Party's wise guidance. If China soon becomes the largest economy, as some analysts predict, it will be first non-English speaking and non-Western country to lead the global economy. History shows that where economic power goes, strategic and political power usually follows. It is pleasant to think that three billion proud Chinese call Asia as their home and, fortunately, it is our home too.

The writer is a former investment banker.

# Prohibit ribbon development

SHAMSUL AREFIN

RIBBON development takes place when extensive residential/commercial/industrial development occurs in a linear pattern along both sides of arterial roadways. It is widely accepted that if arterial roads are to perform satisfactorily as passage for through traffic, the number of connections for local vehicular access to them must be limited. Access of local traffic to the arterial road creates several problems; such as, congestion, reduced traffic flow, accidents, etc.

The existence of commercial buildings, like shopping centres/markets, generates traffic on arterial roads, thus reducing effective road space and rendering curbside lanes ineffective, which substantially reduces carrying capacity of arterial roads. This type of development is very much in demand and is attractive to developers because they do not have to waste money or plot space for constructing roads; and it attracts trade from the traffic on arterial roads. This practice has resulted in inefficient use of resources, for example, uneconomic extension of utilities leads to urban sprawl that causes deterioration of urban living conditions; the best example of this is Dhaka city.

In places where residences/commercial buildings are too close to the arterial

roads, there will be an increase in number of road accidents involving pedestrians and vehicles going in and out of those buildings. This is revealed by Dhaka's pedestrians accident statistics, which show that pedestrians are vulnerable also on the footpaths, which are meant for their safe movement. This is one of the major reasons for current logjam problem in our major cities. The impact of ribbon development on through traffic can be minimised by restricted or controlled planning of residential and commercial/industrial properties along the route.

Roughly, a standard city should have 25% of its total space for road infrastructure, while Dhaka city has only about 7.5%. This, together with ribbon development, has resulted in severe gridlock problems and absence of road safety standards. Moreover, given the very high population density, the space requirement for road networks should be much higher than a standard city's requirement.

Thus, the combined effect of these issues has turned Dhaka city into the most unlivable city in the world. Chittagong city might emerge as the second worst city in the future, if appropriate interventions are not applied immediately. All the cities of this country are plagued with ribbon development, a precursor to growing urban sprawl. It is apprehended that other major cities will embrace the same fate of Dhaka city if proper planning and legisla-

tive steps or framework are not outlined immediately. If they are allowed to grow, it would be a very grim scenario for the whole country.

Ribbon development must be prevented to ensure congenial living conditions in the rest of the cities of the country. Therefore, the government should start preparing City Master Plans for all districts as soon as possible, engaging reputed foreign firms, giving priority to major cities. Moreover, the country is in dire need of high quality professionals in Town Planning, Transport Planning and Modeling, Traffic Engineering etc., with expertise on the latest software tools and the use of modern technologies. This is one of key issues of institutional developments and exigently necessary for modern city planning.

One of the most effective methods of ensuring that ribbon development does not take place is to acquire extra land for fulfillment of the future requirement. Moreover, as service roads are installed to meet mainly local traffic needs, they need to be incorporated with channelisation by outer separators to segregate them from through-traffic on the arterial roads and highways. Besides, ribbon development has started along highways also. To achieve this separation, the government must plan ahead to secure sufficient right-of-way for major roads at the earliest.

Ribbon development generated great

concern in the United Kingdom during the 1920s and the 1930s. Consequently, Restriction of Ribbon Development Act 1935, as amended by the Trunk Roads Act, 1936, was introduced in the UK. Thus, it paved the way for development of the modern London City. For another instance, in India, the legal framework for controlling ribbon development has been provided by the National Highways Act, 1956. On the contrary, ribbon development in Bangladesh is so omnipresent that it seems as if the town/urban planning authorities are unaware or oblivious of its catastrophic effect on all urban settlements. In the developed countries, restrictions are imposed on vehicular traffic movement either by barring entrance or prohibiting parking to avoid adverse impacts resulting from such developments in the areas where ribbon development is permitted, for example, in the city centres.

It is a very grave issue, therefore, legislative steps should have been taken to impose ban on ribbon development. We could then have much better planned urban development and better urban living environments as well. But the authorities concerned have not yet taken any measures to impose ban on such development; which is severely hampering the planned development of urban habitations.

The writer is a Traffic cum Road Safety Engineer.

QUOTEABLEQuote

Men are probably nearer the central truth in their superstitions than in their science.

Henry David Thoreau

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Breakfast bread

6 Happy or Grumpy

11 Relative by marriage

12 Circle spokes

13 Syrup source

14 Midterms and finals

15 Circle parts

17 Got together

18 Cloverleaf feature

22 Frontiers-man Crockett

23 Brewing vessel

27 Chilled

29 Mourful music

30 Empathize

32 "Damn Yankees" role

33 Spring holiday

35 Back, on a boat

38 Bike part

39 Tremble

41 Throw away

45 Beneath

46 Port-au-Prince's nation

47 Wise saying

48 Winesap, for one

DOWN

1 Director Burton

2 "Cat" - Hot tin Roof

3 Swiss Peak

4 Spending limit in sports

5 Annoying fellow

6 Not naked

7 Candle material

8 First person

9 Frost

10 Balled hand

16 Mouse chaser

18 Sneaker problem

19 Wind pointer

20 Demonic

21 Tartopper

24 Sask. or Alta.

25 Lustly look

26 Eye drop

30 Curio cabinet

31 Language suffix

34 Malia's sister

35 Blue hue

36 Supply with cash

37 Unveiling cry

40 Gunpowder holder

42 Tear

43 Eur.-Amer. separator

44 Diner dessert

Yesterdays answer

TRASH ATBAT

HAPPY ROUSE

RIPUP FORCE

ALLNEW EON

CEE REHEATS

EDS BAYOUS

CORPS

GOALIE CAB

VERMEER AVA

END SCARED

GEES EUSING

AVAIL BINGER

SALTS EAGER

CRYPTOQUOTE

HE ZRI VBMHET, NZ ZRI IEC UO ZRI CNQ, QUP VRUPYCVGIYYHXICMZ.

-- GNMNMIZ NZDUUC

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: THE FLOWER IS THE POETRY OF REPRODUCTION. IT IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE ETERNAL SEDUCTIVENESS OF LIFE.

-- JEAN GIRAUDOUX

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

HAS LT. FUZZ STARTED THE ATTACK?

IN HIS OWN WAY

HE'S MOONING THEM

HENRY

by Don Trachte

NOW SHOWING

JUNGLE TERROR

MEOW!