

When the going gets tough

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

EVERYBODY in Dhaka has a solution for its traffic problem. After all, everyone is a part of the problem and is responsible for it. My private car occupies roughly 40 sq. ft. to ferry me from one place to another. I tend to ignore the fact that at least 20 people can be crammed into a same-sized vehicle. Do I feel guilty about it? Of course I do. Do those 40 people hold grudges against my privileged status? Of course they do. I have the luxury of conditioning the air inside my car, while they are forced to share the body-heat of each other. I feel fortunate. But should I thank the divine providence for such comfort? How can I thank divinity for my privileges that I enjoy at the expense of others? Should they be thankful for their misery too? Besides, what are my privileges compared to the ones who abuse them?

Yes, you have guessed it right. I am referring to the type that has no remorse in blocking thoroughfares for hours in the name of security, going against the flow of the road just because they can erect flag-stands or sound out mad alarms, or parking at their whims while playing Tom and Jerry (or even Tweety bird) with the law enforcing agency!

Dhaka is a city that is generating hatred. Dhaka is a city that is fast splitting into two polarised camps. The binaries rule: Us vs. Them. Even within these binary categories, there is a lot of mini-me's. It's all about 'me', I want to go fast, I want to go first. I want to survive, I want to bypass. I want to take over, I want to overtake. So I will say what I must say. But before that let me make a list of the topics that I won't say because, as urban legends have it, some of these issues are taboo, and it is better to care for one's life.



I won't go into the tales of losing man-hours in gridlock, of the trauma of dying patients in ambulances, of examinees running late for exams or of job seekers missing their appointments. I won't go into the issues of traffic management, potholes, waterlog, rail-crossings, illegal markets and materials occupying footpaths and roads, jay-walkers and pedestrians on the road, mixture of slow and fast vehicles, lack of bus bays and so on. I won't talk about the increase in fare because of jam, the burning of fuel and the air pollution. I won't talk about the honking and the verbal aplenty that add to the city's noise levels.

I won't question the presence of a canton-

ment, an industrial area and an international airport inside the city. I won't dare raise eyebrows over the way the uniformed men are occupying vast stretches of land in the middle of the city that is disrupting the connectivity between Airport Road and Mirpur Road, or Sat Masjid Road and Old Dhaka. The flight route of their golf birdie can halve the loads of traffic flow in the two main arteries, but who am I to talk about it!

I will not talk about the narrowing down of certain roads such as the Elenbari-Bijoy Sarani link road because of some vested effort to save some government residential quarters. I will not

talk about the slow progress of construction works. I will not talk about the presence of inter-city bus terminals inside the city. I will not talk about covered van and trucks plying in the city during peak hours. I will not talk about unfit cars and buses that stop functioning in the middle of the road, causing a huge chain reaction. I will not talk about the lack of civic sense in buses picking up and dropping off passengers in the middle of the streets. I will not talk about starting a fight over a kiss of the bumpers, sending a wave of shock through the Dhaka spine. I will not talk about the slow trains that keep on bringing the city to a standstill. I will not talk about the low percentage of road areas and the high volume of vehicles. I will not talk about the expensive traffic signals that go on and off without any influence on the traffic whatsoever. I will not talk about the corrupt police officers who are more interested in raising money perhaps to over-compensate the bribe they spent to get their posting in a city where the proverbial money flies.

I will not talk about any of these. I will simply say one thing: the nerves of the people are on edge. But then again I am not a psycho-geographer to elaborate it. Besides, those who have assumed the responsibilities of running the show have their reliable agencies to feel the people's vibe. So who am I/are we to talk about it? As unwilling participants in the daily drama where we are stranded in the streets for hours, we can only hope that the producers and the directors of the drama will script a proper ending that will purge the climactic tension that we are acting out on a daily basis.

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BUDGET FY 2015-16

The simple math

OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

situations in the 1970s and 1980s, Bangladesh now depends little on foreign grants. There will also come a time when the income side of the budget will be entirely based on domestic resources and taxes in particular.

We, however, have foreign dependence in another way in the name of foreign financing, which is not unusual. Rather, it is beneficial because of the very low cost of financing. As we have noticed a fiscal deficit of Tk. 27 (= 100 - 73), we manage Tk. 8 from foreign financing and Tk. 19 from domestic financing, such as bank and non-bank borrowings and national savings certificates. The ratio between domestic and foreign financing stands now to be 70:30, which was 65:35 a few years ago. This apparent improvement is not an unmixed blessing.

While in the income part (Tk. 73), we need to increase our relative domestic contribution and need to improve domestic resource mobilisation as much as possible. Domestic contribution should be minimised when it comes to deficit financing (Tk. 27), because domestic financing is expensive. It is equivalent to taking loans by the fiscal authority and the government must ensure the lowest possible cost of financing, regardless of their sources.

Otherwise, the government will keep on increasing the future burden of interest payments which will again take a toll on taxpayers' money, impinging on the government's capacity to spend for development.

For example, borrowing Tk. 100 through a domestic channel of saving certificates will cost Tk. 12 as an interest payment while the liability can be as low as Tk. 2, if through foreign channels. That will release extra Tk. 10 which can be used for development projects to promote growth. As it stands now, the government has to pay Tk. 334 billion as domestic interests and only Tk. 17 billion as foreign interests. Domestic financing is 2.3 times bigger than foreign financing, but the interest liability for the domestic portion is almost 20 times larger than that for the foreign counterpart. Hence, our pattern of financing should be revised in order to reduce the future burden of the budget.

We spend our Tk. 100 (the whole budget) in a composition of 65:35 (current vs. development expenditure). Tk. 65 will be spent for current and revenue expenses such as paying the workforce and the rest Tk. 35 for development projects. The budget document terms this Tk. 65 as non-developmental spending, creating some curiosity. I don't know how consumption spending can be strictly termed as 'non-developmental', while consumption raises output and growth. And growth, in turn, is the principal contributor to development. I would request the Ministry of Finance to give a softer term of this item to avoid the strong negative notion against the word 'development.'

This 65:35 composition is not discouraging for a growing economy like Bangladesh, but the frustration arises when we cannot use the whole allocation for our development budget. The revenue capacity is now 12 percent of the GDP, while the spending size makes 17 percent of our national output, signalling a budget deficit to be equivalent to 5 percent of the GDP. Unfortunately, we cannot spend the whole amount dedicated for development purposes. Since FY 2009, the average budget deficit went up to around 3.6 percent only, suggesting a stark underutilisation of resources and a deficient implementation power of the government machinery. Hence, improving our capacity through investing in education, quality knowledge, technology, and infrastructure will be of crucial importance.

The author is Chief Economist of Bangladesh Bank.

A journey cut short

ASHIK KABIR

IT'S been a very long and excruciating 11 years without the presence of my father Late Humayun Kabir Balu. I was only 13 years old when he was assassinated in front of me and my two siblings. My elder brother Asif Kabir was also severely injured by the bomb attack on my father. My brother helped me know what kind of an individual my father was.

My father Humayun Kabir Balu was like the light that was forcefully blown off by some freakish wind but not before it had lit thousands of hearts. He had a charismatic personality and his fearlessness inspired many young people to take up journalism as a profession.

Even though he was always busy, he always made sure he spent time with his family. I was only 10 years old when my mother died. After the death of my mother, he did his best to be both a father and mother to us, during the last three years of his life.

Everywhere he went, I used to follow him like a shadow except when I went to school. And he was always there for me no matter how busy he was. Sometimes when my older brother, who was a student of Dhaka University, would come home during his vacations, we would spend precious moments together. We would often have family sessions, which involved all four members of the family, my father, brother, sister and me. My father wanted us to be well-educated, but more importantly, he wanted us to be good human beings, who would always be there for those in need.

January 16, 2004. The night after the assassination of Manik uncle (journalist Manik Saha, who was also killed in a bomb attack on January 15, 2004), my father was sobbing like a child on the balcony of our house. His sobs woke my brother and me and when he saw us, he took us in his arms and broke down. He kept saying, "They have killed Manik, he was just like a brother to me. I was with him five minutes before he was murdered; he was so happy about his elder daughter's success. What will happen to them now?"

But later, he turned his grief into strength. He led a protest with his fellow journalists, demanding justice for Manik Saha, disregarding the life threats he had been receiving from terrorists via phone calls and letters. He never gave up.

He also created a trust for the children of a rickshaw puller who had been killed during the attack on Manik Saha. As far as I know, the trust continues to help them with their educational expenses.

When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the then opposition leader, visited Khulna Press Club soon after the murder of Manik Saha, my father told her that he was afraid that one day he too would be killed by unknown assassins and he would have to orphan his children, who had already lost their mother. His prediction proved to be true: he was killed in front of his house while getting out of his car.



Humayun Kabir Balu

Sheikh Hasina came to our house as soon as she heard the news to console us. She tried to console us and promised that she would take the responsibility of the children. Needless to say, she has kept her promise.

My father was a freedom fighter and he was the first one to fly the flag of Bangladesh in the city of Khulna, soon after the liberation of Bangladesh. He went to jail for participating in the Liberation Movement, while he was a student. Every now and then I met people telling me how they were helped by my father, and how significant his contributions were.

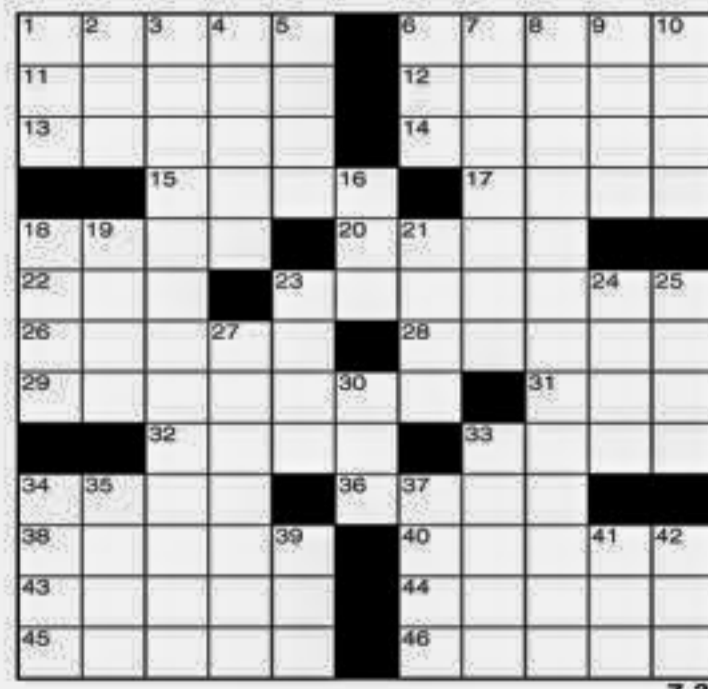
After coming back from school, I would often see my father sitting with a book in his hands. He was a voracious reader. He would often say to me, "Nothing will remain with you forever; not money, not any other earthly assets, except the knowledge which you will carry on forever." He would sit with me for an hour everyday to teach me things that were beyond the syllabus of any school or college; they were lessons on how to be a better human being.

A man of honour, a soul that cried for other's pain and a leader who never deserted his fellow soldiers, even though he couldn't see any sign of hope - that was my father. Eleven years passed but justice has not been served. Those involved in his murder have not been brought to book. But we are still hopeful. We don't know when justice will be served, but we know that his contributions will be cherished forever.

The writer is the youngest son of late journalist Humayun Kabir Balu, who was murdered on June 27, 2004. Email: Ashikk992@gmail.com

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- Maze choices
 - Fire starter
 - Ordered display
 - Hilo hello
 - Beer holder
 - Handle clumsily
 - St. Louis sight
 - Play the ponies
 - Flays makeup
 - Cracked
 - Gift from Santa
 - Apple pie order
 - Decorate
 - Thin cookie
 - Safeguards
 - Race segment
 - Dessert fruit
 - Lake of Lombardy
 - Styl type
 - Mitten material
 - Reduces
 - Hazardous gas
 - Psychoanalyst Fromm
 - Be penitent
 - Disagreeable
 - "John Brown's Body" poet
- DOWN**
- de deux
 - Museum stuff
 - Seven Years War ender
 - Whiskers
 - Agreement
 - Guidebook feature
 - Mobile home?
 - Royal fortress
 - Casual talk
 - Millinery buys
 - "2001" computer
 - Some what
 - Program lines
 - Spielberg thriller
 - Visitor to Shiam
 - Judge
 - Therefore
 - Keep in power
 - Parched
 - Packing box
 - Store sign
 - avis
 - Saudi native
 - Retiring
 - Start of a count
 - Court sight



Yesterday's answer

RAFT SATOUT
ARLO AVERSED
SEAN LEERED
HAGGLERS
SUE TUFTS
FATED SPLIT
IRA AMI
RIFLER LAGER
SAFER ADS
MAMMOTHS
AROUSE NOAH
GENRES INTO
ODYSSA SEED

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

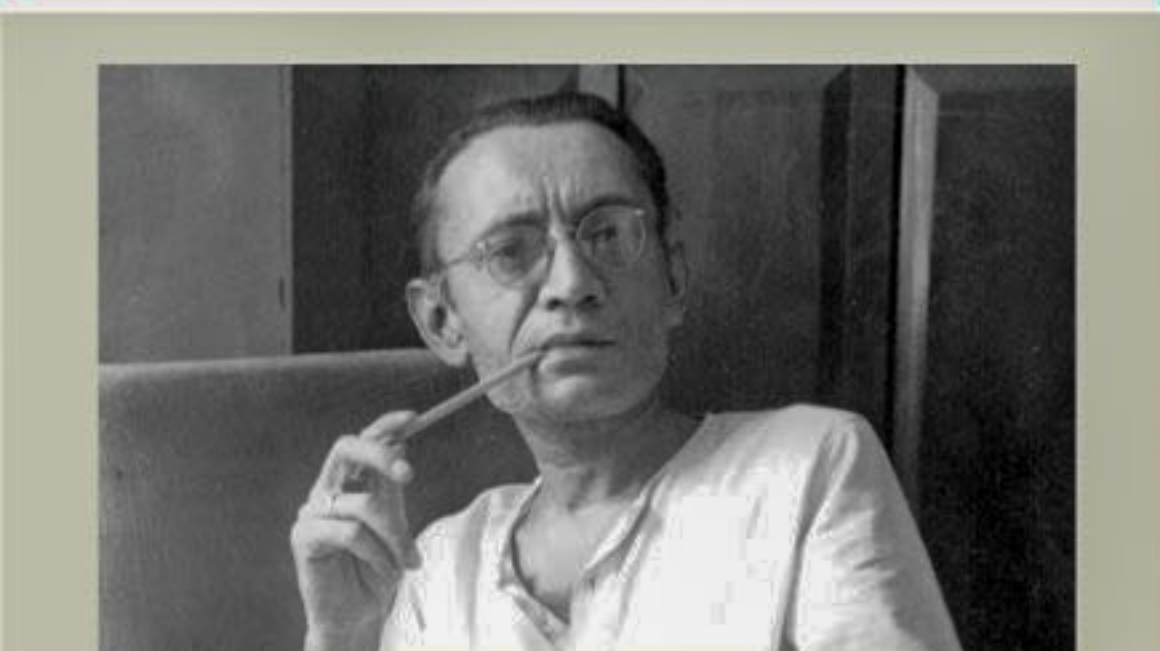


BABY BLUES

by Don Trachte



QUOTABLE Quote



SAADAT HASAN MANTO

WONDERED WHY PEOPLE CONSIDER ESCAPISM SO BAD, EVEN THE ESCAPISM ON DISPLAY RIGHT THEN. AT FIRST IT MIGHT APPEAR UNSEEMLY, BUT IN THE END, ITS LACK OF PRETENSION GIVES IT ITS OWN SORT OF BEAUTY.