

No risk, no game

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THE caption on a *Dawn* photo last week said the 'funfair' was one of the at least six public places in the city offering unregulated gambling, not just an illegal activity, but also since 1979, an offence under the Hudood laws. A picture, it is said, is worth a thousand words. Coming as a follow-up to a 1,000 words report, it reportedly persuaded the Punjab Police chief to seek their closure. No case was, however registered against anybody.

Remember the flurry of public relations activity after allegations of poor taste at a fashion show? The town Nazim had issued a notice to the hotel management for hosting the show without a prior written approval by his office — a no-objection from the precinct police notwithstanding — withdrawing it after an apology was tendered and an assurance on future restraint given. The city Nazim, prompted possibly by some advisers, had then got in on the act and asserted that he alone could sanction fairs and festivals. So, the question about the role of the local administration now becomes: where was the city Nazim?

Organized gambling, of course, is about capitalizing on people's interest in games of chance, sometimes their addiction to it. Wherever sanctioned by the law, it is, therefore, heavily taxed and strictly regulated. The report said the odds on various games at the funfairs were astronomical. Given the protection implied by the presence of uniformed law enforcement personnel, somebody was clearly making a tax-free pile. Since the money was being siphoned off from the city's investment starved economy — it still does not grow on trees — the citizens are entitled to know just who the beneficiary was.

The moral sanction against gambling, derived largely from revealed religions, eroded fast after religion was 'nationalized' in the '70s and reduced to a function of the state and discarded in the '80s when the establishment found it to be too tricky and cumbersome for its simplistic tastes. While the statutes remained, the executive insisted on

keeping the power to grant exemptions 'in public interest.' Who stood to gain from the arrangement was never much of a secret. After much foot dragging and double talk on the question, the doctrine of necessity was invoked to protect capitalism's key tool, interest. Its condemnation as evil, going on simultaneously, helped create a remarkably pragmatic and amorphous casuistry.

On the gambling front in particular, the prize bonds were protected as a low-yield savings scheme. The opportunity created by it was too good, of course, to be neglected. A group of 'investors', has duly attached itself to the scheme like the barnacle. It started with some prize sharing schemes and has progressed to launching its parallel schemes. Having failed in all its attempts to shake it off, the government is finally resigned to sharing the dividends with the parasites. Given its lure, and, therefore, the effectiveness, the morality of lottery, even state lottery has been questioned in the west. In Britain, it is universal-

ly condemned by progressive and welfare groups despite the transparency of the operation and the fact that the proceeds are spent on projects of public nature for which the government is unable to raise funds through taxation. The governments also justified raffle to raise funds for charity (Fight TB) and their favourite projects (SAF Games). The question, whether it was kosher to raise funds for noble causes through slavery or drug trade, was largely ignored.

There is this issue then about equality before law. Can there be separate laws for the rulers and the ruled?

Charles I, whose claim to fame has more to do now with what was done to him than what he did, certainly believed so. "A sovereign and a subject are clean different things," he is on record telling the Regicides. The point has been debated endlessly and, on account of the peculiar nature of a monarchy, some people tend to agree with Charles. Well, what about a republic where sovereignty rests with the people? Can the state, or its proxy, the government, arbitrarily arrogate to itself the right to be above the law? Can it claim exemption every time it violates a rule and still insist on penalizing the errant citizens? As Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, famously pointed out, there is something terrible about a state that must answer the question in the affirmative.

Culturally, gambling has been a rather respectable pastime in the sub-continent, more ancient indeed than history. Even those not inclined by nature are urged to indulge themselves occasionally. Tradition has it

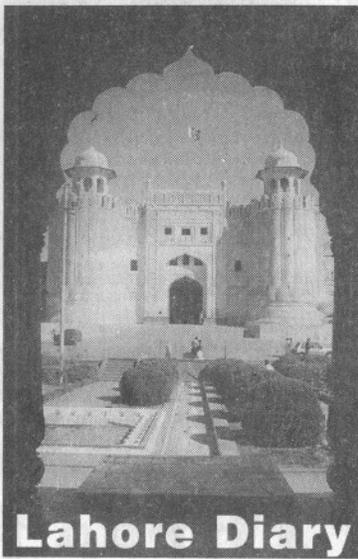
that those failing to join in even on Holi, the feast of colours, are condemned to be born in their next incarnation as monkeys. The explanation, of course, is simple. Living with an extremely limited knowledge base necessitated a lot of decision making under uncertainty. Erring always on the side of caution, therefore, was a huge disadvantage. The occasional abandon of reason was thus not just exciting, it also brought evolutionary advantage. The success succeeded inevitably and ingrained the utility of the strategy in the mass subconscious. There was, however, always the danger of getting

addicted. Taken to extreme, the intoxication resulted in the tragedy of Raja Nal who lost his beloved wife in a gamble.

Also, as times changed, the increasing knowledge tilted the scales in favour of calculated strategies. Only the poorest and the most illiterate — the wretched of the earth — are its adherents today. Ironically, its not just the odds against their winning that are increasing, it is also getting harder for them to benefit from their gains should they ever win. Billa, who has a *tanoor* near *Dawn's* Lahore offices, squanders away nearly 50 per cent of his meagre income on betting. Several *Dawn* staffers and God knows how many other well wishers have failed to persuade him to quit, even to control the fraction of his income devoted to gambling. There are hundreds of thousands of people besides, who claim they just want a start in life and would quit after their first jackpot. Some of them openly declare that gambling is evil and, in the words of Prophet Yousuf's brothers, would be good once they get the vital breakthrough.

There are already signs that this is increasingly a national trait. How else can you explain the fact that every swindler seems to find easy prey? What else can explain the housing frauds, the notoriously volatile stock exchange, the cooperatives and the finance company scams? The canker is eating away the work ethic and an increasingly larger number now see a favourable throw of the dice as a substitute to good old hard work.

On another scale, what do you make of our governments' decision making on Operation Gibraltar, or nationalization or more recently on privatization, on Kargil, on Lt-Gen Ziauddin's 'appointment' as chief of army staff? Equally, what do you make of India's 1962 attack on China, on Kashmir, on the BJP, even the attack on its parliament? The world today is so complex and entangled, an explosion in New York can literally cause deaths in Central Asia. A gamble too many, frankly, frightening idea. — ONLOOKER



Lahore Diary