

Overtaxing ride

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Amidst a laudable desire to promote austerity, as manifested by a ban on foreign travel by the ministers for merely signing agreements on the valid grounds that the ritual could be performed by our Ambassadors abroad, the purchase of a fleet of 15 new cars by the PM Secretariat looks quite surprising.

In sharp contrast to the present 'official car culture,' which eats up over Rs. 77 billion annually, till the early 60s the bureaucrats of all hue and colour, including Federal Secretaries, had to make their own arrangements for going to offices and also for meeting their social and personal obligations. They did not feel shy even using bicycles for this purpose. Those using bicycles for commuting to their offices also included foreigners hired for top slots in the state hierarchy. Sir Edwards Snelson, Federal Secretary, Law and Parliamentary Affairs, at the time of Ayub Khan's Martial Law, tops the list of the bureaucrats who had been pedaling to their offices.

Those were the times when state officials did not enjoy perks and privileges over and above their normal salaries. The bureaucracy believed in 'simple living and high thinking' and led contented and happy lives. Even the prime ministers of pre-1958 days felt at ease while travelling in old models of cars. The members of the federal cabinet also drew clear lines of distinction between the official and private journeys and used state vehicles strictly for official duties only. The cabinet ministers who wanted their wives to be driven to social and cultural functions, used their personal funds to buy cars for their spouses.

This practice was in vogue even when ZAB became Foreign Minister and had to buy a car for use by Begum Nusrat Bhutto. Even the President's House did not maintain more than three official vehicles during those days. In Ayub Khan's time, out of the three official cars, one limousine was earmarked for the President, the second for use by Begum Ayub and family members and the third vehicle by the staff for performing official errands. The President and the Prime Minister carried out their official obligations with the assistance of a skeleton staff of junior level and there did not exist any exclusive secretariat for the holders of these top slots.

While the leadership and the bureaucracy exercised restraint in spending money from the state coffers, the country had sufficient funds for catering to the needs of defence, development, industry

funds mercilessly on extravaganzas and pomp and show, perhaps, to over-awe the citizens through their prodigal manners, lavish life-styles, office decor and mode of travel.

The post-1970 rulers tried to stifle opposition to their wasteful expenses. They granted perks and privileges, including official cars, plots (agricultural, residential and commercial) and a couple of allowances, to the bureaucracy liberally in their bid to get maximum cooperation from the Baboos. Thus emerged a new elite, embedded in a culture of sycophancy, seeking one favour or the other from the rulers of the day. Ultimately, the bureaucracy's lust for favours, plots and postings at lucrative positions became insatiable. The government would do well to inform the citizens how much of their hard earned income is spent, every year, on the perks/privileges and provisions of other amenities to the bureaucracy?

Given the state of affairs, the state expenditure started rising, while the increase in revenues could not keep pace with the steep growth in expenses. This did not disturb the leadership. They sought recourse in raising the taxes and rates, and also seeking more and more loans, both domestic and foreign, to meet the growing budget deficits. Finally, the country reached a point where it presented the look of an overweight ship, struck deep in turbulent waters.

Against the situation at home, we find that in the developed countries, the official cars allocated to leaders could not be used by their spouses or family members. Once, when the spouse of the Speaker of German Bundestag (National Assembly), who was returning home after attending an international conference, used the Speaker's car for travel from airport to the residence, it became an issue which kept reverberating both in the galleries and the media for well over three months. The issue died down only when the House amended the Rules, permitting the use of Speaker's car by his/her spouse in emergent situations.

The economic measures initiated by Musharraf government have helped in 'salvaging the ship' partially. And as a result of the wise management, the economic situation has somewhat improved, but much still needs to be done for the country's continuous growth and all round development. In a world where the economic indicators now are practically at the bottom, little above the least developed countries of the world, the high time has come for the government to take bold steps to

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