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**Fleeting moments**

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**Railways in the limelight**

The chief justice of the apex court termed Pakistan Railways as the most corrupt department in the country and summoned its minister, Sheikh Rashid Ahmad, to appear in court to explain his position. When the minister presented himself, the CJP said the minister should have resigned after the train tragedy in which 73 passengers lost their lives when Tezgam bogies caught fire because of a presumed gas cylinder explosion.

The Tezgam tragedy occurred in October 2019, but the Railways in that year suffered a series of accidents making a century, according to reports. So much so, the news of derailment of bogies doesn’t surprise anyone; it’s now treated as a routine affair. If you google the number of accidents Pakistan Railways suffered, you get a whole page listing them.

Instead of conducting serious probes on why the Railways had become accident-prone and unsafe to travel, the matter was taken lightly and no meaningful corrective measures were taken. Finally, the top court had to intervene in the public interest to set things right in the Railways. However, when the CJP commented that railways minister should have resigned after the Tezgam tragedy, Sheikh Rashid, who is never at a loss for words, could have pleaded: “Your Honour, there’s no such tradition of handing in resignation in our dear land; how could I set a new trend.”

The Railways is not the only organisation that is in disarray. Take for instance, other equally large state-owned organisations such as PIA and the Pakistan Steel Mills. Last month the Sindh High Court, on a petition filed by general secretary of senior staff association of the airline, stopped the CEO of PIA from working. The CEO, a former air marshal, had brought his own team of former senior air force colleagues to run the airline.

The change in the top layer, as expected, caused much heartburn to PIA senior staff aspiring for promotions. After all, they were career officers who had served a lifetime in the airline. At a time like this, one recalls how a former COAS Gen Waheed Kakar responded to the offer to serve as ambassador in the US after retirement. He said there was no better appointment after having served as COAS of the army. He hasn’t been heard since. That’s called fading away with honour.

PIA and Pakistan Railways have had a history of providing reliable and satisfactory service to the people in the past. How did the performance of both deteriorate and turned them into loss-making liabilities? Some governments in the past were inclined to privatise PIA but political exigency came in the way and new appointments made on the top, instead.

Needless to say, the new appointments are usually meant to accommodate cronies and kin of the well connected. What’s the point in pouring billions of public taxes into loss-makers to keep them afloat? Neighbouring India has made a new attempt, second within two years, to part with a 100 percent stake in Air India. Airlines run profitably only when operated by private hands.

The Pakistan Steel Mills is a loss-maker of its own kind. Pakistan Steel has remained out of production since 2015 but its workers have been receiving salaries amounting to Rs380 million each month. Let’s ask what if the PSM were a private property. Would its owners willingly pay the employees an exorbitant amount running in millions every month while the PSM didn’t produce a single steel bar in five years. Is the PSM a charity organisation? There has been talk of handing over the PSM either to the Russians or amalgamate it with CPEC. If done, it would save hundreds of millions in public taxes.

The public-sector entities that sustain themselves by draining the public exchequer must be privatised. After all, taxpayers have a right to ask why their hard-earned tax money is squandered on perennial loss-makers. The maladministration prevalent in public-sector organisations is mainly due to cronyism and favouritism – thus, lack of accountability. PTCL is a classic case to quote. It turned far more efficient after it was partially privatised and its administration handed over to private management.

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