

Proper fleet, manpower needed to save Biman in days ahead

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Dhaka : Biman has stepped into its 50th year of operations. But if you look back at Biman's golden age from 1971 to 2000, and compare it with its present state, you will see Biman's network is now smaller, showing us a downward trend in the graph. Bir Protik Alamgir Sattar, retired Captain of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, said this to The Bangladesh Monitor in an interview recently.

"The graph of Biman will go further down," claimed Alamgir Sattar, stating poor management, whimsical decisions, unskilled professionals, bad fleet plan and corruption as the prime reasons. And now the coronavirus pandemic is even rubbing salt into Biman's wounds, he sighed. **Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina honouring then Captain Alamgir Sattar of Biman Bangladesh Airlines with Bir Protik title for his contribution in the Liberation War of Bangladesh at a ceremony in 1997** _Photo : Collected

It may be mentioned here that Alamgir Sattar was also one of the founding

members of the country' flag carrier as with his hands, Biman got its first aircraft to operate passenger flights after the liberation war.

Earlier, during the liberation war, Alamgir Sattar was a founding member of the Kilo Flight which had 10 pilots, seven Bir Uttams and three Bir Protiks including Sattar. At that time, Alamgir Sattar was appointed a Flight Lieutenant of Mukti Bahini's Air Force from the people's forces.

During Alamgir Sattar's tenure as pilot of Biman from 1971-2000, the flag carrier reached a height where it used to fly to 26 destinations at one point of time as opposed to the current network consisting only half of that.

On January 4 in 1972, Biman Bangladesh Airlines was formed by ordinance and it started operations with at Dakota airplane.

After the liberation war, on January 16, 1972, with then Captain Shahabuddin (Bir Uttom), then Captain Alamgir Sattar (Bir Protik) met Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and asked him to bring the Dakota aircraft from Bangladesh Air Force to Biman Bangladesh Airlines for the purpose of starting passenger flight operations.

That Dakota plane belonged to Jodhpur Maharaja's. During the liberation war, Captain Alamgir Sattar along with three others flew that airplane. However, the aircraft was very old, the radio telephone was broken, hydraulic dripped from the engine and it had poor passenger carrying capacity.

Biman got the plane from the Air Force in late January 1972. Col. Osmani was then General and Minister of Biman. With his instructions, the benches at the back of the aircraft were made longer to carry more passengers which ruined the aircraft's balance capacity for flying. Hence, in six days after launching the plane, it crashed killing five pilots onboard the training flight, shared Sattar.

After its crash, Biman flew F27s. During that time, Biman had six F27s, recalled then Captain Sattar, as he was the Chief Pilot of the F27 fleet. Biman then had a Boeing 707 too. In 1974-75, Biman made 9 profit of BDT 3 crore from one airplane, said the former Captain of Biman.

Sattar mentioned, during the time of late Abdul Mannan as Managing Director (1978-1981), Biman prospered the most. Back then, Biman had qualified people in management, Sattar expressed. That was the time when Biman introduced flights to destinations like New York, Paris, London etc. Furthermore, the routes were turning out to be profitable then, Sattar added.

Worst fleet plan now

Biman will never be profitable because the fleet plan of the airline is the worst, claimed Sattar. "The Boeing 787/777 might be the best but it is not good for us."

He mentioned, if Biman flies from Dhaka to New York or Toronto directly, it cannot fly at full capacity. Biman will have to compromise with cargo and passengers as they will have to settle for only 70 per cent load factor.

Since, the air above flows from west to east, on return flights Biman might manage to carry full passenger load but not cargo, he added.

"There are 50 others planes that Biman can use," urged Sattar. For example, there is Boeing 777 200 LR with the capacity of flying 17,000 km. With it, Biman can fly directly from Dhaka to New York with full load factor, suggested Sattar.

Another emphasis Sattar put, was on the importance of intermediate landing. An Airbus 321neo has the capacity to fly from Dhaka to New York with intermediate landing. This could be better for Biman as it would cost less too, noted Sattar.

He further claimed, to make the route Dhaka-New York profitable, Biman cannot fly less than three weekly flights. This is where the problem lies, Sattar mentioned as Biman will never be able to get full load factor for three weekly flights. This is due to the fact that Bangladesh can never be a hub, noted Sattar, saying, "Even Thailand

will not use Bangladesh as a hub since it is too nearby.

On the other hand, Biman is now wasting the flight cycles of a huge plane like Boeing 777 by flying it on a short route like Dhaka-Cox's Bazar. Whereas, such aircraft's cycles should be utilized on routes like Dhaka-London, Sattar expressed, claiming, this is costing Biman more.

"Instead, Biman can fly ATR or Dash 8 on such small routes. They can have more frequencies with these aircraft, allowing the passengers to enjoy more connectivity options," said Sattar.

Lack of proper manpower

"Biman has a lot of manpower, but no proper ones," Sattar said. It is in dire need of skilled professionals in different positions. There must be a committee, competent to run the fleet plan of the airline, Sattar urged.

That committee should decide which planes to operate, depending on the maintenance cost estimated by the engineers, commercial aspects like how much passengers the plane can carry, where to make intermediate landing, how to make a route profitable etc.

Biman has recently started carrying out some maintenance works of aircraft like landing gear replacement and c-check at home. This saved Biman millions of cost, once claimed the current Managing Director Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal.

However, on this note, Sattar disagreed by saying, "Earlier, Biman used to get maintenance works like C-check or D-check of an aircraft from Singapore. Now, if you get both done from there, it might cost Biman a bit. However, if you do one of those checks here and keep the plane grounded for 15 days as a result, it would cost Biman even more."

Poor professionals left at Biman

Biman is to blame for the poor professionals, it is left with currently, said Sattar. There was a time when skilled professionals were there at the national flag carrier but they have either retired or left due to poor salary, mentioned Sattar.

Ever since, Biman is not getting qualified manpower because it offers less salary compared to others. To change the scenario, Sattar added, Biman must start offering better salaries. Only then competent professionals will choose to work at Biman and its productivity will increase three times, allowing it to have a chance at success in the coming days.

On this occasion of Biman's Golden Jubilee, if the flag carrier of the country wishes to get out from this downward spiral, it must immediately start working on these issues with hopes to survive and prosper in the days ahead, concluded one of the founding members of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.