

When the earth breaks



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Lord Byron describes poetry as the lava of imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake. Forget the scientific theory and think for a minute. Every time the earth fails to write poetry, an earthquake happens. The ground shakes, buildings sway, trees tremble, waters slide, and most other things rattle. This is how a disgruntled earth likes to throw its fit. Tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes come from the rumbling belly of a grumpy beast. It may be just a coincidence, but watch it. The beast gets angry when there is no poetry.

Don't take it literally, but think of it as a metaphor. Hollow men make hollow earth, and that is when a sudden break or shift occurs in its crust. The energy radiates out seismic waves, just as the energy from a disturbance in a body of water radiates out in wave form. Poetry does the same to your mind, sending waves in rhymes, choice of words, metaphors, similes, and sheer delight. Poetry, so to speak, jolts your heart with tremors of emotions.

Seismologists say that, at any given moment, there are a number of very faint seismic waves moving all around the planet. These tremors, which aren't usually felt by humans, are known as microquakes. But then sometimes the earthquakes are strong, which jolt buildings in their foundations as roads fold, bridges collapse and the ground cracks like

brittle biscuits. Just think how it proves everything wrong, the swaggering men, their science and technology, vaunted architecture, and the vanity of manicured lawns.

All of it happens when poetry is absent, when we are overcome by vapidity and lose our ability to correspond with our souls. Can poetry change all of these? Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." According to someone, the definition of poetry was like grasping at the wind -- once you caught it, it was no longer wind. Yet power of poetry has its own definition. It is evocative, and stirs up an intense emotion in the minds of its readers, who experience shocks and aftershocks of joy, sorrow, anger, catharsis, love, revelation, insight, truth, and beauty.

So it happens in a striking sequence -- hollow planet after hollow people after hollow soul. You don't see the connection? Poetry is all about feelings, every touch, every smell and every sight magnified in the enchanted mirrors of a poet's mind. Poetry idolises the earth, its resources, its beauty, the plants, flowers, birds, and bees. Poetry elevates the earth, worships it, making relevant connection between soil and soul.

When man is hollow, the earth can sense. That is why man is always the last to know before the earth rolls. The notion originated in ancient Greece around 373 BC that rats, weasels, snakes, and centipedes move to safety several days before a destructive earthquake. Dogs stop barking, some dogs hide, cats hide, horses make more noise and get restless. Sharks are reported to evacuate the reefs they cruise daily before a hurricane. And, it is said that you can tell that an earthquake is imminent when you see earthworms come out of the ground in winter. Before large earthquakes, it seems even the wind stops.

It is said that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for their wickedness.

CROSS TALK

Frederick Douglass, the American abolitionist, author, and ex-slave, said that it was not light that was needed, but fire, that it was not the gentle shower that was needed, but the thunder, that what was needed were storm, whirlwind, and earthquake. This is where poetry and earthquake come to a level. When man loses the power to jolt himself, earth does it for him. When the earth breaks, it breaks for him.



Man stands in front of the ruins of his home in Kashmir.

Those two ancient cities in Palestine, located near the Dead Sea, were struck

by brimstone and fire, perhaps accompanied by earthquake, because

of the indecency and perverse sexual practices of their inhabitants. The

earth flipped as though it refused to bear their burden, as an entire civilisa-

tion slipped through a trapdoor and vanished. When people are wicked, their souls are desolate, because all emotions are rinsed out, leaving only the dry spell of instincts and impulses. That is when the soul is dislodged from the soil and the earth is alienated from people.

When God made his plans known to Abraham about the destruction of Sodom, Abraham was worried about the righteous people in the city. God then promised that he would save the city if He found ten righteous people in there. Two angels were sent to investigate, and they only decided to save Lot and his family from the impending destruction of the city. When leaving Sodom, the angels asked them not to look back, but Lot's wife didn't heed their advice. She was instantly transformed into a pillar of salt.

The biggest mystery of the moral universe is why the children, the sick, the crippled, and the innocent are killed by natural disasters, since it doesn't make the connection between sin and damnation. The earth opens to indiscriminately devour its victims just like we don't care which chicken is slaughtered when we are hungry. It happens just like the way we exterminate bugs in the house, not sparing anyone from the deadly fumes, not even the baby bugs. Innocence is absurd in human condition, because if you believe in religion you also believe that man fell on earth for redemption. Children are born with the original sin.

In earthquakes, the earth breaks and crushes human beings as if to prove that they are so hollow, life pops out in one squeeze. It happens when there is no poetry, when man is no longer capable of projecting strong feelings, when he becomes restless, fragile, and weak, when lust takes over love, information takes over wisdom, and instant takes over constant. Poetry is absent when man is impatient, when he wants to kill, not defeat

his enemy, when he wants to get, not earn his dignity, when he is in a rush to get through life without taking time to appreciate it.

The earth needs life forms for the same reason a show needs an audience. Insects crawl, birds fly, animals fight, and humans write poetry. Man must love, man must hate, his sigh and laughter, scream and cry filling the earth the way an actor is engaged on stage. Man is the most intelligent life form on earth, and he alone can express his mind, think, dream, love, and sing. He alone can produce the lava of imagination that can prevent earthquakes.

The spate of natural disasters must be telling us something. The hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, storms, and epidemics, the wrath of nature is hell-bent to destroy lives and everything man-made, as if to take his life and hurt his pride as well. Religion has it that doomsday will come when the earth will reel under the burden of vicious men. And man is vicious when he doesn't write poetry, when his emotions run dry and you can hear the clanking noise of basic instincts.

How does the earth write poetry? It doesn't write pushing pen on paper but through the lives of men who live on it. When man moves away from his natural state, nature moves away from him in equal pace until they both stand so far from each other that there is no love left. Natural calamities are earth's intense emotional response to the insensibilities of men.

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We need an Ombudsman not an Ombudsmouse

ANM NURUL HAQUE

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has said that a tax Ombudsman will be appointed after Eid. It is really a piece of good news as the government has consistently failed to meet this crucial need of the nation. We also know that the multilateral donors, particularly the World Bank, have long been pressing the government for appointment of a tax Ombudsman. The World Bank is so impatient on the issue that it has even suspended the disbursement of the third installment of the Development Credit Support (DSC) amounting to \$ 200 million, for the government's failure to appoint a tax Ombudsmen in time.

The government formed the much talked about Anti-Corruption Commission on November 21, 2004, which was the fulfillment of an election pledge of the four-party ruling alliance. The government was under incessant pressure from the donor countries and agencies for formation of the independent Anti-Corruption Commission. Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed claimed that the formation of the commission was a landmark step of the government in order to fulfill its election pledge of combating corruption. Whatever may be the fact, the people of this country welcomed formation of the independent Anti-Corruption Commission and expected it to play a major role to control the unabated corruption in all sectors, though it has failed miserably. But the establishment of an Ombudsman's office, to act effectively as the watchdog against corruption still remains unfilled.

An Ombudsman is a public official empowered to investigate citizens' complaints against the government or its functionaries. He is to investigate complaints of citizens who claim to have suffered injustice in consequence of maladministration by the government functionaries. He may also initiate investigation *suo motu* without any formal complaint by anybody. As an intermediary between the citizens and the government functionaries, the Ombudsman is an impartial and independent official empowered only to recommend. Article 77 of the Constitution provides: "(1) Parliament may, by law, provide for the office of Ombudsman. (2) The Ombudsman shall exercise such powers and perform such function as Parliament may, by law, determine, including the power to investigate any action taken by a Ministry, a public officer or a statutory public authority. (3) The Ombudsman shall prepare an annual report concerning the discharge of his function and such report shall be laid before Parliament."

The Ombudsman Act is enacted

The constitution of Bangladesh also desired that the parliament would enact necessary law to introduce the office of the Ombudsman. Twenty five years have elapsed since enactment of Ombudsman Act, 1980 in the Parliament, but the nation has not yet seen an Ombudsman though it is a crucial need to ensure good governance in the country. A constitutional obligation should not remain unimplemented for such a long time.



Mighty Mouse: Not what is needed!

In 1980 pursuant to Article 77 of the Constitution that provides for the establishment of the office of Ombudsman. According to Section 6 of the Ombudsman Act, the Ombudsman will investigate any action taken by a ministry, a public officer or a statutory public authority when he receives a complaint regarding that action from any person, who claims that injustice has been caused to him. The Act does not include some important government functionaries, such as Minister, Members of Parliament, Judges, etc within the jurisdiction of the Ombudsman to investigate. The Ombudsman under the existing act will tantamount to the creation of what the British had termed as "Ombud-smouse" which means a toothless tiger. Obviously the people of Bangladesh do not need an Ombudsmouse, but an Ombudsman in the real sense of the term.

The Ombudsman has been empowered to serve summons and interrogate any person and ask for public record or its copy from any office for examination. Section 9 of the Ombudsman Act has made it mandatory for the competent authority to implement the recommendations made by the Ombudsman in his report after investigating a case. We think that it is necessary for establishment of an Ombudsman office for close look of the functions and responsibilities of the Anti-Corruption Commission so that the Anti-Corruption Commission can deal with some punishable offences committed by the high-powered government officials.

The formation of the Anti-Corruption Commission raised the old question of partisanship on the part of the government. Such a question raised at the very inception of the commission, because of the appointment of three core members whose

past records show that they have been closely associated with the BNP-led government and may not go for taking actions that will displease the high command of the BNP. Our experience with another statutory organ of the state is not at all a pleasant one. The statutory body Election Commission has already lost its credibility as to holding free and fair election after recruitment of 150 upazila election officers (UEOs) who have umbilical link with the ruling alliance. The establishment of an Ombudsman office in the similar way will create another new crisis.

The newly-formed Anti-Corruption Commission started functioning from November 22, after its Chairman Justice Sultan Hossain Khan joined his new assignment. The chairman sought all-out cooperation from the government, opposition political parties and people for effective functioning of the commission, and said the commission would succeed in getting rid of corruption if it received everyone's cooperation. According to the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, the commission needs no approval from anybody to investigate any person or to prosecute any person on charge of corruption. The people of this country have very bitter experience with the Bureau of Anti-Corruption, whose only job was to harass the opponents of the party in power. But the Anti-Corruption Commission has also miserably failed to fulfill their expectations.

Ranking of Bangladesh as the most corruption afflicted country in the world by Transparency International for the fourth successive year, is no doubt a matter of deep embarrassment for the nation as a whole. One may dispute the ranking of Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world, but there prevails no scope

for denying the widespread corruption in the country. The present government as well as its predecessor came to power with firm pledges to wipe out corruption from the country on top priority basis. But the hard reality is that none of the governments honoured their pledges so vital for the better growth of economy and well-being of the people. The present government, however, has at last formed the independent Anti-Corruption Commission, though it has not been able to start functioning properly.

For a country that has ranked as the most corrupt country in the world, for the fourth successive year by the Transparency International, the formation of an independent Anti-Corruption Commission was a praiseworthy development. But the Anti-Corruption Commission failed to fulfill a long-standing public demand as it was not allowed to operate independently and neutrally with sufficient powers. If the government was genuinely interested to let the Anti-Corruption Commission function effectively and the parliamentary standing committees to work with full flair, these institutions would be able to address the unabated corruption in the country at least to some extent.

As many as one hundred countries across the world introduced the office of the Ombudsmen, to ensure that rules and regulations were complied with by the government functionaries while discharging their duties. The constitution of Bangladesh also desired that the national parliament would enact necessary law to introduce the office of the Ombudsman. Twenty five years have elapsed since enactment of Ombudsman Act, 1980 in the Parliament, but the nation has not yet seen an Ombudsman though it is a crucial need to ensure good governance in the country. A constitutional obligation should not remain unimplemented for such a long time. Not only a tax Ombudsman, the appointment of sector-wise Ombudsmen and cancellation of the official secrecy act are also imperative to ensure good governance. But before going for such appointments, the government must select non-partisan men and create necessary environment for the Ombudsmen to perform their duties without fear or favour.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

TARIQ ALI writes from Lahore

THE scale of the disaster has traumatised the entire country or perhaps not quite. Here in Lahore a group of people collecting funds for earthquake relief were apprehended and charged. They were amassing money for themselves.

Even in the midst of devastation, life goes on. The global media have descended on the country, their reports repeating the same images and the same banal comments every few minutes. Soon they will move on, so that when they are really needed, to monitor relief efforts and reconstruction or keep watch on the funds, they will no longer be there. The citizens of the west will also forget. But Pakistan will never be able to.

The situation in the north-west of the country is much worse than has been reported. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz lost his cool at local journalists for reporting the destruction of schools and the deaths of hundreds of children: "Why are you being sensationalist? Be optimistic!" The defensiveness was unnecessary. Nobody blames the regime for the earthquake and even the normally loquacious Frontier province and Afghan mullahs,

eager to describe Katrina as "God's punishment" for US wars, have fallen silent. Why would Allah punish the Islamist strongholds in Pakistan?

The death toll has been underestimated. Balakot, a small city which is the gateway to the beautiful Kaghan valley and heavily dependent on tourism, has been destroyed. Corpses litter the streets. According to yesterday's estimates, at least half of the city's population of 100,000 is now dead. A whole generation has been wiped out. Survivors were, till yesterday, without food or water because the roads were wrecked and helicopters were in short supply.

It is the same story in Muzaffarabad, in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Everything is wrecked. Here there have been anti-government protests and citizens have "looted" shops in search of food, just like in New Orleans. Further up on the Indo-Pak border, where a state of permanent tension is

deliberately kept alive by both sides, 400 Pakistani soldiers sitting in trenches were crushed to death as the mountain wall protecting them crashed and buried them alive.

What of the relief effort? The government is doing its best, but it is not enough. The absence of a proper infrastructure, a dearth of reserve funds to deal with unexpected tragedies, and a total lack of preparedness despite annual disasters on a lesser scale, have cost innumerable lives. To watch General Musharraf on television bemoaning the shortage of helicopters was instructive. A few miles to the north of the disaster zone there is a large fleet of helicopters belonging to the western armies occupying parts of Afghanistan. Why could the US, German, and British commanders not dispatch these to save lives? Is the war so fierce that they are needed every day? Three days after the earthquake, the US released eight helicopters from "war duty" to

help transport food and water to isolated villages. Too little, too late.

Pakistan's army has been put into action, but armies are not suited to relief work. They are not trained to save lives, and reports yesterday that aid convoys are being attacked and seized by angry crowds long before they reach their destinations are an indication of the chaos.

Even in normal times the poor have limited access to doctors and nurses. The shortage of medical staff has been a curse for 50 years. No regime has succeeded in creating a proper social infrastructure. At times like this the entire country feels the need but it will soon be forgotten, till the next disaster. In a privatised world, the state is not encouraged to buck the system.

Things look bad here this week, but they will look worse when rescue teams arrive in areas still out of reach.

Can Stringer fix Sony on the run?

STEVEN LEVY

WHEN Sir Howard Stringer became the first gajin (non-Japanese) to head the legendary electronics-and-entertainment giant Sony last June, it didn't really seem so shocking.

Several years earlier, such a selection would have been mind-boggling, as Sony, despite being one of the more cosmopolitan corporations in Japan, was as deeply steeped in tradition as a strong brew of green tea. What mitigated the surprise was the company's plight, a grim combination of red ink and the humiliation of losing in the very product areas it once dominated: things like televisions and portable audio. Plus, its movie studio had made "Gigli."

Likewise, it's no big jolt that after months of Magellanesque travel between New York and Tokyo (with stopovers to see his family in Britain), Stringer has come up with the first fruits of his plan to save Sony and they focus on firing 10,000 people and reorganising the company to make it a flatter, less feudal organisation. Stringer, though famously affable in person, has previously expressed pride in his willingness to cut staff when he revitalised the US branch of

the company in his previous role as CEO of Sony America. And he would often argue that all of Sony should do what he did here, and level the "silos" that keep its divisions from running efficiently.

"It's a double-barreled reorganisation," he told me in an interview in his New York office, explaining how painful it was to cut expenses when his predecessors had already gone through a tough round of downsizing. The good part, he added, is that the new, streamlined organisation in Sony's electronics realm (which still sounds pretty complicated to me, with five business groups, two "units" and one division) will aid in producing "championship" products. And what may those be? "Things where we have a chance to have an edge over everybody else," he says. "I keep saying to everybody, think about Apple's \$44 billion market cap it's based basically on two products. We have to be more focused and less of a department

store." But creating championship products, or improving Sony's successful ones like the PlayStation Portable, is much tougher when your company is still grappling with some of the difficulties of the digital era. Its products remain hobbled by the need to use nonstandard proprietary technology (like its Memory Stick) and, worse, punitive copyright-protection schemes that make potentially great products almost useless.

It would be refreshing and ultimately a boon to Sony and all of us -- if Stringer figured out how to use his company's music and movies in a way that let his products fulfill their potential in an era when consumers are increasingly taking a more active role in ripping and remixing content.

Instead, he's arguing in the other direction, for higher prices for legal song downloads. Responding to Apple CEO Steve Jobs' recent gibe that the labels are "greedy," he says, "If

we're greedy, we're not doing very well. If you compare the amount of money made from the iPod versus the (amount made by the) music companies, it's not exactly a match." Actually, the labels get almost all the money from the 99-cent online-music fees. Is the guy whose company makes the Walkman saying that music companies should share in the profits of electronic firms? (For the record, Stringer says Sony isn't giving up on competing with the iPod: "We're trying," he says.)

It's hard to move a ship forward when you're still plugging its leaks. "We're trying to achieve a revolution with the appearance of evolution," Stringer says, and he's made a reasonable first step. But other companies are free to cut straight to the revolution.