

Right is might: A mirage forever?

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I start with a short story: A person borrowed Taka 10000 to another person. One day, the lender, along with his child, went to get the refund from the borrower. But, the borrower denied taking any loan. Upon the lender's insistence, the borrower forced the lender to swear upon his child. Pathetically, however, the child died instantly and the borrower's lies were rewarded immediately.

While coming back home the borrower came across a saint and apprised him of the incident. The saint advised the lender to go back to the borrower and offer an apology by revealing that it was, in fact, the

lender who took Taka 20000 (not, 10000) from the borrower. Interestingly enough, the dead child of the real lender came alive once he uttered this double lie.

One might ask: "How come?" Yes, that is the order of the day in the Iron Age (kali joog) we are in. I may sound utterly pessimistic. I, however, cannot be optimistic in a society where the rulers of all ages, not the people, just cannot unlearn colonial thinking and the use of mediaeval mechanisms to silence dissent, let alone the opposition.

I am further prompted to add that those days are, perhaps, not far off when there may not be a significant number of people available to speak the truth in fear of being mocked at

and punished for being straightforward. Yes, this society been has been turned by the power-mongers, whosoever they may be, into a brutish one where equal punishment is awarded to plunderers and burglars.

This is not to mean that Sheikh Hasina is above reproach, but to convey the bare fact that the masses are not so foolish as not to be able to distinguish between a fact and a farce. Though the chief adviser started his mission with a vow to uproot the 3 Ms, money, muscle and misuse of power, the show while arresting Hasina was an epitome of muscle and misuse of power against an already captive woman.

Admittedly, after years of confrontations and bloody clashes, the country has been experiencing a spell of peace. Thus, the people tried their level best to remain happy despite the unbearable and uncontrollable price-hike. The people were hoping for a true change to take place, and were also ready to consign the 3Ms to the museum.

Despite enjoying huge support, the two ladies, too, were in danger of being thrown into the dustbin of history. The government was enjoying a happy ride. There was not even a ripple of discontent among the people about the government's stringent action against the corrupt. Rather, the arresting of criminals and the corrupt strengthened the

government's position.

However, such a cheerful ride of the government, perhaps, became excruciating for the forces against rationality. Thus, the spectres of command politics, a term rightly used by Mahfuz Anam, decided to show off their prowess. Admittedly, the general people who had been famished during the previous 4-party regime have nothing to be joyful about Hasina's needless arrest.

However, the forces that were keen to get the January 22 election staged must now be laughing up their sleeves. Sceptics, however, are vocal in their claim that Hasina was going to pay for foiling the January 22 election. If the real

intention was to punish Hasina for widespread corruption, why were, then, no credible cases against her?

If Hasina was so corrupt -- I do not imply that Hasina is impeccable -- why was there the need to manage or concoct an extortion incident 10 years old? If Hasina looted thousands of crores, why were there cases of only a few crores? Interestingly, the amount of "extorted" money in Tarique Rahman's case was Taka 1 crore. Is it a message that Tarique Rahman was more honest than Sheikh Hasina?

If the real idea is to destroy Hasina's public image, then the real controllers of things should have tried to make the masses, whom they regard as brainless and

speechless animals, believe that it was Hasina and her party rather than the 4-party alliance who were in power during 2001-2006, and looted public money at will!!!

Yes, they have the batons, and the masses are bound to give credit to whatever they profess!!! Their propaganda machine is also on, and they have plenty of cohorts established during the golden age of BNP-Jamaat regime to whom they supplied the audio CDs of Awami League leaders' confessions regarding Hasina's involvement in great scams.

A person asked me the other day: "Did Falu, Nasir, and other BNP arrestees not mention Khaleda's name in the interrogation cell?" I

could not answer him properly. Interestingly, even the die-hard fans of the previous 4-party regime did not show impudence by bringing out joyful processions and distributing sweetmeats following Hasina's arrest.

Is the "Right is might" situation to remain a mirage, though it was claimed by learned people that "right is might, and ever was, and ever shall be so."

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In Memoriam ASMO Subhan : No praise is enough

RAMENDU MAJUMDAR

WE knew that his health was failing, but did never imagine that the end would come so soon. I have come across very few outstanding personalities with rare human qualities like Mr. ASMO Subhan, who left his worldly abode on July 17.

I remember meeting him for the first time at his bungalow in Hyderabad, probably in 1970, when my wife and I accompanied our friends Iftikhar and Risalat in a day trip from Karachi. It was Iftikhar who made an appointment for me to see Mr. Subhan, ten years or so later, at

his office at Duncan Brothers (BD) Ltd. in Dhaka.

Anyone entering the Camellia House (Duncan's office) in Paribag might think that he has stepped into an art gallery. The big hall downstairs displays a rich collection of paintings by renowned artists of Bangladesh. As you go up, the staircase, the walls, the open spaces, are all nicely decorated with paintings and sculptures, which make the workplace so aesthetic and charming. This has been possible only because the Managing Director of Duncan, Mr. Subhan, was a passionate art connoisseur. He used to regularly pass on the

artworks to different gardens of Duncan, too.

When I approached him first, sometime in the 90s, to help us with advertisements in our quarterly magazine, Theatre, he highly appreciated our endeavour and readily agreed to patronise us by placing a back page advertisement of Duncan in every issue of our magazine.

His successor, our young friend Imran Ahmed, has continued the legacy. The other major contribution of Mr. Subhan was the sponsorship of the biennial publication of the International Theatre Institute, "The World of Theatre."

Since 1997, he had been offering sponsorship of Duncan for all the editions of this prestigious book. After publication of the first edition with their support, he just told me that Duncan would be with us in all our subsequent editions as he liked the good work. Bangladesh today enjoys a respectable position in the international theatre community primarily because of this flagship publication of the International Theatre Institute.

My daughter once asked me: "Have you ever visited Mr. Subhan without asking for any favour?" Probably not. Whenever I went to his office with a request for help in

organising a festival, producing a new play, bringing out a souvenir for an art exhibition, or for any other good cause, he would just look at the bottom of the letter where the sponsorship rates were mentioned, keep the letter aside, and discuss the political situation and different issues with me. In the next two or three days a confirmation of the sponsorship arrived, sometime even with a cheque.

While he was in the civil service, he had the opportunity of working as the private secretary to our illustrious leader late Tajuddin Ahmed. He believed that we were doing some positive work in the cultural arena,

and commended our social commitment. He used to express his concern for my well being as a genuine friend at times of political crisis, when we took to the streets in protest.

ASMO Subhan's working style always fascinated me. He would come to the office at midday, as he used to work out of his home in the morning. His decisions were always quick. He was very meticulous, be it in his attire, office atmosphere, Duncan's magazine, or advertisement. He could command respect from his colleagues because of his great leadership quality. I always found him working in a casual mood,

never stressed.

He was a large-hearted man who ignored the petty things we often look into. His colourful personality could easily attract anyone, but he always preferred to be behind the scene in any event. I could never make him agree to come to any of our functions as a guest of honour. Once he was in the audience in one of our theatre festivals when, after the performance, I offered my thanks to him from the stage for his sponsorship. When he was leaving, he said to me, "You have embarrassed me." Such was the person!

With his passing away, we have lost a sincere friend, a great patron

of our art and culture, and a colourful icon of the corporate sector. I am so unfortunate that, on Thursday when I went to his DOHS home to pay my last respects to his mortal remains, his family members, friends, and colleagues had already left with his body for burial at Brahmanbaria. In a way it was good that I didn't see him lifeless, I will always remember Mr. Subhan as being full of life and dignity. May his soul rest in eternal peace!

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Unsafe at any speed

MELINDA LIU

WANG Hai's mobile phone keeps buzzing with calls from clients. He's China's most famous crusader against fraudulent, shoddy and dangerous goods. The business consultant targets counterfeiters, helps duped consumers and protects whistle-blowers, many of whom face harassment or worse.

"A good system for guaranteeing quality control simply doesn't exist in China," says Wang, who's been on the consumer-rights warpath for more than a decade. "Even confidential informants who report to authorities about someone selling fraudulent goods can wind up dead, under suspicious circumstances."

All of that ensures Wang is extremely busy these days. Over the past few months, a number of dramatic product-safety scandals have rocked China and horrified the world. The US media have exposed one badly made Chinese export after another, from poisonous pet food to toxic toothpaste to tires so poorly made they litter American highways with shredded treads.

These revelations have raised serious questions about China's rise as factory to the world. It may seem hard to remember now, but just a few years ago, pundits and the global press were marveling at how quickly China had come on as a major manufacturing export power able, or so the thinking went, to build just about anything fast, cheap and well.



PHOTO: AFP

Now the true picture is emerging, and it isn't pretty. Far from the disciplined and tightly controlled economy China was thought to have, the ongoing scandals have revealed an often chaotic system with lax standards, where the government's economic authority has been weakened by rapid reforms.

This sorry state is not unprecedented. Other economies, such as South Korea's and Japan's, experienced similar growing pains decades ago. The difference, and the danger, is one of scale, since Chinese goods now dominate the world in so many sectors. Unless Beijing can improve its image fast and turn "made in China" into a prestigious label at least reliable brand, consumers will remain at risk and the country's export-driven economic miracle could face serious trouble.

China today resembles nothing so much as the United States a century ago, when robber barons, gangsterism and raw capitalism held sway. Now as then, powerful vested interests are profiting from murky regulations, shoddy enforcement, rampant corruption and a lack of consumer awareness.

In the United States during the early 20th century, public outrage over bogus drugs and contaminated

foodstuffs, fueled by graphic accounts such as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," finally prompted passage of the landmark Pure Food and Drug Act. China needs a similar revolution today if it is to protect its competitiveness and its consumers.

The problem is especially pressing at home. Bad as the export scandals have been, conditions are even worse inside China. Factories that produce domestic goods often have far lower standards than those that produce and export clothes, consumer electronics or microchips. Zhou Qing is the author of What Kind of God, an exposé whose sense of social mission could easily be compared to Sinclair's epic.

In it, Zhou spins one hair-raising tale after another. There's seafood laced with additives that lower men's sperm counts, soy sauce bulked up with arsenic-tainted human hair swept up from the barbershop floor and hormone-

infused fast food that prompts 6-year-old boys to sprout facial hair and 7-year-old girls to grow breasts.

In writing his book, Zhou had plenty of material to choose from. While the export scandals are new, Chinese consumers have had it so bad for so long that their casualty count is staggering. Bogus antibiotics produced in Anhui were blamed for six deaths and 80 people falling ill in 2006. In 2004, unsafe infant formula killed at least 50 babies and left another 200 severely malnourished, according to media reports.

Virtually every product category is affected, from candy that has choked children to killer fireworks to toxic face cream. At least 300 million Chinese citizens roughly the same number as the entire US population suffer from food-borne diseases annually, according to a recent report by the Asian Development Bank and World Health Organization.

To be fair, Beijing has made some attempts to limit the damage. Officials implicated in consumer-product scandals are starting to face severe punishment. In May, a court sentenced to death Zheng Xiaoyu, first leader of China's State Food and Drug Administration, for approving fake medicines in exchange for bribes. Officials from the factory that produced the melamine linked to at least 16 US pet deaths have been detained.

Last week, as US media reported on pesticide runoff and drugs affecting farm-raised catfish bound for US markets, Chinese authorities released a survey taken earlier this year that showed that less than 1 percent of food sold for export and 20 percent of the products made for the domestic market was substandard or tainted.

Yet it's far too soon to conclude that China is starting to clean up its act the way the United States once

did. In part that's because politics here remains a different and dangerous game. When What Kind of God was released in China at the beginning of this year, its state-owned publisher edited the text heavily and distributed few copies with scant publicity, ensuring that the public reaction would be minor compared with that which greeted Sinclair's book.

Although Politburo members initially praised Zhou's work, Zhou contends his status as an '80s dissident led to subsequent efforts to downplay its importance. Zhou spent almost three years in prison following the 1989 Tiananmen democracy protests.

Indeed, in China, muckrakers like Zhou must still tread carefully, especially if their work negatively affects the bottom line of provincial czars. That's a lesson Zheng Qi, a whistle-blower in Jiangsu and one of Wang Hai's clients, learned the hard way.

Trained as a quality-control technician at a military hospital, he reported to authorities in 2004 that the Peng Yao Pharmaceutical Factory near Wuxi was exporting bogus pills to Africa. (Zheng had once worked at the plant, but was fired after trying to expose a similar case in the '90s; he asked to use a pseudonym because he fears for his safety.) According to Zheng, the factory claimed the pills would fight insect-borne diseases such as malaria. But he says this wasn't true, and that Africans may have died as a result.

No sooner had he made his claim than Zheng began to suffer harassment, and in a recent unsolved accident, he was hit by a car with fake license plates. "I believe I'm followed and monitored everywhere. The traffic accident was done on purpose," he says. Zheng blames factory head Zhang Guoqing for his persecution, alleging Zhang's connections to local party and government officials have shielded his plant, which continues to operate. (Zhang declined to respond to allegations.)

Fortunately, Beijing will find it harder to resist international economic pressure than it has domestic critics. The embarrassment and controversy over shoddy exports including diethylene glycol added to cough syrup, which has killed at least 93 Panamanians since July 2006 -- are being used by some Beijing authorities to prod other bureaucrats into action. "Just as the Chinese leadership used WTO entry as leverage to push domestic reform agendas, it will use (this) international pressure to improve public-health and food-safety issues," says Wenran Jiang, a Sinologist at the University of Alberta. Zhou, the author, notes that China's former FDA head Zheng

Xiaoyu was sentenced to death in May "because of America's dogs and Panama's cough syrup."

Yet Beijing is finding it harder to wield the kind of power over the provinces that it once did, making the cleanup that much more difficult. "There are clear indications that Beijing cannot effectively control the rest of the country," says Jiang. "The regime is particularly weak at regulating a cutthroat market economy with millions of private enterprises."

Three decades ago, all of China's big manufacturers were state-owned enterprises, and the government could guarantee quality control. Now, however, many manufacturing companies, including formerly state-owned enterprises, have slipped into the loosely regulated private sector.

These big businesses often get preferential treatment from local officials who are supposed to monitor them. And companies commonly bribe local police forces, even paying cops' individual salaries. Then there's the problem of regulations themselves. Experts say China should adopt an EU-style Basic Food Law and streamline its overlapping rules and jurisdictions.

Japan in the most sophisticated sectors of industrial manufacturing. China's high-end exports are more comparable with those of South Korea and Taiwan, says Oded Shenkar, a professor at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business. In other words, they rank somewhere between Mexico's and Japan's. And the Chinese government must figure out how to improve quality if it hopes to keep the economy humming. The recent U.S. recall of defective Chinese-made car tires suggests more such discoveries may be forthcoming, which would further tarnish mainland brands and dent their overseas ambitions. For example, the Chinese manufacturer Chery Automobile, in cooperation with Chrysler, plans to start exporting small and subcompact vehicles to the United States in less than a year. But a scandal there could prove crippling. Other Chinese automakers, such as Geely, have already postponed plans to export to the West because ensuring safety and performance standards has proved so difficult. The Chinese-made Landwind SUV recently received the worst crash



PHOTO: AFP

For the time being, different agencies still issue and follow different guidelines.

China also lacks a system for properly recording quality complaints, which makes it easy for authorities to later deny knowledge of a transgression. And according to Zhang Bing of the consulting firm AT Kearney, China has little means for tracking defective goods back to the source after they are distributed.

As a result of such gaps, China's many lapses are undermining the country's reputation as a juggernaut that will soon compete head-to-head with the likes of Germany and

rating a German auto club had awarded in two decades.

The real problem may be that some parts of the Chinese bureaucracy have become so used to quality problems at home that they are waking up too slowly to the damage these lapses do to their reputation in Europe, the United States and Japan. The mind-set of the demanding consumer society has not yet taken hold. When U.S. officials tried to raise the product-safety issue during a recent session of the Sino-U.S. strategic dialogue, held in Washington, D.C., in late June, Chinese delegates seemed

easier for Chinese eels and wheels to travel from East to West. "All of those farmers at the end of all those brand-new highways are suddenly connected to the rest of Chinawhich is now connected to all of us," says Drew Thompson, China studies director at the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C. "But getting all those farmers up to international standards is a Herculean task." To accomplish it will require a clear-eyed recognition of the problem, not a stifling of Chinese critics following in the footsteps of Upton Sinclair.