

Ramadan is not a food festival

The representatives of the edible oil refiners and importers association have assured the government that the prices of oil will not increase during Ramadan. We hope they will keep their promise.

FARUQUE HASAN

NINETY percent of the shops in Dubai, a city that can boast of having the only seven-star hotel in the world, are run by Indians. And most of these Indian shopkeepers are Hindu by faith. During the holy month of Ramadan, if you buy a five-litre can of soybean oil in Dubai, you will get a one-litre bottle of oil free as a Ramadan gift from the shopkeepers.

In Bangladesh, where most of the shop owners are Muslim by faith, most of them wait impatiently for Ramadan to come to hike the price of oil, milk, pulse, onion, sugar, beef, chicken, vermicelli and what not.

"Why have you increased the price of soybean oil in Ramadan?" you ask a shopkeeper.

"What can we do, the wholesalers have increased the price," the ste-

reotype answer will come. Ask the same question to a wholesaler. "The importers have increased the price, so we have to," will be the answer. Now you ask the question to an importer. "The price has gone up in the international market, so we have no choice but to increase it," the importer will answer.

Those who are familiar with the international market know very well that the prices of soybean and palm oils have recently gone down significantly. Give this information to an importer (no doubt, thanks to the internet he already has the information), he will invariably tell you: "We are selling our previous stock."

When the price in the wholesale market goes down without any effect in the retail market, ask the retailer the cause, his answer will be the same: "We are selling the previous stock."

When the price of a commodity in the international market goes down, the question of previous stock looms large in our market; but when the price of that commodity goes up in the international market, it immediately affects the price of it in our market; previous stock does not play any role at that time.

When Ramadan comes the price hike of the essential commodities becomes a menace to the ordinary people; and it becomes a headache for the government to control the prices.

On the first day of the last Ramadan, a sweetmeat shop at Pallabi started selling *jeelapee* at Tk.60 a kg. In the afternoon, when the number of customers increased, the shop owner hiked the price to Tk.70 per kg.

People were still buying his *jeelapee*. He further increased the



Time for fasting or feasting?

price to Tk.80 per kg; people were still buying. He increased the price to Tk.90; people were buying non-stop. At last he fixed the price at Tk.120 per kg; and before *iftar* all his *jeelapees* were sold. Who will control this market, the government? Then we will need as many governments as there are shops in the country.

While selling his *jeelapee* at a skyrocketed price, making extremely high profit, the shop owner was wearing a toopi; he was certainly fasting to control avarice in himself, which is what the practice of Ramadan is for. But to him, Ramadan means only not eating or drinking anything from sunrise to

sunset, and nothing more.

Ramadan is not only a month of fasting; it is also a month for practicing self-control. But alas! During this month, defying the real intention of Ramadan, we increase our food intake almost two-fold, which ultimately increases the demand for food stuff in the market; which in its turn gives greedy businessmen the chance to hike the prices of food stuff at their sweet will.

In the holy month of Ramadan, thousands of roadside food shops selling *iftaree* spring up in our cities and towns, as if a food festival is going on. Ramadan is a month of fasting, a month of self-control, not a month of food festival as we have made it in this country. A *hadith* clearly states that he who eats less is a better Muslim.

Allah has ordered His servants to completely abstain from taking food and drink during Ramadan. That does not mean that one may have extra food, much more than the quantity he usually takes, between sunset and sunrise. If he does so, he is frustrating

the intention of Allah to make fasting compulsory in this month; thus he is violating His command in this regard.

Fasting does not only mean abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. It also includes abstention from greed and lust during the whole month of Ramadan, so that one can keep them under control during the other months of the year.

Ignoring this fact, the greed of some businessman of Bangladesh knows no bound in this month, and they indulge themselves in making extra profit by hiking the prices of the commodities. This is a clear violation of the command of Allah.

Most shopkeepers are apparently pious; they observe fasting all month long, and say their prayers five times a day, but they don't control their greed, which increases manifold in this holy month.

We will only be able to defeat the unscrupulous businessmen if we don't turn the month of fasting into a month of food festivals, if we understand the real essence of

Ramadan, and if we obey the dictates of Allah regarding fasting.

The representatives of the edible oil refiners and importers association have assured the government that the prices of oil will not increase during Ramadan. We hope they will keep their promise.

In Bangladesh, the importers of different items have formed associations of their own. There are allegations that some of these associations often act as syndicates to control the market at their will.

There is an allegation that a non-member of such an association faces a lot of problems when he tries to import an item that is imported by the members of that association. We hope this sort of allegation is not correct.

Let us not pretend to be pious Muslims, let us be true Muslims; let us take Ramadan as it is, let us not take it as what we have made it; let us control our avarice to make extra profit during this holy month.

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China, India and Pakistan?

Since the future certainly belongs to China, more and more states will be vying to improve ties with China. Pakistan has advantage of the past but nothing lasts forever. With the changing face of China and its emerging relationship with India, Pakistan needs to ...

SYED ALI ZAFAR

PAKISTAN was the first Muslim state to recognise China in 1950, and hence began an era of mutual trust and understanding. The relationship went from strength to strength because not only did both sides cooperate on international issues but also fully supported each other in times of need. Pakistan was a conduit in the opening of the China-US dialogue, and even supported China in subduing Muslim dominated militancy in China's Northern Province.

China came to Pakistan's aid in both wars against India and always helped Pakistan militarily, economically and in maintaining its territorial integrity. Their friendship flourished also because of the geopolitical situation at that time; the Cold War between US and then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was at its peak; India and China had territorial and political disputes; China's relationship with Japan and other South Asian countries was not friendly; and China had virtually no influence in Africa or Latin America.

China was not as technologically advanced in warfare as the two superpowers or even many European countries, nor was the Chinese leadership ready to militarily or otherwise have its presence felt beyond the countries near its immediate boundaries. China was also not close to being the economic

power it is now.

At that time Pakistan had something to give back to China, and the existence of conducive circumstances and absence of rivals competing for China's friendship also ensured growing relationship between the two countries.

While this Sino-Pakistan relationship is likely to endure (the Chinese president's message to Pakistan said that it was China's desire to "build on past achievements and strengthen traditional friendship, advance with time, expand and enrich China-Pakistan strategic partnership so that our friendship will pass on from generation to generation"), global circumstances and China's political and economic situation have undergone a major transformation.

In these changed circumstances, Pakistan cannot be complacent and take things for granted, and indeed, to meet the goal "of building on past achievements" must prepare itself for an aggressive future looking policy.

The Chinese makeover began as far back as 1990s, by which time the "Mao" dominated generation of Chinese leaders had either passed away or become a voiceless minority, and the Chinese leadership realised that if China was to effectively compete with other developed countries it had to start "playing a decisive role in world affairs." China, hence, began a worldwide offensive to acquire "soft influence" (as opposed to the hard-line military approach of the past).

The Asian financial crises of 1997

provided a convenient point, when in sharp contrast to US and Japanese policies, Beijing refused to devalue its currency and came out as a country which was willing to stand up for other Asian states in time of need. At the same time, while entering into various bilateral corporate agreements with other countries, China also began to end all its old border disputes.

China's aim to spread its "soft influence" obtained further impetus through the missteps from US and its post 9/11 selfish and inward looking policies, including its war in Iraq and Afghanistan and lopsided and biased dealings with international disputes.

More importantly for Pakistan, during this time, the world also saw emergence of India as a player in the economic field. It was but natural that both China and India recognised the advantages of a relationship afresh. An important landmark was realised when Chinese President Hu Jintao announced a five-point proposal for promoting China-India economic and trade cooperation in 2006 (which included setting a new goal for bilateral trade to reach \$40 billion by 2010, establishing concrete venues for economic and trade cooperation and strengthening cooperation in multilateral arenas like World Trade Organisation).

It is envisaged that bilateral trade target for the year 2010 may even go beyond the \$50 billion mark. India and China are now

cooperating to meet energy demands and on oil and gas projects in Iran, Syria and Kazakhstan, and in South America and Africa.

China has even offered assistance in India's nuclear energy program and there has been cooperation on defence matters. China and India, along with Brazil, are also the key figures in BRIC, the alternate financial organisation of the world.

China also needs to build up its relationship with India in pursuance of a policy to "engage and contain" as a counter-measure to the developing US-India relationship. During the Cold War, India's proximity with USSR was a danger to China, but this is no longer there.

On the other hand, the stakes seem to be piling up against Pakistan, which opened up its airspace to America, and it appears that there could be a number of American air bases on Pakistani soil.

Pakistan and China cooperation on Gwadar was based on the understanding that the port would be used to carry goods to Central Asia and give China access to the Arabian Sea and Middle Eastern markets but, perhaps due to America's growing influence in the region coupled with unrest in Baluchistan and tribal areas, the Chinese have shown little interest in using it.

Pakistan, politically and economically, also seems to have no agenda for the present moment, with our leaders totally engrossed in domestic issues.

Since the future certainly belongs to China, more and more states will be vying to improve ties with China. Pakistan has advantage of the past but nothing lasts forever. With the changing face of China and its emerging relation-

ship with India, Pakistan needs to take concrete steps to ensure that the preferential treatment it had enjoyed from China continues through the next generation.

Having sounded out a warning that China, notwithstanding its friendship with Pakistan, continues to expand ties with India, I intend to point out a few practical steps that ought to be taken immediately.

One impact of globalisation will be collaboration on business ventures and projects between countries. China has just begun to bring professionalism to its business management but is technically and training-wise not very strong, and will, therefore, prefer to enter into joint ventures with nations whose people have the skills and expertise to make the collaboration successful. India has already begun establishing universities where Chinese language is compulsory in the MBA program.

India has also embarked upon a major exchange programs amongst students and experts, which resulted in joint ventures being executed. Their plan is to enhance their educational system so they can be true partners in China's future projects.

In order to stay in the game Pakistan must provide enough intellectual and trained manpower equipped in Chinese styles of management and working, and speaking Chinese and English, so that collaboration in future joint ventures between Pakistan and Chinese entities can become a reality.

Pakistan needs to set up joint and unilateral universities, institutions and fields of studies in China and Pakistan for training in management sciences, IT, energy, infrastructure, science and technology,

Chinese language, Chinese history and culture, and start preparing the future teams of people who the Chinese would prefer to work with.

The Pakistan government needs to substantially increase programs for exchange of scholars, send more and more students to China, and organise informal business and cultural summits. If we make a beginning now, we may hope to compete with the Indians in China's joint ventures, otherwise we may be too late and lose the economic advantage of having a relationship with China. Perhaps our private universities like Hamdard, Beacon and others can start programs on these lines.

Future plans must re-evaluate and announce new and more aggressive bilateral trade goals -- our relationship with US and our joint fight against terrorism notwithstanding -- consider setting up multilateral areas, economic zones and economic organisations with China, and work towards synchronising our economy with China's. Agriculture is our main saviour, and dams our priority.

The leaders should put differences aside, notwithstanding the issues, which can continue to be debated and resolved in their own time. Plans need to be made on how value and benefit can be reaped from China's expertise and assistance. The economy of Pakistan is in the doldrums, and the confidence of people at its lowest.

Immediate announcement of China ventures, and building dams, could stimulate the economy and boost the hopes of the Pakistani nation, and would give the much needed credibility to the government.

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What Chinese stars earn from sport

The next generation of sports stars is likely to be even savvier about marketing their achievements. Where Yao Ming's parents refused to let him go to sports school, because they felt he would not be able to make a living from his athleticism, parents like Ding Wenjun are now making enormous financial sacrifices to promote their children's talent.

DIAO YING

XU Haifeng was the first Chinese to win an Olympic gold medal. That was in the 1984 free pistol shot competition in Los Angeles, and it earned Xu the first national prize money for an Olympic champion -- 9,000 RMB (about \$1,312) and a salary increase from 51.5 RMB (\$7.50) to 98 RMB (\$14) per month. "At that time, that was already considered a lot of

money," says Xu, now the deputy director of China's Cycling and Fencing Sports Administrative Center.

No longer. While Xu Haifeng might have been one of the first athletes to make any money out of his sport, China's top-earning athlete is now NBA star Yao Ming, whose estimated income for 2007 was 380 million RMB (\$55.4 million). The country's second biggest earner is Shanghai's Liu

Xiang, whose 2004 Olympic gold medal in the 110-meter hurdles earned him 160 million RMB (about \$23 million) last year.

Both are beneficiaries of China's changing economic system. Wei Jizhong, a consultant to the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee, and former national sports official who led the women's volleyball team to five consecutive championships, points out that during Xu Haifeng's era, people around the country were still discussing whether or not China should adopt a free-market economic system, not the commercialisation of sports.

"Xu Haifeng won in 1984, but the formal decision to adopt a market economy was made after (former Communist Party leader) Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour," says Wei.

The changing stakes have led to changing attitudes too.

While older athletes saw their sports as more about the glory of themselves and their nation, the new generation has learned the value of packaging itself. One example of an athlete 'on mes-

sage' is Liu Xiang as spokesman for Amway's nutrition supplement Nutrilite.

At one press conference for the brand, Liu Xiang's first comment was a plug for the brand. "It's been my dream to represent Amway," he said as he took his seat. "From a young age, I used Amway products my father's work unit gave to him and felt they were great." When a journalist asked about Liu's dreams for the future, the athlete did not speak about hurdles or life, but instead resolutely said, "I hope everyone will use Nutrilite."

Olympic medals don't always bring in the money. Lu Hao, a high profile sports agent whose clients include Yao Ming, says that athletes' market values are closely related to their media exposure and the type of sport they play. That's why the gorgeous young athletes on the national badminton team -- featured last year on a magazine cover that presented them dressed like Hollywood stars -- have signed contracts with Federal Express, Bank of China, Pepsi and L'Oreal. The Chinese Ping-Pong team, by contrast, lags behind in these deals, in spite of its excellent match performances.

Most athletes, also, are still managed by state organisations. While sports like basketball and soccer are more commercialised

than others, most still fall under a system called Sports for the Nation, where the value of an athlete's brand falls largely under the domain of "state assets."

Yao Ming, who moved abroad to play, has an international team of professional money managers. Liu Xiang's "state owned" business activities, on the other hand, are managed by the Chinese Athletics Association.

Intermediary organisations must pass through the Association to discuss advertising representative business. Under the state-owned athletic system, athletes' advertising earnings are allocated by provisions of China's State General Administration of Sport.

Accordingly, Liu Xiang keeps 50 percent of his earnings, with 15 percent going to his coach Sun Haiping, and 20 percent to his hometown Shanghai's sports bureau. The remaining 15 percent is allocated to the Chinese Athletics Association.

Although, there isn't a vast difference between the number of ads done by Yao Ming and Liu Xiang, the hurdle star's income is less than half of the basketball star. "Yao Ming is already a professional athlete," says Wei. "He only participates in national training for a short time when there's to be a match. Under the national system, athletes receive government subsidy and are financially taken care of by the

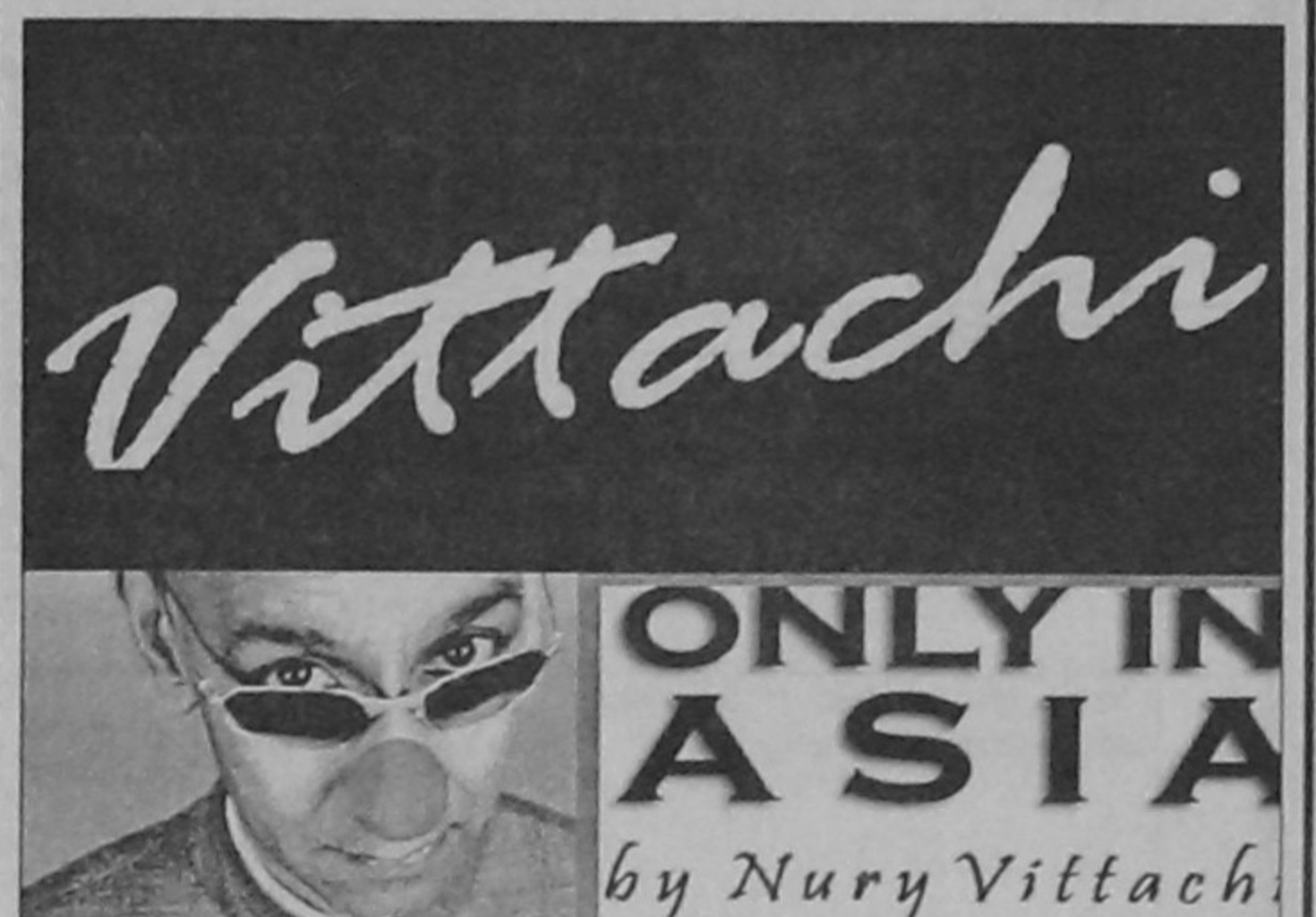
state. So they don't entirely answer to themselves."

Chinese athletes who disobey the rules can pay a heavy price. In 2005, Sydney Olympic diving champion Tian Liang was removed from the Olympic team for participating in too many commercial events. The decision forced Tian out of the Beijing Olympics and also saw the sponsorships for the former "Sunshine Boy" fade into the twilight.

The next generation of sports stars is likely to be even savvier about marketing their achievements. Where Yao Ming's parents refused to let him go to sports school, because they felt he would not be able to make a living from his athleticism, parents like Ding Wenjun are now making enormous financial sacrifices to promote their children's talent.

Ding is the father of snooker player Ding Junhui, winner of the 2005 World Snooker China Open and the world's Number 11 ranked player. Ding Wenjun, a former cigarette salesman, risked ruin by selling his family's house to support his son's career. The gamble paid off. Last year, the 21-year-old champion made 4.8 million RMB (almost \$700,000) in ad and endorsement money -- more than 500 times the award money Xu Haifeng received back in 1984.

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Submit to destiny and feel a little karma

THE Asian concept of karma is storming the West. An American TV series based on the idea that fate ultimately rewards the good and punishes the bad has become one of the most popular sitcoms for years. The show, *My Name is Earl*, tells the story of how an unlovable man -- a redneck petty thief called Earl Hickey -- is transformed by karma.

Yes, it's clever and funny, but to be honest, the situation envisaged -- karma gives big cash lottery prizes to people who do good deeds -- does not ring true with the real Asian spirit of karma (or with real life, come to that).

Let me demonstrate with a true story. A burglar in India gave himself up after he decided that karma was teaching him an important lesson.

Sharanappa Heralgi broke into a house in Karnataka one night and stole a painting of the householder in the hopes that it might be valuable.

But when he got home and looked at it in the light, he was stunned to see that it was a portrait of his long-lost sister Parvati, who he had not seen since she had been kidnapped 13 years earlier.

Clearly, karma was sending a message to him. But what was it?

He decided to break into the house again -- but this time to gaze upon the sleeping woman who lived there.

At the dead of the night, he snuck into her bedroom, and his heart broke when he saw her face. "My beloved sister," he breathed to himself.

"I didn't want to wake her up as I wasn't entirely sure how she would react knowing that her brother was a thief," he later told the Patrike newspaper. "I felt like an absolute monster."

He decided that karma wanted him to give up his evil ways. He

went to the police station and confessed all.

The dramatic import of the encounter was somewhat diminished when investigations revealed that the whole thing was a mistake. The woman was not related to him in any way.

But this being India, both burglar and victim decided to gloss over this inconvenient fact. The woman told police she would not press charges, explaining: "It's possible he could have been my brother in a previous life."

Her sibling-from-a-past-life agreed with this interpretation of events. Police let him go without charge. "He appears genuinely sorry for his actions," said an officer. "Hopefully he will be a changed man."

I can see other villains adopting this interesting defence. "I only stole everything you own because I thought you were a close family member."

Anyway, the new Western interest in karma has generated new bits of culture such as the following list, known as The Sayings of the Jewish Buddhists.

1. If there is no self, whose arthritis is this?
2. Be here now. Be someplace else later. Is that so complicated?
3. Drink tea and nourish life.
4. With the first sip, joy. With the second sip, satisfaction. With the third sip, peace. With the fourth, a Danish.
5. Accept misfortune as a blessing. Do not wish for perfect health, or a life without problems. What would you talk about?
6. Wherever you go, there you are. Your luggage is another story.

If anyone is offended by this column, please be tolerant. After all, I may have been your brother in a previous life. Scary, huh?

Your karma today wants you to visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.



Success brings gold.

