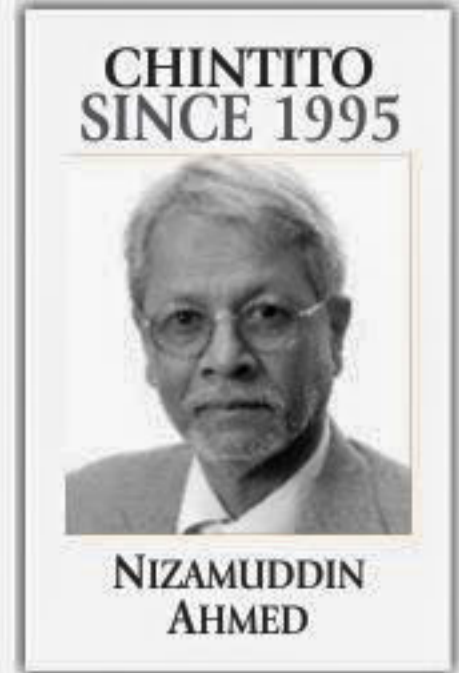


Rajuk's 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'



CHINITTO SINCE 1995
 NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

BRITISH historian Lord Acton's 130-year-old observation that a person's sense of morality diminishes as his/her power increases is true to this day. But, only for fools, for certainly nothing is permanent and the long hand of the law is bound to catch up—when the law can free itself from the entanglement of pressure groups and self-serving corruption. What Acton could

not foresee, however, was the validity of his statement when a group of persons work together for mutual benefit.

In the era of the foot-pound-second (FPS) system and manual drawing, in the early 1990s, my client's submission for planning permission of his six-storeyed residential building was rejected by Rajuk. Mighty impressive stuff because there was an anomaly of perhaps a couple of inches, meaning two, in the summation of the lengths along one wall of my architectural design. That the technologically-qualified officer possessed a hawk's eye and dexterity with figures got me wondering, and my client wandering for months.

There are other aspects of integrity of the capital city's development authority that one cannot help but appreciate. Rajuk strictly practises the *science* of apparently not entertaining visitors. Once upon a time, my request for soliciting an unscheduled audience with an all-powerful "authorised officer" was met with surprising harshness by the man at his door. I did, however, manage to see my Buet junior by practising the *art* of gate-crashing—stubbornness spiced with the charm of persuasion.

At Rajuk, cards have to be shuffled artfully and dealt with sleight of the hand to make an officer (a government employee we forget) pick up the pen and sign an application for planning permission.

"Are you sure?" the teacher asked flabbergasted, "Did he not sign even after seeing it was an application for my building?"

"Sir, I told him, and he double-checked that it was your building. He was greatly animated, moving papers from one side of his desk to the other, slapping on some other drawings, opening this drawer and that, and then pushing back the papers to the other side. He only calmed down when I slipped money under his papers."
 "But, but..." the teacher's voice was breaking, "He is my classroom student. I taught him ethics..." the words trailed off to a whisper.

Rajuk's acquired power over the last two decades is much derived from its chosen convenience of isolation, somewhat like the Myanmar military, the North Korean regime and similar autocracies. It is all hush-hush until one is able to untwine the maze by moving from room to room to gather signature after signature, and finally *push-pash*. There are, however, expensive ways of doing business, especially if a file grows legs and walks away.

A government project for capacity-building of Rajuk, the city corporations, fire service, electricity distributors, and Wasa involved local and international experts. The team contacted Rajuk's chairman to seek his cooperation and relevant information to make the organisation more efficient, effective, vibrant and people-oriented—contributions that would be viewed as critical by any CEO. At the inaugural meeting, where you had puffing *shingara* for snacks and steaming tea, in attendance of his board members, the chairman committed most cordially Rajuk's wholehearted support to

the investigators. The meeting ended with customary warm handshakes all around. Over the following six weeks, the chairman Sir did not respond to over 50 phone calls made to his cellphone. The other organisations honoured the RTI Act 2009 and subsequent rules.

Rajuk as well as some other service agencies naively shield themselves behind the lame excuse of manpower shortage. During recess of a talk show several years ago, I suggested to the then Rajuk chairman, off-camera out of respect, that given its manpower limitations, his public organisation should enforce punitive measures on a few errant building owners, and other owners would become aware and alert.

Control is always by example. Police in any country are outnumbered by criminals. Food adulterers vastly exceed the number of magistrates. Rajuk has heeded my plea only after the recent FR Tower fire by inspecting handpicked buildings. Lo! There is a sense of awareness spreading all over the city.

Despite the much-vaunted shortage of manpower,

and drinks, one should refrain from all sorts of sinful acts when in a state of fasting. No water, no food, and definitely no *ghoosh* (bribe sounds much too foreign). Therefore, officers arrange to see applications for planning permission after *iftar*. When one has broken fast, alongside filling the tummy, filling the pocket with undeserved revenue seems pleasingly permissible.

Whereas its predecessor was a trust for Dhaka's "improvement", since its transformation to Rajuk in 1987, the public agency has been taking up "development" projects to justify the term *unnayan* in its title. In the words of Rajuk, it has "taken an initiative to make Dhaka liveable (Hic!) through solving housing, transportation problems and creation of large-scale water-based public spaces." On the contrary, our housing is an escalating mess with, for instance, slum dwellers (well over a million in Dhaka) sans basic civic amenities. On a good day for traffic jam, it may be faster to walk the 9km from Motijheel to Gulshan because driving could eat up about five hours. Water bodies are



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

"It was the unbridled greed of the building owners, developer and Rajuk officials that led to the devastating March 28 fire in FR Tower where at least 26 people died," Public Works Minister SM Rezaul Karim said on March 30.

Rajuk's inspectors are famous for sniffing a violation of even a few centimetres from several miles away. One may challenge (read test) Rajuk's hidden strength (and selective adeptness) by constructing not an entire building but a simple column or a brick-wall. For sure, the perpetrator shall be hounded, pounded and grounded. Not to fear, where there is money there is always motivation to resolve a crisis at the cost of a few lives years later.

Rajuk is also extremely proficient in identifying a building that has violated architectural, structural or fire-related legislation (any or all), but it always waits for a building to bend, collapse or catch fire. It takes on average about six hours to issue a statement that the building that has come to the limelight for the wrong reasons did not have the approval of Rajuk. Even at that point in time, there is no word on the adjacent or other buildings that are perhaps equally or more vulnerable.

During the forthcoming Ramzan, a month of religious training, we shall learn from some Rajuk officers and employees that its blessed days and nights are the holiest of the year. In addition to abstaining from food

everywhere but visible only after a cloudburst because development has meant filling up low-lying water retentive landforms in incessant violation of the Environment Conservation Act 1995 and the (reservoir) Joladhar Ain 2000.

"It was the unbridled greed of the building owners, developer and Rajuk officials that led to the devastating March 28 fire in FR Tower where at least 26 people died," Public Works Minister SM Rezaul Karim said on March 30, promising that building code violators, including Rajuk officials, would have to face the music.

Rajuk did not opt to utilise its derived and bestowed power for society's benefit, but has sunken deep in the quagmire of depravity, primarily due to greed and impunity in carrying out its contradictory functions as the city's controller and developer. We see hope in minister Rezaul's resolve.

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Hands off protected forestland

Areas around Cox's Bazar already under threat

IT is difficult to imagine a recent move by the public administration ministry to get allocation of 700 acres of protected forestland in Cox's Bazar's Shuknakhari to set up a civil service academy. This area is already under severe pressure from the influx of Rohingyas which has resulted in the razing of some 6,000 acres of forestland in southern Cox's Bazar. We do understand the need for an institution to train our future administrative cadres, but surely it does not have to be at the cost of disturbing the delicate ecological balance that exists in a forest which is already under threat. The Department of Environment has issued a no objection certificate for the acquisition of land on the condition that hills will not be cut and the environment will not be hurt. But it is hardly realistic for these conditions to be met, especially since this is a construction project that we are talking about.

The proposed site for construction in Shuknakhari was categorised as an ecologically critical area in a gazette notification issued back in 1999 and Section 17 of the National Land Use Policy-2001 says that such forestland should be conserved, maintained and expanded. Environmentalists agree that leasing out forestland for public construction would set a dangerous precedent and could open the doors for private entities to follow suit. We should be doing more to preserve the various species of animals and plant life that exist in the limited forestlands we have instead of opening them up for further decimation.

The recent decision by the Supreme Court which directed authorities to stop acquisition of land at the hills and hillocks of Jhilongja Mouja in Cox's Bazar for a residential project for officials of Bangladesh Power Development Board gives us hope that perhaps these precious forests will be left intact and an alternative site be selected for the academy.

Sorely lagging behind in research

PM's call to focus on research is time-befitting

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has rightly stressed the need for research and development in order to maintain Bangladesh's current economic and GDP growth. What she said at an event organised by the Science and Technology Ministry about the importance of research was time-befitting. Although we have achieved tremendous economic growth over the years, when it comes to producing quality research work, we lag far behind our South Asian counterparts. It was found in a recent study that social science research publications are doubling in quantity every six years in South Asia. Overall, India published the lion's share, 84 percent, while Pakistan published 6.4 percent and Bangladesh 3.2 percent.

Even our top public universities have not been able to produce quality research works in recent years. One of the reasons is low budgetary allocation for research activities. For example, Dhaka University's annual budget for the fiscal year 2018-19 was Tk 741.13 crore, of which Tk 36.55 crore or 4.85 percent has been allocated for education and research, while the major portion of the budget has been allocated for paying salaries, allowances and pensions of teachers and employees. And in Jahangirnagar University, Tk 2.15 crore or only 0.92 percent of the total budget of the university for the fiscal year 2018-19 has been allocated for research and innovation. It is thus no wonder that we now see a prevalence of low-quality, and sometimes plagiarised, research work in the country.

We need to focus on creating quality research works, especially in the field of science and technology, if we are to find innovative and timely solutions to the myriad problems the country is facing. And besides increasing the budgetary allocation towards research, we need to encourage teachers and students to get involved in research work and set up more research-based institutions.

To help women entrepreneurs, men should first change themselves

DANA MCLACHLIN

WHEN I set out to research masculinity and entrepreneurship in Dhaka, I expected to hear the occasional sexist remark. Instead, I was surprised to find that the men I worked with were often eloquent defenders of women's rights, explaining to me in detail the religious, cultural, and familial barriers women entrepreneurs faced in Bangladesh. When I asked about gender, everyone, it seemed, had an answer for why there are not more women entrepreneurs.

However, my optimism faded as I realised men's answers didn't extend to critical reflection on themselves. In practice, describing the cultural barriers against women only served to absolve men of their sexist practices in creating that culture, positioning "culture" as a past-tense structure that their present-day actions could not alter. Often, it displaced blame solely onto women themselves for not being innovative or competitive enough to succeed as entrepreneurs.

For example, men would tell me that Bengali culture and religion kept women from being brave enough to start a venture, because women were sheltered and not exposed to the necessary risk true entrepreneurs need. But when I spoke to women about the difficulties they faced starting their ventures, rarely did they mention culture as a barrier. Rather, they made concrete and practical demands: to be taken seriously in a meeting, and not assumed to be the assistant of their male employees. To go to a business meeting alone without being sexually propositioned or harassed. To attend a job interview without being asked about their marital status. While occasionally culture was invoked to legitimate these demands, all of these complaints were rooted in men's everyday actions of exclusion which marked women as different and out-of-

place in business—not an amorphous culture that socialised women to be less risky.

Similarly, I once attended an entrepreneurship symposium where all of the speakers were male. It went completely unremarked that not a single woman spoke for the first three hours of the programme. However, during the interactive portion at the end of the session, when the floor was opened to audience members, mostly women contributed their ideas. Suddenly, the moderators began making jokes. "Where are the men? Come on guys, step up!"



PHOTO: HATHAY BUNANO

they laughed. While perhaps good-natured, these comments normalised the all-male panel and othered women's voices as out-of-place and taking up too much space.

Part of the problem is also events and programmes designed to help women. While these can offer useful resources and sources of recognition for women, they also pigeonhole women as intrinsically morally worthier or thrifter than men. The often cited (though unverifiable) statistic that women invest more back into their communities and

families reinforces this ideal of women as moral mothers. While this stereotype can offer strategic advantage, it also excludes women from the pleasures of risk that men can access. Women are not morally-pure entrepreneurs; they are capable of the extremities of human fallibility, greed, and selfishness just as men are. In a context where being a bold risk-taker is venerated, we do women a disservice if we put them on pedestals and label them "safer bets", preventing them from the productive pleasures of struggle.

Programmes targeting women will

thus do little to create more entrepreneurs unless men themselves begin to alter their own actions. Sexism grows not only in outright discrimination but in the quiet assumptions about who is capable of what. If men really want to help women be entrepreneurs, they should stop thinking about the difficulties women face, but think about themselves and their own actions. When they reach out to someone with an opportunity, who do they choose and why? When they choose to trust someone as a business

partner, why is it? What assumptions do they make about the potential of women in their offices, or the labour they are expected to perform?

This self-reflection also requires shifting what is considered an innovative or exciting venture. Strikingly, the same men who would tell me it was a real shame that there weren't more women entrepreneurs would dismiss the entrepreneurial activities of women, especially with regard to clothing and crafts, as "basic" or not "innovative" enough. Those are just "side businesses" people would say, nothing serious or interesting. This dismissal of women's entrepreneurial ventures in organisations ostensibly designed to incite entrepreneurship reflects how deeply business is assumed to be a male space. The irony is that many of these supposed side businesses actually produce far more revenue than the publicly lauded (male) technology businesses, most of which struggle to turn a profit in Dhaka.

Most striking to me is men's seeming inability or refusal to examine how gender had shaped their lives. When I tried to ask about gender, men would immediately describe women's status and positioning. By presuming that "gender" means "women", men lose the chance to think critically about what it means to be gendered as male and grow up in a society that limits men's range of human expression. These limitations also hurt men, restricting their ability to share vulnerability or develop empathy, and foreclosing a broader imagination of who they can be.

Throughout Dhaka, both policymakers and universities proclaim that entrepreneurship can solve problems. Its possibilities, however, remain limited if people continue to be restricted by narrow, gendered expectations.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rohingya crisis: Keep the conversation alive

It has been almost two years since the 2017 influx of over 700,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh. And even after such a long period of time, no solution to this humanitarian crisis seems to be in sight. There is a real danger of the Rohingya crisis losing importance and attention. It doesn't seem to be prominent in either national conversations or in people's collective memory. Now, we barely read about people's thoughts on the crisis in newspaper columns which was intensely covered in 2017 and in 2018.

Let's not forget about the crisis because if we do, we would be doing a huge disservice to the refugees as well as the host community which has been severely affected by the Rohingya influx. Locals there are now faced with a number of threats to their very livelihood. We must keep the conversation alive to ensure the international community does not let Myanmar get away with its crimes against humanity.

Rahat Khan, by email



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN