

# **The Runaway Corruption - Cynicism Syndrome in Asian Cultures : Its Redemption and the Future of Bioethics**

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## **Abstract**

Corruption has been cynically dismissed as a global phenomenon by some Asian leaders. This attitude becomes a plausible cloak for *mala fide* deeds. Worse, it becomes a veritable shield for the corrupt . But modern information and investigative systems can penetrate the meticulously built smoke screens and illuminate the murky shadows. Bailouts due to politico-economic patronage are, however, routine and considered unworthy of protracted media pursuance, resulting in further cycles of brazen corruption. Public indifference towards the latter is a product of institutional, moral and cultural failures, resulting in corresponding cycles of cynicism. The overall consequence is near total despondence of any meaningful redemption, or overall improvement. In Asia, demographic pressures and/or socio-economic frailties, as also politico-religious bigotry add to the general public disillusion and indifference, and breeds an unending treadmill of further corruption and disgruntled cynicism without much hope for amelioration. The solution, and salvation, lies only in individual and collective (societal) espousal of the ethical in every walk, and work, of life. Social, spiritual and cultural pressures enabling political activism in ostracizing both criminal intent and action in public life, maintenance of decorum and propriety in private life by public figures can rekindle hope and confidence, and banish sullen cynicism from the heart and mind of the lay public. In most of Asia this has become an imperative needing urgent attention and implementation, but hardly any silver clouds are yet discernible on any Asian horizon. A sea change in moral perspectives of whole communities only can redeem the situation, and pave the way to a renaissance of the Bioethical culture which, the author asserts, has been an underlying universal ingredient of the Asian psyche through the ages.



## **Introduction**

The Asian mindset seems to be different from the Western (Euro-American) in respect of many facets of human conduct. This has been analyzed in some detail by Sharma<sup>1</sup>, and finds echoing concurrence in Sakamoto<sup>2</sup>. Behavioural, ideological and life style differences regulating from this impinge upon the vast ambit of Bioethics as well, since the aetiology of the latter is rooted basically in fundamental human precepts and conduct. This article sets out to enlarge on some of these themes.

## **Clearing the Mists**

For long, the human animal has held little disputed center-stage on the theatre of Life on Earth by virtue of its pre-emptive evolutionary pinnacle. However, with the backdrop of threat to global environment and survival, need for a wider and more pragmatic ethics, encompassing the entire biota, and by hyperbole, the abiotic components of 'Gaia'<sup>3</sup>. This new approach is the essential Bioethics. It is important, however to caution that anthropocentrism must (and should) continue as the all pervading diaspora in all exercises of bioethical conduct in the present, and the future. Sharma 1997<sup>4</sup>, 1998<sup>1</sup> has elaborated this in various contexts.

It emerges, therefore, that while the classic Bioethics of today seems to posit for pre-eminence of biological and environmental issues, human-centric general ethics actually determines the fate of all Bioethical enterprise on essence. It is necessary to grant these seemingly antagonistic, but in fact closely related twin systems their proper perspectives and relative importance in any projections/analyses of, especially, futurity.

## **The Puzzle of the two streams**

Distinctively disparate trends are easily discernible in the two major human streams of civilisation-western and eastern, in the twilight of the present century. In the last two quarters of the latter, while most western communities settled down to Prosperity and Progress after facing successive holocausts, many Eastern nations emerged as de novo entities from colonial, or other oppressions of History.

Struggle, therefore, epitomised both Mega-cultures. But while one has



steadily marched what can, through strictly objective lenses, be termed as positive progression on nearly all frontiers of human endeavour, the other seems to be struggling to stand up, before beginning to march. Thus, irrespective of the political ideology, most nations of Asia continue to be quagmired in squalor of poverty of both substance spirit. The puzzle of societies with unquestionable spiritual heritage<sup>1,4</sup> slipping into unabashed non/un-social grime needs deep, painstaking and perhaps painful sociological analyses. The ground reality, however is that brazen corruption, of the mind, the spirit, the systems and the economies, have become a way of life in many Asian Nations. These infirmities may exist in the West too, but they have not stymied the general universal trend towards progression. In a later section, we shall analyze the influence of these societal parameters on Bioethical concerns. Continuing with our exposition, we shall now concentrate on the great Eastern Pot-Pourri in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Egregious Asian Polities: Circa 1950-2000**

Emerging from the colonial yoke one by one, Asian nations embarked on brave and ambitious programs of development and progress around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Irrespective of the political ideology adopted, however, most communities came to be plagued by Hydras of corruption, which proliferated with gay abandon. Attempts to weed the evil were feeble, and doomed to failure since the ravens of greed having tasted blood, were in no mood to let go. The share of the pie, in big and small countries alike went to a coterie, only struggling bits tricking down to the faceless mass of the general populace. Territorial, ethnic, linguistic, and worse of all, religious bigotry fanned the flames of hatred between communities, resulting in the mushrooming of huge Arms markets where food, shelter and cloth were the prime necessities. In some countries, relative openness of societies, as in real democracies, did brake the downslide, but limitedly so. In others, totalitarian regimes, in or without uniforms took over, with more deterioration, or sometimes-transient improvements. Causes of these runaway debacles have been ascribed to ever rising populations, increasing poverty, natural/man made calamities, depletion of natural resources, erosion of traditional moral values, straining of the social fabric, systematic plunder, denigration and destruction of institutions, exploitation of the weak and the helpless,



poor/inadequate laws, or ever worse implementations, failing judicial systems/authority, brazen bureaucracy, banal politicians.....veritably an unlimited Pandorean warehouse of unseemly garbage.

The calumny and the rot reach their zenith in the perversion of even the highest citadels of human potential: the academia, the intellectual...

Scientists, writers...

The Indian caste system, after its degeneration into the heredity mode, has been (rightly) berated universally. But Dynasties, and dynastic coteries, even succession sometimes, in flourishing and supposedly enlightened democracies of both East and West are atavisms of the same hue. In the East unfortunately, the feudal colonial culture imposed on the captive populace by the West generated towards the despots an abject servility, residues of which still remain today, being transferred to Dynastic incumbents or the nouveau 'rulers'- the dictator/politicians/bureaucrats. However, what is more galling and worrisome is the growing menace of brazen nepotism, the coterie kingmakers, lobbyists and servitors to the "rulers" (see above) even among the supposed intellectuals-scientists, writers, teachers. Ineptitude, inefficiency and downright corruption in the Judiciary coupled with a lackadaisical, weak, knee-jerk hiccups of the fourth Estate(where it is not totally gagged) add to the diaspora of despair. Escape from just punishment-(indeed, any punishment!)of crooks in high places through brazen power-manics, or equally bland legal/political legerdemain further magnify the wages of cynicism which engulf whole populations. The cycle seems doomed to continue till total collapse of all values associated with culture and civilization. In such dismal scenarios, bioethics necessarily recedes far into the murky mists. That human salvation must always precede any other desiderata must be accepted as an axiom.

Sequestration of mythical proportion wealth and assets, often offshore, by a few, dynastic rule, brazen fascism of coterie and groups, religious bigotry and terrorism, ethnic hates, genocides, national rivalries or greed for territorial/other hegemonies-tragically, all these human failings seem to have found sung havens and accentuated expression in Asian populations.

Such imperfections plague, and sometimes glaringly and abundantly, parallel (western) societies too. But these breed neither a perennial rut, nor hopelessness and despair. The contrast is striking, and seems to be directly related



to the totality of communitarian and thrusts.

### **The dilemma of Bioethics**

Sakamoto<sup>2</sup> points at the human centrism of the Western man in contrast to the more pragmatic relationship which Eastern communities establish with non-human components of nature. It is amusing to reflect that whereas the west seems to have discovered Bioethics, the east was living it for years! The harsh european-arabic monotheistic religious creeds too offer this stark contrast to the much more ambivalent, generally benevolent and tolerant, all-embracing spiritual mores, which also encompass all nature. The millions of eastern Gods become vibrant entities – indeed, bioethical precepts in this context. The conceptual amalgamation of Nature, Man and Beast, find reflection in symbolic veneration (temples; epics; idols!) of the universal reverence that oriental mysticism enshrines, and extends, to all creation<sup>4</sup>.

All the more pity therefore, that with such unquestionably lofty spiritual antecedents, the Eastern polities should have degenerated into squabbling cesspools of depravity. And it is in this universal decline that we can perceive the mutual influences which shape human societies at one end of a continuing spectrum, and the bioethical (biological; environmental) factors at the other.

### **Routes to Salvation**

It has been recognized universally that with time, inequities of all description will have to be overcome for the very survival of the human species, and this planet. This must indeed be the foremost bioethical imperative today. Sharma<sup>5</sup> has argued strongly for a proactive anthropocentric channelisation of human evolution (both cultural and biological), and unto that end, the development of a Universal Ethics<sup>4</sup> by global consensus. Realisation of equally indispensable bioethical goals and priorities, as also socio-economic and political liberation, of the whole continuum of human civilisation will follow naturally.

Curiously, despite a fundamentally bioethical approach in concept and practice, many Asian countries, and people, do not subscribe with enthusiasm, if not actually frown, at the introduction or induction of modern bioethic in their present cultural fabric. The reasons for this are ascribed to the recognition of the priority of improving the human condition (and society) first. This is, indeed, an inescapable truism, which the repressed and marginal human communities can



easily comprehend. It is argued, therefore, that the venal and vicious cycle of corruption-cynicism stifling must be obliterated to pave the way for Bioethical renaissance (we have agreed that Bioethics is not new to the Asian psyche) in these parts of the globe.

While there are few hopeful silver linings, on the Asian horizon, the global phenomenon of corruption can still be rooted out, along with frustrating cynicism it has bred in the Asian polities. This can be best-accomplished by radical restoration of cultural and spiritual values, which have lost to the pace, and dust of modern (western?) technological 'progress'.

Insistence on not only honest appearance in public, but actual conduct beyond reproach in private and personal life by public figures/servants may also regenerate afresh the breed of role models, which has become near extinct even in countries of high lofty pretensions.

In summation, it is the inner moral fabric of the supposedly spiritual Asian man that needs reinforcement. The apical cornices of corruption – the venal politician, the vicious bureaucrat and/or the tyrannical ideology (religious or military) can be easily overcome by the turning tide of espousal of probity by the lay public, or the common man.

Strengthening of institutions by their effective, honest, efficient functioning without interference, fear or favor; transparency of intent and deeds; the bold foot, and the fearless face forward; and basic communitarianism of spiritual dimension will not only crush corruption, but transform cynicism and despair into adventurous hope. This will inevitably lead to the resurgence of 'humanity' in the human species, which is the only sure path to a truly bioethical culture.

For the above desiderata to be realized, it is the modern Asian human who must fight both external and internal forces which have bred the amorality in his mind, psyche, home, hearth and nation. The fight will neither be easy, nor short. But a beginning has to be made, and at the base of the pyramid, which will have to be of the common man. The apices will have no choice but to fall in step, and even out in unison.



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