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# OPINION

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## PLUS CA CHANGE....

GAURI DESHPANDE

WELL nothing very new, and it's still raining. All the mothers (the non-Japanese ones) who gather at my daughter's school every afternoon to collect their respective offspring, assure me that all the time *they've* been here, it rained all through April. (They also warned me of hot and muggy summers, but these I shrugged off; I mean, think of Bombay! And to tell you the truth, right now, a hot and muggy day would be positively welcome.) However, if you ask a Japanese friend, he looks surprised and says, but this is a very unusual April, and then looks at you reproachfully, as though it were all somehow your fault. But there was one sunny Saturday during the week that the cherry trees were in blossom, and we did climb up onto the hill behind our house along with all the other merrymaking, sake-carrying parties to view the cherry-blossoms. And, for the record, they are very pretty, and I even composed a Haiku in their honour. It was judged the best Haiku not because it *was* the best, but because there were no other entries. So here goes:

At times like these I feel  
My very words should've been  
Flowering cherry trees.

You will forgive the few technical lapses, such as an extra syllable or two, because, after all, it was written while under the influence. The day before, S had gone to an *evening* cherry-blossom-viewing-and-sake-drinking party, but I suspect that he rather indulged in the latter part of the two-part activity, because he did not seem to remember any cherry trees the next morning. Before we could manage a picnic to see the blossoms in moonlight, the rains came down and with them the blossoms too. So, maybe next year. I find the cherry-blossom a non-descript sort of a flower. It becomes remarkable only in its profusion, and also, I suspect because of the brevity of its existence. But to an eye accostomed to the deep purple glory of the jacaranda, the blazing fire of the gulmohur or the shocking pink of the cassia, these flowers seem a bit wishy-washy. They are pretty enough, and coming at the time they do, when everything is sort of grey and muddy, they are doubly welcome as harbingers of Spring, but if you put one blossoming cherry tree down in a street

ablaze with *pallaash*, no one will notice it. I know I started it as a joke, but the Dalmatian peach trees did put up a more spectacular show.

This really must be the last word in affluent societies, for people throw away the most fantastic things. Not only the rag-a-bone man but even I could easily furnish my house quite luxuriously from the refuse heaps of the city. To date, I have collected gratis, one chair, two bar-stools, one quilt, one bicycle, one foam rubber mattress, one umbrella. I could have picked up one dining table, one shelf, one chest of drawers and one guitar, but there is hardly room enough in our tiny flat for all that. Yesterday I saw two record players atop another heap and was going to snatch them up, but just then the municipal workers came and began loading everything in their garbage truck, and I didn't know how to ask them. We are now "shopping" for a video cassette player, but S says, he won't sneer at a colour TV. Apparently, there are some poorer people too, because, in an hour or two the usable items generally disappear from these heaps. It is illegal to put garbage out at the collection centres for more than an hour or so before it is due for collection, but the city fathers wink at the infringements of this rule and the heaps prove to be bonanzas for the needy.

Going back to the cherry-trees, did I tell you that at the beginning of March the municipal corporation (or whatever) workers brought large, fully grown trees in trucks and planted them all along the thoroughfares? These trees are in leaf and flower now and give a nice festive look to the otherwise dreary cityscape. In the centre of the street as a divider are planted low hedges of azaleas and they too burst into the most colourful clusters of flowers this week. I wonder if a large truck will come and cart them all away at the end of September? I will duly report. The large trees (and I mean really large, about two metres tall with trunks at least fifty cm. across) were brought in with the earth intact around their roots and simply put down in the deep holes prepared for them. This late transplantation does not seem to have harmed them any, for they are just bursting into bright coloured leaves. Even the azaleas and the small plum trees were not there in the winter, but were brought into the city in March, full grown and already in bud and plonked into the ground. All the main streets now wear a look of Spring, thanks to these activities. There are azaleas, hydrangeas, cyclamen, pansies, lillies, daffodils on the lower levels and maples and others in new leaf on the higher. All these are pleasing to the eye but the effect of the city of Kobe in her festive garb is a bit peculiar. You see, this city has everything a city could possibly want. She has the inland sea on three sides of her, a mountain rising at the back of her, a chain of islands across the sea, weather not too inclement at any time of the year, a manageable sort of population—not too large, not too small—, enough industry and commerce and yet not too much pollution, adequate educational and cultural facilities and easy air, sea,

rail links to the rest of the world. But in spite of all this it remains just another modern, ugly, medium sized town. And when it is all decked out in its flowery finery of Spring, it looks rather like a plain woman dressed up in all her silks and jewels. Poor Kobe. And, sometimes I feel Poor Japan too; for the Japanese, it seems to me, try too hard, care too much, flaunt too openly, go too far in chasing, what is called in the modern world, "achievement". And in the gaining of it, they seem to lose the small, shy, beautiful faces in their hearts and their land for which they were so famous and of which they were so justly proud. Now they seem to tend to extravaganzas, hyperboles, unhappy exaggerations and unpleasant over-statements. They come up with huge expos, garish amusement parks, glittering shopping centres, all slightly off key, because all are monstrous hybrids grafted willy-nilly upon the culture of the land. There is doubtless great beauty to be found even in modern architecture, but only if that architecture is an integral part of the nation and the culture that surrounds it, when it has arisen out of it. Rockefeller Centre suits New York; it will be an intolerable eyesore if planted next to the Sofia Mosque or the Taj Mahal. And so when I climb up on the hill behind our house and look upon the concrete ugliness, glassy squareness, neony glitteriness of Kobe I feel very sad. I feel sadder still when I think of how pantingly hard we, in India are trying to get here under what we are pleased to call the Pressure of the Need to Modernise. Is there no way out ?

Ever since I got here, I have been puzzled as to how the Japanese identify one another. Take the following example. There is a police station near our house, where presumably some of Kobe's finest come home to roost. The outside of this box is plastered with posters advertising what I take to be savings schemes, retirement plans, sporting and cultural events and pictures of wanted criminals. The first time I saw one of these last, I was terrified because I was convinced that the chap at the corner who cuts my hair every six weeks or so was this wanted criminal in disguise. Wondering how to share this information with the friendly neighbourhood policeman, I went into the Co-op to do a bit of shopping and nearly ran out in fright, for there was that criminal, weighing out my hamburger. Screwing up my courage I peeped inside the police box, determined to unburden my soul and blow me if that very hardened criminal were not sitting there behind a desk grinning at me like a shark ! I gave it up. I mean how do you know who's who ? After many weeks I can confidently recognise my friend-philosopher-and-guide Ikeda-sang, but I suspect it is only because I always see him in his office. If he were to accost me about seven o'clock of an evening in Sannomiya's nightclub district (not that I am likely to be found there at that time), I would probably start shouting for Kobe's finest, and then of course that hardened criminal in disguise.... You see where it all leads ? Besides I cannot yet shout "Help !" in Japanese, so keep your fingers crossed that the occasion does not arise until I can.

I do wish Summer would come fast. In the winter I wrote to you that I was waiting for Spring, and now I write that I am awaiting Summer; but you must not think that I am always pining for what is not. There are lots of things to enjoy in the present. For example, the once a week TV appearance of my favourite samurai, the once a week American movie on TV in which people like Lawrence Olivier and Sean Connery speak impeccable but incomprehensible Japanese, the once weekly emergence of the sun, the steady progress of the blanket that I am knitting for my girl, and of course my 'shopping sprees' into the garbage heaps; but I do wish that our landlord hadn't shut off the central heating with the very first appearance of a cherry blossom!

P.S.

Before I close, let me retract a lot of the things I said at the beginning of this letter about cherry blossoms, because only yesterday we went to Osaka to the Mint, where they have a kilometre long avenue of blossoming cherry trees of at least five hundred different varieties. And they are spectacular. The ones that I have been 'viewing' so far, are a sort of a pale, indeterminate pink, like the soles of a new-born baby's feet, but there in Osaka, the colour ranged from a jazzy shocking-pink, to the purest snow white. They were all double- or triple-blossoms and looked like huge bunches of thickly clustering roses rather than cherry-blossoms! These were the trees and flowers that I remembered from twenty years ago and remembering, had not dared to say to my friends that the cherry-blossoms in America were better (at least in memory) than in Japan. Each tree was beautiful in itself, an absolute poem in form and colour and composition; but the vista of a kilometre of them lining the road on both sides, was simply breath-stopping. The white one had my special attention as the one featured in one of my favourite novels: Meredith's *The Egoist*. Pick up your copy and look up the double-blossoming white cherry tree for me. There was even a yellow variety, and one, a sort of a pale green, which stood out only on account of its modesty amidst its opulent cousins. But—and this is a big but, and you are going to think that all my statements laudatory or derogatory are always prefixed and suffixed with 'if only' and 'but'—there was a huge flaw in our enjoyment. From the time we stepped out of the train at the station to the time we exited from the avenue of cherry trees, we, along with at least half the population of the Kansai region were processed relentlessly forward by an army of smart, smiling, tough, walkie-talkie toting policemen stationed five paces apart all along the route. It was Japanese Organization at its most efficient, and I mean ruthlessly efficient. There were at any given moment at least a couple of thousand people on that road, being pressed forward continuously like toothpaste in a tube, all gawking at the blossoms, taking pictures of the blossoms, of

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themselves and their children and their friends against the background of the blossoms and being pushed step by step at a fixed pace quite ceaselessly; until slowly, over the forty or fifty minutes I spent in the cherry-blossom tunnel began to blur in my mind as a jumbled mosaic of flowers, people, children, flashlights, policemen, flowers.... And though we did enjoy looking at the extraordinary spectacle and the great beauty of the flowers, we came home thoroughly exhausted and agreed among ourselves that the cherry trees behind our house are not at all spectacular, in fact are rather a sort of a poor relative of the royal beauties in Osaka, but we loved every moment we had spent sitting under them and drinking our sake and composing haiku, in what was practically solitude, because the next sakura-viewing party was a good six feet away from us!

## COMMENT

M. R. Masani: I am delighted to see that, in your two issues of April 14 and 21, you have initiated a discussion on the important subject of Voluntary Euthanasia with articles entitled "Whose Life is it Anyway?"

This encourages me to mention that a recent article of mine on the same subject in the *Statesman* of 5th April has evoked a very positive response in the form of over a hundred letters which I have received from readers of that paper in or around Calcutta expressing their agreement and offering to join in establishing in India a Society for the Right To Die With Dignity.

I shall very much appreciate it if readers of your influential little journal who are interested in this cause will write to me at: Breach Candy House, Warden Road, Bombay 400 026, so that I may be able to contact them in this connection.

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