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# OPINION

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## SO IT'S SPRING AGAIN (SO WHAT !)

GAURI DESHPANDE

ON the twentyfirst of March, Spring arrived here officially and it was a holiday (trust the Japanese to do everything officially right), and it rained steadily for twentyfour hours. I had almost given up in despair and booked my ticket home when on Sunday the Sun rose as he should, and shone forth in all his glory, so we donned our cotton shirts and ventured out for a walk in the park on the hill (sorry, mountain), behind our house. It would have been truly a lovely park, but . . . they have laid it out in nice concrete walks, children's amusement grounds, baseball practicing grounds, archery ranges, Kobe-viewing galleries, . . . you know. Well, anyway, not to crib too much, it was better to walk along concrete pathways under severely disciplined trees than to be pounding pavements being trampled in the shopping district. One piece of great news. The trees are about to burst into flower. We have been promised sakura — cherry blossom — parties by all and sundry and we await the opening of the bud. I am always asked whether I am excited at the prospect of seeing my first cherry blossoms. To the first person who asked, I gave a truthful answer, that it was not my first cherry-blossom viewing. I had the pleasure in America more than twenty years ago. The poor man was aghast. America ? Yes. Japanese cherry-blossoms ? Yes, they were a gift to America from Japan. He was still not satisfied. It's not the same thing, he said sadly. I mean, I understand. Didn't Japan invent cherry blossoms ? And their viewing ? Right. So now I tell everyone that I am tremendously excited at the prospect of viewing the cherry blossoms in the company of about one million people doing the same wherever I go, all probably singing Sakura, Sakura and getting drunk on Sake. Not that I have any particular objections to any of these activities, you understand. What I object to is the compulsive nature of the whole thing. It is like wearing new clothes on Diwali day and eating sweets and bursting fire-crackers. If anyone tells me that such and such a thing is done because it is the done thing then of course, quite perversely I don't want to do it ! I feel like saying, I'll wear new clothes when I am feeling especially happy, eat sweets when my weight is down to fifty-nine kilos and burst firecrackers, never. Unfortunately you cannot view sakura when you want to ; they must be viewed within a period of about seven days, and that's that. So I guess I will go and 'view' them. And why 'view' ? Why not see, or look at ? Because it all is rather like a General viewing the

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troops, that's why. But what I am *really* going to enjoy, is saying after the event, "They aren't bad, but you know, the view of the blossoming peach trees on the Adriatic coast was really something." It's sad, but because of his essentially polite nature S refuses to join in this leg-pull, and so I will have to say ha ha all to myself and to you !

I must say that in one thing Japan comes up to my expectations, and that is food. I won't bore you with detailed descriptions of the minute and tasty dishes which parade in front of you steadily and (seemingly) endlessly as you get fuller and drunker, but suffice it to say that I have become a firm convert to the idea of eating raw fish and seaweed soup. They are both perfectly delicious. That Kobe beef was created especially for those of us who had done good deeds in their last births, (and happen to be very wealthy in this one, or somebody's guest ) goes without saying. The only thing I don't quite seem to appreciate, is the sake. Not because it tastes bad or anything. It tastes fine, hot or cold. But because it doesn't do for me what I expect any good, solid wine to do, and that is make me mellow and tolerant of the human condition. But sake is like cherry blossoms, it must be drunk with Japanese food, and I must admit that you cannot very well drink a growling burgandy or a taunting bordeaux or a laughing beaujolais with Japanese food. It has to be the giggling or murmuring sake.

Further about our Samurai. He has abruptly changed roles and now appears as a police-detective in a new serial. He looks perfectly unnatural and it breaks our hearts to see him in the usual jerkin-and-jeans, crop uniform that all TV policemen seem to wear. However, we do get to see him once a week as the Shogun Yoshimune in all his silken finery, his topknot and his fantastic swordplay. Unfortunately I went and hunted out a sketch of the real Yoshimune, and he was a sad disappointment—let us say something like the real Shivaji and his statues. There seem to be a lot of Samurai films on the TV, at least four a day ; and on the other hand the real Japan around us is very rapidly divesting herself of every vestige of her feudal past. It is something like us : one foot in the present, wanting the future desparately, knowing that that is where the sustenance, the power, the glory is going to come from, but also knowing, almost instinctively, that there can never be glory, power, any more like the one that was, and clinging to a past long gone and dead, and perhaps well dead. The samurai movies are to Japan what Ram and Krishna and Ashoka and such like are to us. But it makes me wonder. After all we need the props of past glories because our present is so squalid, poor, unhappy. We are at the bottom of the heap and we like to remember the times when we were at the top. But Japan ? She is at the top. Every one is forever telling you that. They are the first in the production of this, they have the largest of that, the most advanced of the other thing and so on. Why doesn't their number one position, their present prosperity, high technology, plethora of comforts and luxuries sit happily and proudly on their shoulders ? Why are they uncomfortable

with it all ? Why must they hark back forever to the samurais ? I wish I knew, or could find out. If I do, don't worry I shall not keep my insight to myself !

An event of great importance took place in Osaka recently : the Spring Grand Sumo Tournament. I have become a great fan. I love to watch the long long ritual, the very brief fight and the even briefer bowing out of the loser. I worry if one of my favourites loses one of his one hundred and sixty-eight n 20 kilos. The slightly distracted look in their faces as they mawvely equal for the opening ritual drives me to distraction and they do not thwock against each other with the solid sound of chargign buffalos I feel cheated. I was glued to the TV during the entire fifteen days and can reel off their sonorous names and weights and places of birth and records of wins and losses but much to my annoyance it was S who won the bet about who the Grand Champ will be. I am impatiently waiting for the Summer Grand Tournament to have my revenge !

And a footnote : my complaint about not being appreciated by the Japanese has to be modified a little. I have finally found an admirer : S's doctor ! Only, S is very mean and insists that the Dr. is impressed by me only because I am such a healthy specimen of humanity ! Never mind, at least I am being admired by the medical profession. Who knows, I may even branch out into the dentists or the pedicurists.

## **"WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY ?"**

M. K. RATHISH

(Continued)

An American doctor writing in 'The Psychologist' magazine narrates an interesting episode. A certain old man suffering from an incurable and extremely painful type of cancer, went to the doctor and told him. "My son has come from 2000 miles away to see me. I have already given him my blessings. My wife doesn't love me. I see no point in continuing living. Why don't you give me some morphine, doctor, so that I can put an end to my life ?" Taking pity on him the doctor gave him some morphine. That evening his wife found it hidden underneath his pillow, and threw it away. The next day the doctor gave him another bottle. That night when his wife and his nurse were having dinner, he slowly walked up to the shelf to have it. But he was so weak that he collapsed before he could swallow it. His wife who came running on hearing the noise, wrenched the bottle from him. She rang up the doctor. "Did you give my husband morphine ?" she asked. "Yes", the doctor replied, "he had begged for it." "Remember", she shouted, "I can sue you for attempted murder." The worried doctor consulted his lawyer. "The District Attorney can make things hot for you if he wants to," he was told. That stopped our doctor's humanitarian activities. "Because I have a wife and children to look after," he wrote apologetically. Another good man frustrated by a law that should have been scrapped long ago.

In England there is a society, "The Society for the right to a dignified

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death," also known as EXIT, which tries to help old, infirm or incurably ill people who do not want to live, to die in peace. The Society wanted to bring out a manual on how to commit suicide. Immediately they were threatened with prosecution. In England the punishment for "aiding and abetting" suicide is jail sentence up to 14 years. Finally this book was brought out from Scotland where no such law exists.

Mr. Gopal Shivram Mandlik, 85, committed suicide on 8-12-1980. He was a man who had been carrying on a crusade in India for the legalisation of the right to die. He wrote letters to the P.M. and various M.P.'s requesting that a bill be brought legalising suicides. He got no replies from anyone. He died a sad and disappointed man.

This is from his last interview, published in the Sunday Standard Magazine of September, 1979: "I have led a lawful life for 85 years and in a few years I might become a burden to others . . . I do not wish to go on living now that all my earthly duties, I feel, are over . . . I do not wish to commit suicide. It is illegal. I desire that I may be given permission to end my life under the care of a doctor who would ensure that my end is painless and peaceful. An act to that end is necessary."

When he committed suicide on 8-12-1980 he left behind a suicide note which makes poignant reading: "... For the past two and a half years I have been trying to get the government to pass an Act facilitating a painless and peaceful death at will. I sent many a registered letter to many a government official (including the Prime Minister) but those who are busy in the service of the people have not had any free time for replying to my letters . . . .

" . . . With a view to end my life the way I desired, I swallowed sleeping tablets on the 15th December, 1979. Prior to that attempt I had donated my body to the Sassoon Hospital, Pune, and eyes to the Eye Bank. But after I had taken the sleeping tablets I had been unconscious at the hospital and, unfortunately, the end did not approach me. And I had to return home. Therefore I decided to administer poison this time. I regret that my body and eyes will not be of any use since there would be poison in them. But responsibility will rest with the Government . . . ."

The essence of liberalism is letting people do their own thing. The age of coercion is gone. So, if a person wants to die, let him. Whose life is it, anyway?

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