

Weekly Copy Ps. 5

Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XXII

August 11, 1981

No. 14

HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT — ?

GAURI DESHPANDE

OFFICIALLY, the monsoon began today (*June 1*). Every one tells me that Japan has but this one rainy month, and when I ask them what they called the last three months, they quite seriously say, 'Spring'. I have learnt for myself the truth of what Mr. Maloney says in his book: don't make jokes in Japan. I have yet to discover what the Japanese consider humorous. The TV 'laugh shows' (that's what they are called, seriously), are a blend of the coarsest slapstick and surprisingly close to obscene situational comedy. For instance, a man dressed as a woman trips over his kimono and falls down, dislodging his falsies and the audience falls about in delight but if you tell them even the simplest of jokes (of the 'doesn't everybody' variety), they laugh in their usual lip-stretching way which tells you that they are only being polite. My quota of jokes to conduct further research is coming to an end and it will be a sad day for me when I have to retire defeated without ever having made a single Japanese laugh at a single joke! However, I did solve the mystery of their general aloofness, not to say unfriendliness the other day. After having met continual rebuffs from various people in the form of slightly implausible excuses to our repeated invitations, I decided to ask someone in the know. This is a Japanese acquaintance on the way to becoming a friend, because he has had the good fortune of having been exposed to a lot of Indians. I asked him why the Japanese are so cool to foreigners. Perhaps because his English is not all that he would desire, his answer came out uncharacteristically blunt, but quite unequivocal. "The Japanese don't make friends", he said, as though that were that. When I looked extremely taken aback, and pressed him for an explanation, he brooded and then brought out rather lamely, "I mean I have friends, but they are the men I went to school with." I still couldn't find any words to express my astonishment at this lack of growth, so he went on, "I have lived in my present flat for more than three years, but I don't know any of my neighbours." I am still too amazed to be able to digest this information. I don't know whether to take it at face value, though my experience over the last six months would incline me to do so, or whether to treat it as a subject for my above-mentioned research: a subtle Japanese leg-pull! It seems I must reconcile myself to a lone and friendless existence here and though I am not all *that* popular at home, await eagerly my return to the

ever welcoming arms of the few there.

You can't beat the Japanese for paying attention to detail. It seems that chopsticks (Hashi) come in two weights: male and female. Truly. To me, all the people here whether male or female, seem to have tiny hands and there can hardly be that much difference in the capacities of males and females as to necessitate this minute, few-grammes weight difference in hashi. But there you are. Also, since the soups, or custards, or even rice, are all eaten out of bowls, which have to be picked up in a precise and delicate thumb-and-forefinger grasp of rim and bottom, and brought to the lips, there is consequently a weight difference in bowls as well. When I appeared skeptical of and even annoyed about such useless sex-based distinctions, it was explained to me that there was of course no actual *need* to have bowls and hashi of different weights for males and females, but it was all based on "what feels right". This principle governs almost all aesthetic theory. It could be put, with apologies to the bard, as "fitness is all". And in the face of this, the architecture, interior decoration, city planning, even dress in modern urban Japan distress me yet more. The beautiful balance, subtle detail and suggested richness found in old Japanese screens, prints, paintings, sketches had aroused in me expectations destined to remain quite unfulfilled; for here too, my eye met the same old atrocious hotch-potch which had deadened it in India. After listening to my complaints, they have told me to visit Kyoto, Nara, Nikko; they say, Kobe is not the whole of Japan (though Kobe seems to think so). And I am sure I will go and see these places, but the nature of my plaint is such as to preclude much hope. I am not talking about beautiful structures in a modern, ugly city. Why, even Bombay has my favourite V.T. and G.P.O. (Don't laugh, I think they are absolutely lovely!). I am talking about a beautiful city; such as I am told Leningrad is, or Paris, or even old Amsterdam. I don't know what makes for this beauty or how to explain it to the Japanese who are offended because I don't find their cities beautiful. Must my hopes be forever dashed in this country which has made a religion out of aesthetics? Let us wait and see.

Talking of beautiful structures in an ugly city, we went and visited the castle in Osaka the other day. Don't be misled by the title. It is hardly a castle as we picture it. Just a large, many storied house with ornate roofs set within a moat on a hillock and fortified to some extent. It is an exceedingly attractive landmark, very well-preserved and totally lost among a gaggle of huge, tall, brown, square glass-and-concrete skyscrapers, so that you cannot even see it until you are right close by. As the Daimyo's (Laird) principal seat it was supposed to reflect his power, his wealth and his honour; and as Osaka was one of the most powerful of Daimyos, it is a suitably imposing castle, though now only a shell. And perhaps it is fitting now that it is completely dwarfed and obscured by skyscrapers, but one cannot help feeling that Osaka has missed out on her chance to become a beautiful city by neglecting her priceless asset. As my Indian companion (with whom I stood on a bridge glancing sadly back at the lovely castle in the shadow of brown five-star hotels

and Govt. buildings) said, "They shouldn't have, really, they shouldn't have ; at least that much they could have done to honour their lost landlord." She was right, and in her comment lies the answer to why so much of Japan, (or, for that matter India), is so ugly. It seems to me to be built without a theme, a centre. The pretty little Split built around Deocletian's palace and temple ; the peerlessly majestic Venice existing by virtue of Sas Marco—the examples are endless ; and in some cases it is not a building or a church or a temple that is the heart of such lovely cities, but some natural feature, like the sea, a hill, a river. I have yet to find many such places in India, and I will keep looking for them here. I might get lucky, who knows ?

There is one most marvellously ridiculous feature of the Osaka-jo (castle) which it shares with most every historical structure in Japan. The history of any such castle will run as follows : (all names and dates imaginary) "built in 760 by the Lord Yamotto and destroyed by fire in 800 ; rebuilt by his great grandson on the original site in 898 and partially destroyed in the battle of Izumo and taken over by the Lord Kitayoshi : restored by his son in 950 but again partially destroyed by earthquake in 1288. Then restored by the Lord Chuai in 1369, it was the scene of the great battle of Koyane in which the Lord was defeated and killed himself. The ownership thus passed to the Lord Yamamoto in 1400 and his family ruled the area till 1583 when the castle was totally destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt according to old plans in 1750 and continued to stand until just before the Russo Japanese war when it was again a victim of an earthquake. The people of the city collected funds to re-erect it again according to plans found in museums and it was rebuilt in 1950. Stones coloured red on the plan in the guidebook are the original stones from the 14th century as far as can be ascertained and those coloured blue are from the 18th. (These are about a dozen in total) The rest of the structure is a faithful replica of the castle as it originally stood." If they had not been so painstakingly truthful about the details, one could look at and enjoy the spectacle of a marvellously preserved medieval castle (or rather, the shell of it, because the inside is all peeling plaster, rainwater leaks and exposed and crumbling concrete), but one's interest in a medieval castle built in 1950 does rather tend to wane !

This combination of the pedantic and the ridiculous is found often in Japanese life. Here, for instance, is Suzuki sori-daijan (prime minister) tottering on his seat because of differences in opinion about the exact meaning of the English words "alliance" and "introduction" in the U.S.-Japan treaty. One faction claims that "alliance" has military connotations and must be dropped or substituted before the treaty will become acceptable to Japanese people whose constitution forbids them to enter military alliances ; whereas Suzuki claims that the word only means friendship and co-operation. One faction claims that when the U.S. ships carrying weapons armed with nuclear warheads called at Japanese ports, it was a violation of the article that guarantees that nuclear weapons will not be "introduced" into Japan. The other (Suzuki) faction claims that "introduction" really means production or building of such weapons

OPINION, August 11, 1981

on Japanese soil. All this confusion is merrily helped along by various American diplomats and bureaucrats who give exclusive and contradictory interviews to various newspapers. In their private life, this abovementioned combination tends to take the form of senseless ritual. A father of two told me that every day his little daughters wait for him to come home. What happens then, I will try to describe in his own words : "Then I pick up and take to bath. Then I put duck in bath. Then we sing bath-song. Then she sleep." I was intrigued by the bath-song. "You mean, you teach them songs while they are in the bath ?" I ask. "No, no, bath-song. Same song, you know, like 'wash your arms and keep them clean, don't forget your ears and feet,' like that." He was offended when I burst out laughing, but at that I believe him, because until quite recently a whole lot of companies insisted that their employees arrive for work a little early, do a set of calisthenics together, sing the 'company song' (on the lines of 'I'll lay down my life for YZ Rubber, because it is more than my father and mother !) and only then disperse to their various offices, workshops or desks. Is it any wonder that people who do not see the ridiculous in these actions will religiously wash the street in front of their doors even in pouring rain ? I have seen this with my own eyes on my early-morning jog, otherwise I wouldn't have believed it. And also is it any wonder then that I am fast running out of jokes to find out what makes the Japanese laugh ?

"The only sin which seems to us more sinful than it did to our fathers is cruelty. We feel for cruelty an abhorrence which would have seemed incomprehensible in the days of torture and public executions. Next to acts of cruelty, lying is the offence that appears to us most sinful—especially the long-drawn, elaborate lying which is hypocrisy."

3918. Miss Rani Burra,
18 Ganga Vihar, 4th Floor,
Marine Drive, Bombay-400 020.

Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 11-8-1981

Regd. No. BYW 69

Licence No. 14. Licensed to post without pre-payment

**Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bomay 400 006 and
printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004.**

Proprietor : A. D. Gorwala.