



WATCHES: Switzerland and watches — these two terms have been linked for 400 years. After the whittling-down process in the 1970s — between 1970-85 the number of jobs was cut from 90,000 to 30,000 as a result of technological change — the Swiss watch industry is again on a firmer footing.
Photo: Chronometrie Beyer is the oldest watch shop in Switzerland (founded in 1760); it also houses a watch and clock museum.

Possibility of a New Export Market in Switzerland

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jects, that are also quite successful — Enfants du Monde, and others. We would not say that they are extremely successful, but have done a good job in the village on latrines and sanitation. They have made a mark also in their health project.

On the other hand we are trying to organise markets. There is a project called Songorip — which is the successor of another project called Bagerap, where we are constructing, rehabilitating, godowns, which was of course meant for grain storage. We are also developing markets including roads.

These are all fields where we can be very successful. We tend to have projects where we can really go down to the beneficiary.

We are trained to go very close to the people. And all these projects I have mentioned — sanitation, markets, godowns — they are easy projects and good projects in a sense that people can be the beneficiaries alone and there they can take the direct advan-

lage. Of course we have projects in other areas. We have a project under food directorate.

DS: What is the future direction of aid to Bangladesh?
JPZ: We are at this moment not talking about future direction, because we once increased substantially our commitment to Bangladesh and we have to stabilize it first. Certain projects are very old projects which are financed or co-financed by Switzerland. And there are projects which can not sustain themselves, for example — sanitation is one of them, because there is no direct profit. You need some kind of financial support for their extension. We are not thinking of extending in the near future and getting new projects.

DS: You are Swiss Ambassador to India accredited to Bangladesh. Are you accredited to any other country in this region?
JPZ: Yes, I am accredited to Nepal and Bhutan.

DS: So, since you are covering an important part of SAARC — what are the Swiss views of improving development in this region?
JPZ: I would say, we are encouraging SAARC very much. Because the problems which you have in one country are very similar to problems you have in another country. Of course, the problems Nepal is facing at the moment are not exactly the same as Bangladesh is facing — but they are not unrelated. For example the question of deforestation of the Himalaya, has a direct impact on the situation in Bangladesh.

SAARC is a natural body where all these countries should start cooperating. And the approach which is followed by SAARC to go on progressively to create an interest zone of cooperation is an interesting concept. On our side, we also developed organizations which have a similar concept.

For instance, we are co-financing with the German and with the member countries; but the biggest part of the financing comes from the new biggest countries. An organization in Nepal is specialising with the problems of the Himalayan countries. India is a member country, Nepal is a

member country, as are Pakistan, China, Bhutan.

DS: In your views, which are the areas we should concentrate on?
JPZ: Well, I would say the areas which you have to concentrate on, are the areas which are given priority by the government. This of course, should be the first answer to your question. There are obvious problems like — question of the population boom. Due to the limited size of the country, controlling the rate of population growth is a big task. And I think it is already being taken

up. It will even be more formidable in the future — all the problems related to population — like health, sanitation, education of course, will be harder.

In the southern part of India they are very successful in this regard. In Kerala, they have almost 100 per cent education for both male and female. And there a big family means three children. It is deep in the mind of the people. It is something absolutely natural for them — to have a small family and educate them properly.

The other field where one should concentrate is the liberalisation of the economic policy. And to create the best framework for the economy to develop freely. This is also a kind of revolution, depending on mentality. People have to see what are the long term prospects and possibilities.

Threatening with a halt for the smallest problem would be very difficult for developing the country.

DS: Thank you Mr Ambassador for sparing your time for us.

Direct Democracy : The Basis of Political Life

IN November 1989, the people of Switzerland went to the polls to vote on an issue which had aroused great interest abroad: a proposal to abolish the army, an institution at the very heart of Swiss independence. It was rejected by a clear majority, 64.4 per cent. But the size of the anti-army vote, 35.6 per cent, was much higher than expected, and came as a shock to the army's high command, to the government, and to many members of the public. How is it that such an important issue is decided by the people?

In Switzerland, 100,000 citizens can request a change in the federal constitution by means of what is called a people's initiative. In this particular instance, pacifist and left-wing organisations joined the Movement for a Switzerland Without an Army to launch an initiative in March 1985. They wanted the following text to be incorporated into the federal constitution: "Switzerland does not have an army. The Confederation, the cantons, the communes and private individuals or groups are forbid-

den to form or maintain combat forces. A global peace policy helps those seeking self-determination and reinforces international solidarity."

The organisers of the initiative had 18 months in which to collect 100,000 signatures. In public squares, on street corners, in clubs and organisations, at places of work and in the universities — signatures were collected everywhere. By September 1986, before the deadline expired, hundreds of pages containing 112,821 signatures were handed in at the Federal Chancellery. After checking, the chancellery declared 111,300 of them to be valid: a request from the people was thus ratified.

What the Government Can Do, and What it Can't

The ball was then in the court of the government and parliament. Both can express an opinion and recommend acceptance or, as is more often the case, rejection of the people's initiative. Both can also concoct a counter-proposal, if for example they agree with the aim of the initiative, but not the proposed means of

achieving it. However neither government nor parliament can quash an initiative. It can only be withdrawn by its sponsors, and if this is not the case, the issue is then put to vote. As with all constitutional changes, the acceptance of an initiative requires a double majority: of voters throughout Switzerland, and a majority of the cantons.

In the example we have taken, government and parliament made a strong call for rejection of the initiative. Also, during the campaigning which led up to the vote, all the arguments for and against were raised and discussed in the media and at public meetings. The initiative's organisers maintained that Switzerland could never survive an armed conflict in present-day Europe. They argued that the real threat to Switzerland came from environmental pollution and under-development in the third world: They said that money spent on arms would be better spent on these problems and on furthering a global peace policy. For their part, the initiative's opponents maintained that an international crisis could arise at any

time, and Switzerland only needed to maintain a purely defensive army. They said neutrality implied a duty of self-defence. Another of their arguments was that Switzerland already pursued an active peace policy, in which the army played a role.

The people's initiative was rejected, and the Swiss army still exists, but for at least three reasons it was a worthwhile exercise. In the first place, the initiative served the cause of democracy, because it led to wide-ranging and profound discussion of an important issue involving the state. Secondly, it was an opportunity to test the nation's pulse, and get some idea of what people feel about the army. Thirdly, this major sounding of public opinion has led to reforms in the military establishment.

Constitutional Initiative and Legislative Referendum

Switzerland's most impassioned voting campaigns are reserved for people's initiatives. They provide members

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