

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

Malaysia: The Best of the East and the West

by Andaz

a high rate of literacy. Malaysia made electronic components now feed the huge Japanese US markets.

Today, that boom has not only continued but has accelerated, beyond the 8 per cent growth-rate for about a decade. The Malaysian Ringgit/Dollar, which was around 2.1 to the US dollar in the early '80s, dropped down to 2.8 in the late '80s, and now has surged around 2.50, and is still going strong. There was never a shortage of foreign investors; now there is a waiting queue, awaiting saturation. The heated up economy is now facing a labour and personnel shortage (the population is roughly double that of greater Dhaka). Hence Malaysia is now seeking factory sites abroad.

During the decade of the '80s, Kuala Lumpur was the fastest growing city in the world. An unemployed SSC had the choice of three to five jobs for the asking. To give an idea of the hectic pace of development, when I when I went there on a short trip in 1976, I stayed at the Regent Hotel, in Sungai Wang area, and could cross the road in front almost blind-fold. In the evenings the whole area was deserted. Five years later, in 1981, there was bumper-to-bumper traffic, and the area is now a bustling shopping and entertainment district. Letters from the Bangladeshi professionals working there indicate that house rents in Bangsar Baru, a prime residential area, have doubled

since 1991 (and three-fold since 1981). I used to live there. We Bangladeshis had a Bangladeshi Club and even published a magazine printed in Bengali.

A strange sight greeted me in the restaurants and corner coffee shops: nobody drank water! It was cold drinks. The of-

There is now a travel boom from Bangladesh to Malaysia in search of jobs. This article gives a bird's eye view of the country — the impression of the writer after staying in KL for ten years.

ali, or paratha. Multi-ethnic societies offer a wide-spectrum menu in the choice of food, in addition to the Western dishes. The Chinese cuisine taste real 'Chinese', unlike our local Chinese food, matched to the Bengalees' taste buds. Ice kacang was one of my favourites as a thirst

since food is cheap compared to the living wage, why spend a couple of hours in the home kitchen?

Best Roads

Malaysia has the best roads in Asia, outside Japan. Driving is a pleasure — there are no cycle rickshaws and 3-wheelers in Kuala Lumpur, and almost all cars are self-driven. The trucks wait by the roadside to observe the restricted hours. The traffic lights are computer-controlled. The cars are the latest models, not necessarily the cheapest brands. Famous brand names of cars are assembled locally. Malaysia is now manufacturing her own car, and exporting it to developed and developing countries (including Bangladesh).

Once, while driving at 140 kph on a highway, I fell into a radar trap, and had to pay a fine of more than one hundred Malaysian dollars. BMW cars assembled in Malaysia, are exported to Japan — the labour is cheaper and the distance shorter. In the developed countries, people do not walk on the road; and you cannot halt the car on the main roads in any undesignated area in the city, for example, to ask for directions. Another best award: KL is one of the cleanest cities in the world. And, may be, the best lighted.

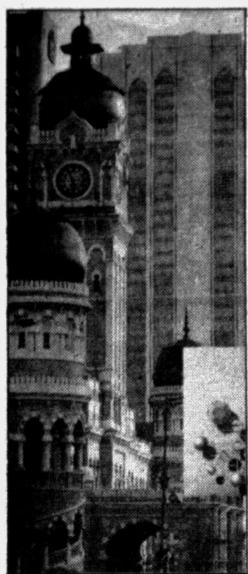


The Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur

next tenant, (who had accompanied me), and close-open the accounts in cash. Once again the computer magic at work. Now the coin-operated public telephones are being replaced with card phones, (recently introduced in Bangladesh). Cellular phone service is enjoying a boom.

Tolerance

The ethnic tolerance of the Malaysians is remarkable. The



The majestic Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur

MALAYSIA is the best of the East and the West, contradicting Kipling (of the British Empire era), who had observed 'The East is East, and the West is West, ...' The boom started in Malaysia in the mid-70s, with the tapping of oil, and the topping of salaries. This was an addition bonus to the then existing situation of Malaysia being the world's largest exporter of rubber, tin, palm oil, and timber; combined with the enviable position of being an under-populated country with



A traditional village house

fices and the shops are run by the females (so low is the unemployment figure). The corner coffee shops have usually three kitchens, for Malay, Chinese and Indian food. The standard of living is high while, comparatively, the cost of living is low. Even in booming Singapore, the cost of living has gone up by nearly one-third.

The Singaporeans drive over the Causeway and dine in Johore Baru, and go back with their petrol tanks and tum-tums filled up.

Perfect Gentlemen

Staying in Malaysia is enjoyable due to the exemplary behaviour of the Malaysians: polite, gentle, and soft-spoken. It is totally unlike the attitude of confrontation and irritation we witness in other developing countries. The secret is not only the cultural background, (nine Sultans and one King/Agong of Malaysia — a world record), but the simple fact that the present younger generation are almost cent per cent literate. Unpleasant situations are avoided. The Malaysian motto in life is to be pleasant at all times.

Another noticeable contrast is that the Malaysians are not talkative like the Bengalees. The noise level everywhere is low. Since nobody interrupts, and nobody is interested in creating a scene, it is not necessary to raise one's voice.

Pasar Malam

Shopping is enjoyable, as the prices are fixed, and there is no bargaining or black-marketing. In contrast, free gifts (percutama) are offered regularly on the surplus consumer goods, as the supply is more



An urban vegetables market

than the demand in the highly competitive market. The open-air night markets (pasar malam) in SE Asia and the Far East are a delightful experience. In the cool of the evening, families stroll out to the weekly pasar malam, (held once a week in different localities), to enjoy the festive air, and to mingle with the cheerful crowd, smartly dressed in trendy clothes (they

quencher. It is an iced sherbet made with nuts, and other local ingredients. There are many restaurants serving sub-continental cuisine, such as Mughlai, South Indian, Ceylonese and Punjabi. The Malay dishes are hot and spicy. McDonald's and Kentucky signboards are all over the town; and there are specialist American ice cream parlours to suit every taste. The Malaysians



City centre, Kuala Lumpur

Patkelbari Revisted

Suddenly an Unexpected Sister

by Waheedul Haque

ONCE upon a time I collected a few elves suffering not unlike me from wanderlust — in Dhanagopal Mukherjee's America they were called hoboes — and made a trekking trip from Takerhat to Gopalganj. We were conscious of this was a stretch fit for a Livingstone to discover and Stanley to find him out. No Hillary would ever care even to know there were some rewards waiting for him here too. Shamed by our master of the poets we set forth to see for ourselves, venturing a mere two steps outside our domestic precincts, only to see a little dew drop on a single ear of paddy.

There were no end to dew drops we saw from very close quarters on so many varieties of plants. Specially exhilarating were the fields of mustard their heavenly brilliant yellow spreading up to the horizon and, not stopping, aspiring to take up some of the gray blue of the winter sky. That was at Bhennabari — and we couldn't help falling on our face and rolling on our sides as much as we could till the civic sense that we were indeed steam-rolling not only beauty but also very useful plants belonging maybe to a poor farmer, we stopped. I was so much beside me with joy, I wrote my first poem of my life at the age 54 and therein remembered the yellowphile Vincent Van Gogh with a sense of inevitability. We wallowed in yellow literally, something I doubt Vincent hadn't ever done physically.

I was impressed by the fact that there was a string of villages all the way up to Gopalganj and may be beyond — with names ending with bairi — which means a home or a house. Bhennabari was just one among Ullabaris and Kadambaris and Patkelbaris. And our noble mission of trekking up to the Gopalganj town was somewhat sabotaged by the last-named one, which, on the face of it, should perhaps have made us to avoid it. Instead it made us tarry the whole while we could affect ourselves from our businesses in town. Not that we found there mounds of

patkels — brickbats — a not particularly appealing thing for people having some experience of Dhaka street fights between the police and all creation outside of this species — the adversaries making the best use of patkels suddenly imported all the way from the myriad brick kilns skirting the city.

Patkelbari made us stop through sheer beauty — beauty of the place and more so of the people. And the villages we crossed to reach it walking along a man-made canal that was dug by one of my best-loved and respected men, who is to occupy much of this story, all had in them this or that peculiarity to marvel at. It is unbelievable but true that from Takerhat to Satpar it took as many hours as there were the few miles between them — by bus. The brick-soled one-vehicle road resembled an unendingly long elephant's back and it was a highest form of pleasure to get off the bus. We were intrigued by the name of the place we disembarked at — Gandhishur. It sure had some connection with the great Gandhiji — and the locals must have been priding about a Gandhiji visit to the place, there was no doubt about that. But what was that suffix 'sur' or 'asur' for?

We trudged into the next village Boltali — which should mean a village canopied by mango-blossoms — to have our first listening experience of a school-full of children chanting together a Saraswati-Vandana. What enchanted us more was however the manner in which the children — there was a very evident preponderance of girls there — were practising handwriting. It was on sand they wrote with a short stick and wiped that off to begin anew. I have only heard of this from our grand parents and never seen in my sixty-plus years. We felt so excited to have travelled back in time — may be not less than 200 years — but more so because of the environment-friendly anti-consumeristic

way to the three Rs. It was hard taking leave of those sweet children who were till then not quite recovered from a sense of awe at the arrival of a horde from town.

We walked into the local bazar that is specially remembered as a place where they do not drown the Durga image on Bisharjan day and keep it for the whole year — well exhibited. More than this we were struck by the name of the bazar — Tutha Mandra, something reminiscent of may be our Austric roots. Then across a sunny and green patch of supremely welcoming open space we just went into an embrace extended by the shades of the trees lining the courtyard of Bijon Biswas — the man who grew and grew in my esteem as years rolled, grew far beyond the impressive presence that's his.

We talked the night out and started loafing and fooling around all too early — playing cricket with all required paraphernalia and also badminton with shuttlecocks of town club standard and rowed down the canal. We were in some garden of Eden. The lady of the house joined us in the evening and took us for a stroll toward their original house-complex burnt down by the Pakistani hordes. Coconut trees, their long leaves swaying majestically, wouldn't allow us to imagine houses formerly filling the area. At some end a big pond stood basking — thankfully — our way and we stood there still thinking of so many things — or perhaps nothing at all, only immersing ourselves in a range of moods and sentiments that seemed to engulf us but rather than changing and making room for the next, kept on mingling. We could not think of what to say and we were not talking to ourselves either.

Suddenly I felt someone's hand groping for mine. It was the lady, petite and dark in the manner of Ajanta's dying princess. She took my hand in hers and without ever looking

at me recited something I have never heard before — or was she just musing aloud? Whatever little my pinnacle can take, is full up and I do not lament that I cannot take any more. I felt terribly awkward. I never expected either the Ballygunge accent or such words in the bucolic fastnesses of an unadulterated namasudra country stretching for miles in all direction. Then she said, 'Can I take you as my brother, my very own? I never credited my inability to distinguish between classes of men or between the two sides of the gender gap to either my Muslim background or to my libertarian self-education but I believed this had much to do with my preference for the way the Buddha that I picked up somehow very early in life. Yet like all true sons and daughters of the subcontinental soil I had in me, tucked somewhere in the unconscious, a reverence for the Brahmins and a kind of unearring for those who came at the lowest rungs of that curse of a system. Once I got scent of it, I set myself to acquire the power of taking a Shudra as equally as a Brahmin many of the latter, I know on personal authority, to be regular rogues.

It was a most rewarding and yet unexpected finale to a journey embarked upon with a grandiose theme. But soon enough I realised my mission could now far better be served by this stumbling upon a wonderful sister who made me promise to visit her at least once a year — on the occasion of the Bhratridwitiya — or Bhaiphonta — a typically Bengali secular ritual that touches the soul. I was hoping to come close to a people very insulated against contaminations from outside — an insulation made possible by the namasudra people's very resolute and sturdy defence mechanisms contributing to its preserving itself as a people as also by a strong social prejudice against them — an echo of the accursed caste system of India that has lost it fangs but not its smallness of mind.



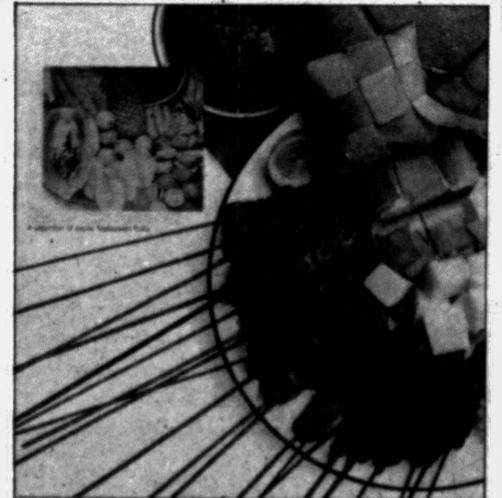
A bird's eye view of Kuala Lumpur

can afford it). The farmers drive in from the rural areas in their mini-pickups or vans, bringing fresh vegetable produce. Mini portable petrol generators light up the fluorescent lamps under the colourful umbrellas. On the market days, one or two roads are blocked to the traffic for the evening. The scented smoke from the satay (kabab) shops drift in the tropical air.

Satay

The satay stick kabab is famous; take it with nan, chap-

are great eaters outdoors. Both the males and the females work outside their homes, and



Satay, the tasty Malaysian dish of barbecued meat

A middle-class family is likely to have two cars, for the working husband and the working wife; and the motor bike is standard for the young man. In the rural areas, motorized cycles are replacing the pedal bicycles. An Office Boy (our equivalent of Peon) with his own motor cycle can easily land a job (and leave as casually, as other jobs await him). The trains and the public transport are not over-crowded, as most families have personal transport.

Counter Service

The developing countries have something to learn from the efficiency of the counter service in Malaysia. The queue habit is voluntarily accepted and self-imposed, and the attitude of the counter assistant is very positive — to assist and help the visitor; how something could be done, not why



something could not be done. At the airport immigration, there is almost no conversation; and sometimes the counter window is screened to make the officer invisible. Any way it takes only a couple of minutes. Each counter has a computer terminal to help the officer. For visa extensions, there are no hassles at the city immigration office.

It took me only a few minutes to get my home telephone disconnected, and to get it transferred in the name of the

three main communities live in harmony. Variety is truly the spice of life. One starts believing in universal brotherhood. There is a Thai proverb which says that when the stomach is full, there is a smile on the face.

Housing

The housing development is one of the best in the world (in a fast developing country). When I was posted in KL in 1981, I assumed I would be looking for a flat (called apartment there); but bungalows were available in plenty. Later high-rent high-rise blocks of flats came up, with rents about four times higher than those of the houses (Dhaka is going through this phase now). By the late '80s, low-rent flats were coming up fast, especially in the suburbs. Low cost flats are sold on instalment or hire-purchase system.

Heaven on Earth

If there is a heaven on earth, it could well be Malaysia. Foreigners have lately started noticing the tremendous progress Malaysia has made in a decade. As the country lies between Singapore and Thailand, it is apt to be bypassed by the tourists. I regularly invited my countrymen to visit Malaysia.

Those who came reluctantly had to change their presumption about the beauty of the country, the standard of living, and the charm of the people. Just to give one example, once we had a part-time maid (known as kajer betti in our country), who came in a car, driven by her son. Of course, all kajer bettis do not have cars. They had telephone and colour TV at home, and shopped in the same air-conditioned super-market (our grocery shop) in the mohalla (locality) where we bought our daily needs.

Visit Malaysia — you won't regret it!

