

Asian civilisational dialogues



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

IN March 2004, a conference was held in New Delhi on what was called Asian Civilisational Dialogues represented by countries from Japan to Egypt and from China to Indonesia. It was co-sponsored by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and the India International Centre. The United Nations and the UNESCO have also been engaged in promoting this cause over the years. This was the first conference with a special orientation and focus on dialogues among Asian Civilisations.

The underlying purpose of the Asian Civilisational Dialogue was to explore the convergences, concordances, perspectives and values shared by Asian civilisations and to assess the prospects of Civilisational Dialogues in Asia among Asian countries. The idea was to delineate the contours of the Civilisational Dialogues in Asia, not only historically but also in contemporary contextual and futuristic perspectives. It may be recalled that the first Asian Relation Conference was held at the initiative of the late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The delegates were happy not only for being able to exchange views with one another, but also to have an opportunity of seeking a common Asian identity, which was difficult to perceive. I was asked to speak on "Cultural Diplomacy in Asian Civilisational Dialogue."

Traditional diplomacy: Diplomacy can be classified in several ways. Three types of diplomacy are generally regarded as the principally recognised ones. In the broadest term, diplomacy is interpreted in its original and traditional form. It denotes the art of conducting relations between Heads of State, Kings and Presidents (governments) through their personal (state) envoys known as diplomatic agents. This practice was introduced during the Middle Ages when communication from one country to another was difficult, time-consuming and, at times, dangerous. To facilitate communication and exchange of views between Heads of State and governments, the envoys and

diplomatic agents played the most vital role, which none else could undertake with the amount of trust it called for. Evolution of this system in different designated categories, such as Ambassadors (Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary), High Commissioners, Consuls General, Consuls and Honorary Consuls took place in due course and has since been regulated by successive Vienna Conventions.

Economic diplomacy: The second category is popularly termed as Economic Diplomacy. This has been increasingly mani-

fest in recent times, especially in the developing world. This deviation from the traditional form of diplomacy was prompted by the dire need for promoting welfare and providing a better standard of life for the people of the most developing nations. Under this method, the government argues, the primary objective of a nation is to provide its citizens with the basic necessities so that they can lead a decent life. Economic diplomacy is regarded as a veritable tool to serve that purpose by marshalling resources for the material benefit of a nation by way of promoting economic, commercial and industrial relations with foreign countries.

Cultural diplomacy: The third form may be termed as Cultural Diplomacy. This is the most ancient and basic of all diplomacies and encompasses more people, more nations, more ethnic and religious groups, and is designed for all times to come. Cultural diplomacy is something, which is, strangely enough, neither widely-known nor recognised as such. Yet, this has taken place through the subconscious mind of the mankind and will continue to do so in future. What then is the Cultural Diplomacy? This, in a sophisticated term, connotes a method of interaction of peoples of diverse origin, group, religion, affiliation, political philosophy, cultural diversity, social and material status and the like. How does this cultural diplomacy function? It functions through the operation of varied methods of activities that are difficult to define in a precise manner. From time immemorial, exchanges have taken place at different levels between peoples

of differing groups and nations. They were generally royal and state messengers and envoys. But they also represented other sections of the people, tourists and travellers, monks and pilgrims, students and teachers, business and industrial people, artists and critics, men of letters and sports, and so on and so forth. Such envoys as described above, constitute millions of undesignated ambassadors who help bring about unity, cohesion and a sense of fellow-feeling among people of such diverse

Mahabharata, and then from Yugas starting from Dharma to Kali Yuga. Vedas and Upanishads also prove to be excellent sources of knowledge. A Nepalese era (878 AD) of some obscure origin was commonly used in Nepal until modern times.

Japanese: The principal chronicles describing the origins of Japanese history are "Nihon Shoki" compiled in 720 AD. These assembled information started several years before 660 BC, the year of enthronement of the first Japanese Emperor, Jimmu.

Persian: The reckoning of

Hsien, Hiuen Tsang, I-tsing, Sheng-Chi and others, who demonstrated extraordinary courage in scaling mountains and sailing through oceans to traverse hazardous lands for long years. In the process, they made immense contributions to human knowledge, enrichment of civilisations by effecting near-impossible interactions, and to the mankind as a whole. They and the numerous others, whose records of achievements were not chronicled, were the real emissaries, as they promoted cultural display with indomitable energy, perseverance, adventurism and, above all, a deep sense of commitment to their worthy but dangerous missions.

Samuel Huntington wrote on the possibility of clash of civilisations and the need for establishing a new world order. He portrayed the danger of civilisational clashes as a potent threat to world peace, and invoked the role of the civil society to come forward to avert it. The political, spiritual and intellectual leaders must work strenuously to establish an international order based on existing civilisations as the surest safeguard against disruption of peace and the waging of another all-destructive global war.

Conclusion: The most recent history of our mother earth almost made us witness a catastrophe of the nature Huntington had predicted. I speak of the events that led to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, blatantly defying the United Nations and ignominiously casting aside the opinion of the world community. The war was waged in the name of anti-terrorist campaign on the global scale and the purpose was to eclipse the trend and growth of what was called Islamic Fundamentalism. All are well aware of the consequences of the war till now and the adverse impact it created on the vast multitude of populace in the world. It almost precipitated a clash among civilisations.

Fortunately, it did not go that far. Never before the Arabs, the Muslims, the Asians and the international community were so divided as they are now and that too, so intensely and overtly. Consequently, never before has arisen an imperative need for civilisational dialogues both within and between dialogues themselves. The strategy was to identify the common identity of Asian civilisations and to promote unity in addressing challenges of the time. The conference was the initial attempt to achieve that goal and sustained efforts would be needed in future to that end.

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CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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groups. Their appreciation of shared values, their determination to resolve differences as well as commitment to noble ideals within a paradigm of common interests constitute the realisation of cultural diplomacy and fulfilment of its objectives.

Chronology of civilisations in Asia: **Egyptian:** The most ancient civilisation was found in Egypt with King Menes, the first king of a united Egypt, commencing his reign at the end of the 4th Millennium BC.

Chinese: The Chinese legendary history can be traced back to 2697 BC, the first year of Huang Ti, the Chinese Yellow Emperor.

Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Civilisation dates back to the fall of the last Sumerian dynasty at 2000 BC. The list of kings is usually found from the reliable source of Ptolemy's Canon. The Assyrian chronology is known from 900 BC and the Babylonian with the accession to throne by King Nabonassar in 747 BC. It is interesting to note that the chronicle of the Babylonian civilisation was recorded by a Greek living in Egypt. This cites another example and tends to justify the historian assuming the role of a diplomat engaged in cultural diplomacy.

Hindu: The Hindu civilisation's chronicles are based on two systems; firstly from antiquity with reckoning of some historical events, such as the birth of Lord Buddha and inscriptions of the Buddhist King Asoka (265-238 BC) and secondly by viewing the position of some heavenly or celestial bodies. This allows one to record history of the period of

Persian history starts with identifying the first of the Persian kings, King Artaxerxes the First in 465 BC. It was found in narrations from the Bible and the Aswan Papyrus.

Indonesia and Malaysian Peninsula: Indonesia exhibits a rich diversity of cultural forms that range from those of the old Malay, which are preserved mainly in the remote interiors of Sumatra and Borneo, through the traditional Javanese and Balinese forms, which are heavily influenced by the Hindu epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

Religion: The last of the great civilisations as epitomised by the three great religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - became the latest of all. Islam had its golden period under the Caliphs and also during the Ottoman era.

Assessment: None of these civilisations prospered and reached their peak of achievements in isolation. There had been exchanges both at horizontal and vertical levels and, as evidence suggests, they represented positive steps to enrich their own systems and secure benefit for their peoples.

It was, indeed, difficult to discover total and reliable evidence of all these civilisations through inscriptions, relics and other sources, but to acquire knowledge about the sources of contacts and interactions, information about the host of emissaries and adventurers that are required were also not available. Yet, one recognises the spirit and actions of the great travellers and adventurers like Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Atisha Dipankara, Fa

affirmed. Vajpayee will therefore be asked to form the next government in May since the BJP will be the largest single party. There is no doubt about that. But some doubts have arisen as to whether the NDA will get a comfortable majority. I say this not on the basis of variable and varying opinion polls, but my own observation. Chandrababu Naidu is not going to deliver the number of MPs he did to the coalition in the last election. That is clear. The BJP will also dip in Andhra because it had MPs from Telangana. The question is: how many MPs will Naidu deliver? Ten? Twenty? Much will depend on that. The NDA is also in trouble in Tamil Nadu, where Jayalalitha is paying for a few accumulated political sins, in particular her vengeful decision to send Vaiko to jail. Her friends report that she is beginning to turn the tide; her adversaries are gleeful that she will be decimated. We will know what the voters say in a couple of weeks.

But Vajpayee will get the support he needs, if not from inside then from outside. The Prime Minister's personal popularity and the confidence that the country has in him is undisputed. That will be the rallying point. In fact, the rallying has begun already. The Prime Minister has already said, quite specifically, that the constituents of the ruling alliance will increase after the elections.

conjecture. This is absurd. Regions within a state have their own dynamics, and vote virtually independently of each other; and often at cross purposes. For instance, the vote in Andhra Pradesh in the first round was concentrated on Telangana, where there is a strong sentiment for separation from Andhra and therefore an anti-Chandrababu Naidu vote. Naidu's strategy is to win seats outside Telangana vote by rejecting the separatist demand.

Politicians, naturally, take no chances; they double-check what they get from 'scientists' with what they see on the trail. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, for instance, ignored Karnataka in the last days before the second round even though one poll thought that S.M. Krishna might pull off an Assembly win despite losing the Lok Sabha battle. She clearly did not see much hope in the eyes of those who came to her meetings in Karnataka. She concentrated, instead, wisely, on Andhra Pradesh, where the Congress has a good chance of following up the body blow it delivered in Telangana with an upper cut elsewhere. It was interesting that Mrs Gandhi chose to spend two vital days in her own constitu-

ency, Rae Bareilly, instead of campaigning elsewhere. That seems like misplaced apprehension. Surely Amethi and Rae Bareilly should be the two safe seats for the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee concentrated on Maharashtra and Bihar in the last phase of the second round, two "swing" states whose results could determine the size of the NDA victory. As they say, size

May Day: Celebrating the spirit of workers' rights

BILLY I AHMED

THOUSANDS of American workers, increasingly determined to resist subjugation to capitalist power, poured into a fledgling labour organisation, the Knights of Labour. Beginning on May 1, 1886, they took to the streets to demand universal adoption of the 8-hour day. Chicago was the centre of the movement. Workers there had been agitating for an 8-hour working day for months, and on the eve of May 1, 50,000 were already on strike. 30,000 more swelled their ranks the next day, bringing most of Chicago manufacturing to a standstill.

The fact that workers had it tough in the early years of the American Industrial Revolution is widely known. Sixteen-hour working day in dangerous conditions, child labour, exploitation, and accidents were common; then, magically, everything became better in a civilised, twentieth-century way. All through their sacrifice on May 1, 1886.

May Day is not just about the arrival of spring in the northern hemisphere. It is also 1880s workers demanding humane treatment; it is men and women around the world marching in solidarity against the factory owners who would have them work all day, every day but Sunday.

The first May Day, in 1886, was a call for eight-hour workday by the workers in many American cities; it is now mostly associated with the Haymarket Martyrs. A bomb thrown by an unknown person at a labour rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square killed one policeman; authorities rounded up whom they considered to be the leaders of the local labour movement and put them on trial. Mother Jones said of the incident: "The workers asked only for bread and a shortening of the long hours of toil. The agitators gave them visions. The police gave them clubs."

The charge against the accused, eight anarchists, was conspiracy - labour unions were illegal at the time under conspiracy laws. The prosecution summed up their arguments with: "Anarchy is on trial. [These men] are no more guilty than those thousands who follow them...convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society." All were found guilty; four of the eight were hanged, one committed suicide in jail, and the remaining three were freed years later when public opinion turned against the rigged trial.

Because of the chilling effect this event had on labour, the next May Day wasn't observed until 1890. Spurred by a resolution from the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the International Socialist Congress, this day saw parades not only in American cities but simultaneous demonstrations throughout the European industrial centres and in Havana, Cuba. The common theme was the demand for guaranteed eight-hour workdays, and to raise awareness of the common class struggle existing in all countries. From that time on, May Day became an annual gathering of the working class in industrial countries.

In the US, Labour Day was started in September of 1882, and quickly became an official holiday at the same time May Day spread throughout the world. Labour Day is a time to celebrate the contributions American workers had given their country, unlike May Day events, which focused on the international class struggle.

Besides the prominence government recognition gave to Labour Day, other factors led to the diminished importance of May Day in the US. American newspapers stereotyped the May Day revellers as being "wild-eyed agitators;" in contrast, those who participated in Labour Day marches were "sober, clean, quiet." At the turn of the century, the difference between the two holidays was exaggerated; the press emphasised the large percentage of immigrants present in May Day celebrations, while Labour Day was "a demonstration of the honest American workingman." At a time when the foreign born were increasingly viewed with suspicion, this portrayal helped push more conservative labour groups in the US (such as the AFL) to abandon May Day in favour of Labour Day.

But American radicals wouldn't give up. Eugene V. Debs, Socialist Party candidate for US President, stated in 1907: "This is the first and only International Labour Day. It belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution." The Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labour union, also rallied around May Day. May Day continued to grow, calling for an end to "imperialist slaughter," throughout WWI and the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

The fear of socialist revolution increased the anti-communist sentiment in America; in 1919 May Day participants were attacked by police and anti-labour rioters, which led to the destruction of socialist or communist party offices in many cities. Workers encountered difficulty in getting permission for marches, and some cities required that the American flag be carried. Similar attacks or bans on May Day parades became common throughout non-socialist European countries, especially in fascist Italy and Germany.

May Day concept continued to grow everywhere in the world. Canada, South Africa, China, Japan, and Korea, India and Bangladesh all saw nascent labour movements celebrate May Day. The largest turnouts were in the Soviet Union and Cuba. US media increasingly described May Day as a "commie" event, even though American leftists of all types continued to participate, calling for fairness and equal opportunity on the job. Large-scale demonstrations led to employers recognising the eight-hour day and forty-hour workweek, among other achievements. But between the Cold War and McCarthyism, participation in May Day events in the US dwindled.

May Day is still celebrated by socialist, communist, and labour organisations in America. May Day 1998 saw a small demonstration in Olympia against the Washington State "anarchy and sabotage" statute, which in 1919 made it illegal for anyone to display banners, flags, or emblems that are perceived to advocate subversion of the US Constitution, federal or state laws. In Seattle, hundreds marched for unionisation and better pay for child-care workers, and on the UW campus over 500 participated in the first annual Teach-In on Globalisation and Democracy, subtitled "Do Free Markets make Free People?"

It is ironic that while May Day began in America, participation has paled there in contrast to the millions of activists who still celebrate May Day around the world including in Bangladesh.

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The future is with the exit line



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is one exit poll no politician ever forgets: it is written in the eyes of a public meeting. You can bring a crowd to the water, but you can't make it drink. Cheerleaders might go hoarse, but politicians know the difference between a roar of the crowd and a gurgle. There are tell-tale signs: people get restless, or leave mid-speech. Note that most of the crowd has been assembled by the party machine, so is partisan or inclined towards the party platform. So if the faithful bring to shuffle before the oratory ends, the story is virtually over. Congress leaders who were with Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1977 recall that she got her first intimation of bad news when at the end of her meetings crowds were less than full-throated when she asked them to repeat after her, "Bharat Mata ki jai!". In better times, there would be all sorts of "jais" through the speech.

A view has been nurtured by psephologists that the opinion polls they conduct are 'scientific' while the message in the eye of the voter is erratic. It is a self-serving view. The eye, in fact, might represent a higher science, for chemistry is more human than mathematics.

There are merits in both, as well as pitfalls. Companies like ORG Marg and AC Nielsen, probably the two best in India, make it a point to bang a huge drum when they get the end-figure right, and change the subject when they get it wrong. Last year's state elections will suffice. ORG Marg (working for Aaj Tak and India Today) gave the BJP between 55 and 65 seats in Rajasthan, and the Congress

between 120 and 130. AC Nielsen gave the BJP 67 seats and the Congress 113 in Outlook. The results? The BJP got 120 seats and the Congress 56. Talk of being spectacularly wrong.

ORG gave the BJP between 30 and 40 seats in Chhattisgarh and the Congress between 46 and 56 seats. Nielsen said the two would be dead even at 43 each. The final tally? BJP got 50 seats and the Congress 37. Opinion polls permit themselves

that it can often send projections askew. Different barometers promise different squalls and storms. Nielsen did the fieldwork for both The Asian Age and the NDTV polls this month. But Nielsen gave NDA 25 seats in Bihar, while working on research by the same company NDTV gave NDA only 14. Sometimes the methodology is inexplicable. This week one opinion poll extrapolated the results of the first round of voting to a national

encounter, Rae Bareilly, instead of campaigning elsewhere. That seems like misplaced apprehension. Surely Amethi and Rae Bareilly should be the two safe seats for the Congress in Uttar Pradesh.

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BYLINE

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a 3% comfort zone margin of error. In Rajasthan that was more like 300%. Such science is not infallible.

Throw your mind back to the Aaj Tak-India Today polls before the Gujarat elections. One done before the election process got properly started gave the BJP a huge victory. A second, done on the eve of the vote, pared this to a paper-thin edge. Other opinion polls, as for instance in the Week actually predicted victory for the Congress. We all know what the results were.

An interesting conclusion emerges. The voter does not care a damn about opinion polls. The controversy over whether polls should be published during the electoral process is therefore a non-issue. The Indian voter is not a headless chicken. He does not rush about from one direction to another at the last minute. His decision matures over time, and once made rarely shifts. The BJP voter in Rajasthan last year did not fall into deep depression after seeing Aaj Tak and walk towards the political funeral pyre to commit sati. He had made up his mind and voted accordingly. He may not even have misled the pollsters. There is so much weightage given to methodology

conjecture. This is absurd. Regions within a state have their own dynamics, and vote virtually independently of each other; and often at cross purposes. For instance, the vote in Andhra Pradesh in the first round was concentrated on Telangana, where there is a strong sentiment for separation from Andhra and therefore an anti-Chandrababu Naidu vote. Naidu's strategy is to win seats outside Telangana vote by rejecting the separatist demand.

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Coizumi's popularity runs high despite a few policy fallout

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

AS Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is starting his fourth year as head of the Japanese government, a survey conducted by an influential popular daily, Yomiuri Shimbun, found his popularity rate climbing well over 60 percent despite skepticism on the progress by the government in addressing such issues as economic recovery and pension reform. According to the survey, 63 percent expressed satisfaction with the prime minister's achievements since he took office three years ago. The figure marks a 12 percent increase from a similar survey conducted a year ago and exceeds the support rate of former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone on his administration's fourth year in 1985. Back then Nakasone's support rate at 54.2 percent was considered an impressive showing. As Koizumi entered his fourth year in power on Monday, he became only the fifth out of 26 postwar premiers in Japan to survive more than three years at the helm of the government.

And for the Japanese prime minister, the beginning of his fourth year in office turned out to be a bit sweeter as his main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secured all three seats in by elections held on Sunday. The election results came as a solid proof that the debacle that many thought the government was about to face as a result of recent incidents surrounding Japanese citizens in Iraq had less impact on voters as a low turnout rate once again proved to be of crucial help for the LDP.

During the last three years Koizumi's support rate fluctuated widely as he started his term with an unprecedented backing of more than 80 percent. At one point the rate dropped to as low as around 40 percent and then regaining a bit to hang around 50 percent. Past surveys had shown that the prime minister's support figures tend to rise sharply after a major development in the political and diplomatic arena. This was the case when he returned from a historic trip to Pyongyang in September 2002 after having a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. The visit was seen as a breakthrough in Japan's diplomatic initiative to normalise relationship with a neighbour with whom mutual distrust runs deep.

The present survey was also conducted at a time when another unexpected incident in the form of hostage crisis jolted the nation. The rise in support rate reflected in the survey, as a result, can be attributed to the peaceful solution of the hostage crisis in Iraq after five Japanese citizens taken hostage in two separate incidents in early April were set free without any precondition.

But at the same time, the respondents of the latest Yomiuri survey were also unsympathetic in their assessment of Koizumi administration's policies. Asked to list issues they believed the cabinet was able to make

progress, the top two items cited by respondents were North Korean issue and the privatisation of state-run postal system. The issues cited by the respondents as problems that the government needs to address without further delay included economic recovery, reforming the pension and related social security systems, as well as unemployment.

As high as 69 percent of the respondents felt that the government should tackle the problems of economic recovery without further delay and 60 percent said they wanted the government to address the issue of social security system, while 39 percent of those who participated in the Yomiuri survey said they would like to see the government addresses unemployment first. The unemployment figure in Japan is still hanging around 5 percent rate and thus fueling doubts among many about the real impact of recent upturn in Japanese economy. The doubt was also reflected in the survey as only 12 percent of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the prime minister's action toward improving the economy.

Koizumi seems to be well aware of the occasional trend of erosion in popular support with the passage of time. As a result, he is trying to reach his supporters directly with appeals made through his e-mail magazine that he has introduced more than two years ago. His weekly e-mail magazine, 138th issue of which is just been out in time for the anniversary of Koizumi administration, is open to everyone and anyone willing to receive it regularly can subscribe free of cost. Issued initially only in Japanese, the "Message from the Lion Heart", as the weekly message the prime minister conveys to everyone is entitled, has also been published in English from early April. According to the magazine's own explanation, the expression "Lion Heart" refers to Koizumi's lion-like hairstyle and his unbending determination to advance structural reform.

In the latest issue the Japanese prime minister focuses on the hostage crisis and related debates that the problem has aroused. As the time of his administration's anniversary also coincided with the end of cherry blossom period in Japan, Koizumi also focuses on that upcoming anniversary in a rather poetic tone citing a few lines from his favourite Japanese poems on cherry blossoms. Recognising the fact that the past three years of his administration had been a time of intense pressure, Koizumi vows to keep the idea of "the wild cherry glowing in the morning sun" close to his heart at all time, no matter what the weather is.

Anyone willing to subscribe the English edition of the e-mail magazine of the Japanese prime minister can do so by visiting the web site at: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/m-magazine/>

M.J.Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.