

## Partnership of people and Saarc summit

The experience of the Saarc Co-operative Council might play a major role in ensuring sustainable economy in the rural areas. Equally, the Saarc Quadrangle Milk Grid should be made functional to help the white revolution in member countries. The 15th summit will consider issues like food security, energy trade, multi-modal connectivity, Saarc mutual legal assistance on terrorism, and common initiatives to address climate changes. These efforts will obviously ensure opportunities to augment the areas of co-operation.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE expectations and aspirations that prompted the formation of Saarc about 23 years back need to be made a reality, creating an atmosphere of effective partnership among peoples of member states. The 15th summit in Sri Lanka, as we expect, will dwell exhaustively on strengthening opportunities of interactions for the sake of overcoming any misconception among the public at large.

In fact, the spirit and the vision that mooted the concept of Saarc could not yet find a place in the minds of common people even after almost two decades. To be precise, Saarc has been just a forum of governments and committees. It is true that a few civil society organisations, writers, academicians, Rotarians, and

technical and non-technical officials of Saarc member states developed friendly links and exchanged knowledge and information. But these initiatives could not impress the common people because they could not develop an environment of partnership.

The spirit of Saarc is meaningless if it cannot generate friendly dealings between citizens of member states. We have to learn from the spirit of partnership in other regional bodies, like Asean or EU, where feelings among the people of member states have developed.

To develop this partnership, there is urgent need to overcome any confusion and mistrust among member states, and to get rid of the same by using the media as a vehicle. There should be a massive drive to eliminate any wrong information among the public of the member states.

Even at the initial stage, there

were confusions at the policy level. We may recall the remarks of late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi in the early eighties, when she was both sceptical and suspicious of the proposal of Saarc, that Pakistan and Bangladesh through Saarc might find a forum to address their grievances and prevail upon India.

Even the Indian foreign secretary, in his deliberation on neighbourhood policy on February 14, 2005 stated: "India would not like to see a Saarc in which some of its members perceive it as a vehicle primarily to countervail India or seek to limit its room for maneuver."

He, however, observed: "India is today one of the most dynamic and fastest growing economies of the world. We are prepared to make our neighbours full stakeholders in India's economic destiny and, through such coopera-

tion, in creating a truly vibrant and globally competitive South Asian economic community."

These are words of hope and despair, which might resound in memory to make the Saarc a really significant regional organisation to develop in a spirit of cooperation and partnership among its people at large. Of course, we should forget the ghost of the past, and join hands in a shared pursuit of collective prosperity with new visions considering the fact of the present and the aspiration of the coming generation.

There could be total commitment on certain issues as provided in the Social Charter signed in 2004 in Pakistan. Article 111 of the Social Charter on poverty alleviation, Article IV on Health, Article V on education and human resource development, are important to ensure people's partnership in the right spirit. In addition, the Group of Eminent Persons, established in 1997, to suggest areas of co-operation needs to be strengthened to identify new areas of partnership.

There should be effective interactions to ensure empowerment of women, collaboration in the areas of ICT, strengthening of local government system, and, above

all, establishment of good governance in all spheres of administration, with special emphasis on extremism and fundamentalism and elimination of corruption.

If Saarc fails to address or attend some of the critical areas, it will eventually appear to be an ornamental forum having no appeal to the people in general. One of the prime areas is food security. The recommendation of the 10th meeting that a food security reserve board should be implemented, including the establishment of a regional food centre. The proposal to create a special fund for poverty alleviation should find its place as quickly as possible.

The Saarc Poverty Alleviation Fund, with a capital of \$100 million, should earmark at least 77% of the allocation for the welfare of the rural population, especially for employment generation and economic emancipation. There is also a proposal to establish an independent commission for poverty alleviation, which demands fresh examination in view of the worldwide price spiral and inflation.

The experience of the Saarc Co-operative Council might play a major role in ensuring sustainable economy in the rural areas.



The ongoing Saarc summit comes with many promises.

Equally, the Saarc Quadrangle Milk Grid should be made functional to help the white revolution in member countries.

The 15th summit will consider issues like food security, energy trade, multi-modal connectivity, Saarc mutual legal assistance on terrorism, and common initiatives to address climate changes. These efforts will obviously ensure opportunities to augment the areas of co-operation, but use of solar power and hydro-electricity to meet the growing demand of

power shall be more useful at this stage. The establishment of a regional food bank shall help to overcome the emerging problems of the member states.

There might be discussion at program committee level about the corn being converted into fuel by some developed countries. The question of modern agriculture and effective use of non-farm sector might emerge for consideration. This time Australia and Thailand will attend in the Summit as observ-

ers, and the Thai experience in agriculture, especially in the areas of seed and use of organic fertilizer, could be shared to build a common strategy for the Saarc member states.

We hope and expect that the 15th Saarc summit will fulfill the expectations of the people and make effective partnership of our people really meaningful and significant.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Advisor to the caretaker Government.

## Let the newborn be with her mother

Government's initiative to provide its over 150 million people with official birth certificates is praiseworthy as birth registration will prevent early marriage, ensure all children are enrolled in school at the right age, protect underage children from working, and ensure special treatment for children in the juvenile justice system. With a birth certificate, a child will be less easily trafficked or exploited.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

MUHAMMAD Sageer Ahmed and Rezia Begum were also excited to welcome their newborn baby. But the baby was stolen from Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) right after her birth. According to the news of a Dhaka-based Bengali daily newspaper on July 25, Rezia Begum gave birth to her first baby in CMCH on July 8.

Shortly after the delivery, the baby was stolen. The baby was, however, found by the police after one week, but was not handed over to her parents, as, according to the police, the new born had to go through a DNA test to identify her real parents.

Sageer appealed to the court to get back their baby as the newborn was suffering from intense thirst for her mother's milk. The investigation report against the alleged



I deserve to be with my mother.

nurse and ayah of CMCH was not strong enough and the court couldn't pass the order in favour of parents. Later, however, the court ordered the police to return the newborn to her parents. But, till

date, Sageer's family didn't receive their baby.

Child trafficking is the worst form of crime. Although the role of media, human rights organisations, or international agencies is

commendable in this respect for bringing to focus the actual existence and perpetration of these crimes, but the incident of stealing newborn babies has become regular at medical hospitals, clinics, or even orphanages these days as the authorities remain indifferent towards ending such happenings.

There are three factors involved with the above common incident: child trafficking, keeping newborn away from her mother, and the role of law enforcement agencies.

Of course, the above newborn was stolen to be sold and trafficked. Most female babies are sold to brothels and the males are trafficked to other countries for camel jockeying and organ harvesting. According to Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association survey, nearly 25,000 Bangladeshi women and children are illegally trafficked into neighbouring countries and the Middle East every year. Lack of enforcement of proper prosecution, use of children as commodities, powerlessness and vulnerability of women, corruption and bribery at all levels are the main causes behind women and children trafficking.

Most of the trafficked women end up in brothels while the children are used in crimes and for

cheap labour.

Strong syndicates are active behind the incident of stealing newborn babies from hospitals, clinics, or even from homes. Women and children from rural areas are trafficked to urban centers for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic work.

To prevent trafficking, both within and out of the country, measures have to be taken for prevention rather than only targeting the criminals of trafficking. Educating people about the issue is a key element of any anti-trafficking program since many people in rural, isolated villages, and urban slums are not aware of the problem and can be misled by traffickers.

Government's initiative to provide its over 150 million people with official birth certificates is praiseworthy as birth registration will prevent early marriage, ensure all children are enrolled in school at the right age, protect underage children from working, and ensure special treatment for children in the juvenile justice system. With a birth certificate, a child will be less easily trafficked or exploited.

According to Sageer, the newborn's father, the investigative police officer was biased in favor of

the alleged nurse and ayah. The government of Bangladesh itself acknowledges serious problems in the enforcement of laws against trafficking, including the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (2000) that prescribes harsh penalties for traffickers.

However, this law is frequently not implemented and fails to safeguard the rights of people who have been trafficked. In addition, the implementation of the laws is weak, in part because members of law enforcement agencies are often involved in trafficking activities, and that the laws are sometimes misapplied with the result that victims are charged with immoral behaviour.

However, we acknowledge the effort they put to recover the newborn baby, who might be sold or trafficked. We feel ashamed to observe the administration of a hospital, as well as its authority, lacks concern and knowledge regarding security requirements. We expect that the law enforcement authorities and the judiciary will be better sensitised so that a newborn doesn't need to live away from her mother.

Ripan Kumar Biswas is a freelance writer based in New York.

## Obama's sober mood

Even if he wins the election this fall, Barack Obama will have a hard time matching the rock-star reception he received in Europe last week. More than 200,000 fans came to hear him speak in Berlin, while heads of state who are more sceptical of the Democratic candidate were still eager to be photographed with him. Obama spoke to Newsweek's Richard Wolffe as his plane neared Paris, one of the last stops on his trip.

Wolffe: Based on what you've seen and heard on this trip, is there anything that has led you to review any policy, tweak things, rethink anything?

Obama: Our success in Afghanistan is going to be deeply dependent not just on getting more troops there, which we need, but also some sustained high-level engagement with Pakistan--something that I discussed before, but I think is significantly more urgent than what I had imagined. Basically there doesn't appear to be any pressure at all being placed on al Qaeda, on these training camps, these safe havens, in the Fata (Federally Administered Tribal Areas).

In Iraq, it's not new that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has wanted to take control of his own country. But there's always been this gap between his assessment of his abilities and American commanders' saying he's not up to it. As president, faced with that difference between what he says he can do and what the commanders say he can do, how would you choose between them? Iraq is a sovereign country. Not just according to me, but according to George Bush and John McCain. So ultimately our presence there is at their invitation, and their policy decisions have to be taken into account. I also think that Maliki recognises that they're

going to need our help for some time to come, as our commanders insist, but that the help is of the sort that is consistent with the kind of phased withdrawal that I have promoted. We're going to have to provide them with logistical support, intelligence support. We're going to have to have a very capable counter-terrorism strike force. We're going to have to continue to train their Army and police to make them more effective.

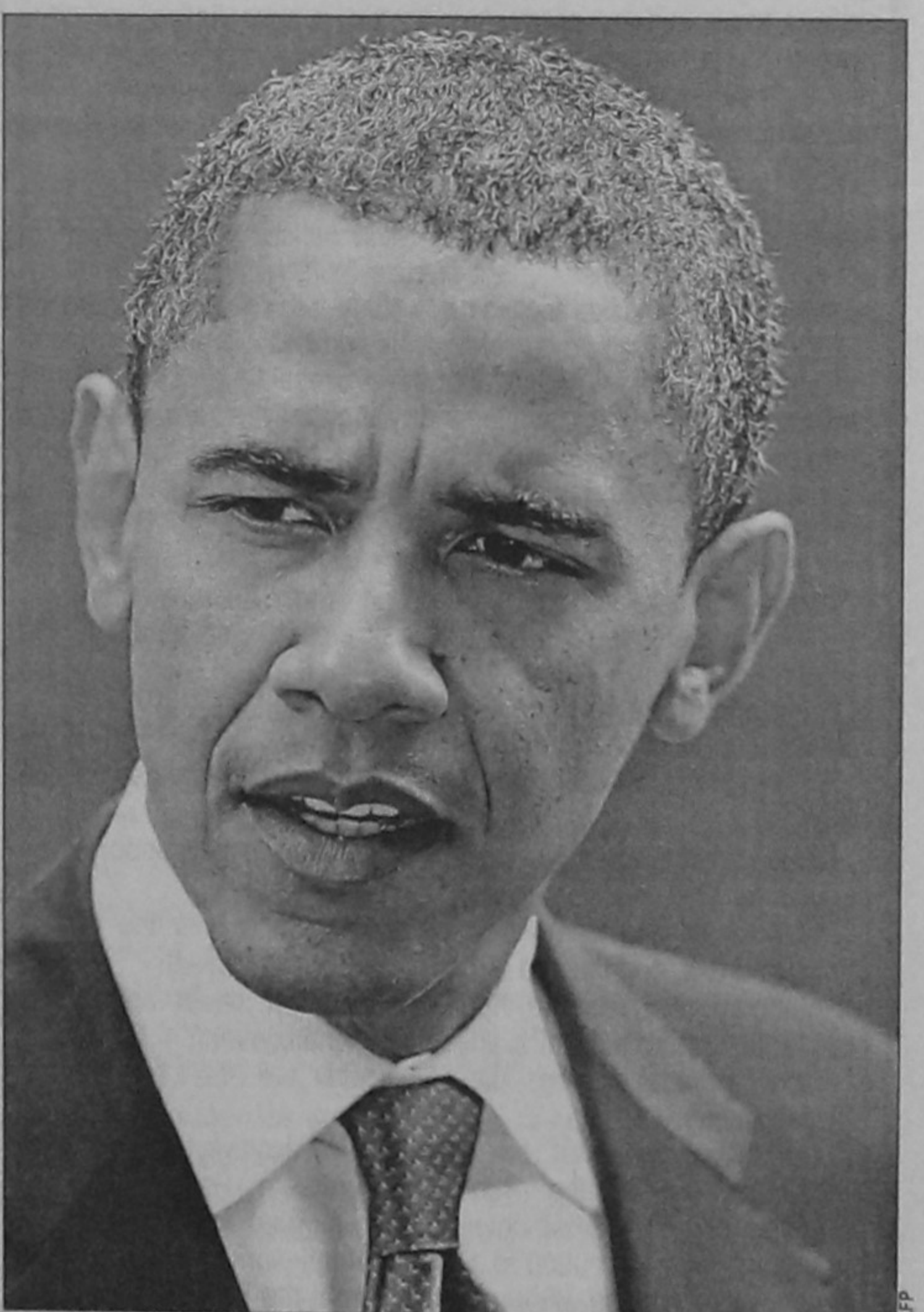
You've been talking about those limited missions for a long time. Having gone there and talked to both diplomatic and military folks, do you have a clearer idea of how big a force you'd need to leave behind to fulfil all those functions?

I do think that's entirely conditions-based. It's hard to anticipate where we may be six months from now, or a year from now, or a year and a half from now. When you went to AIPAC you called for a freeze on settlements. As president, what would you be prepared to do to persuade the Israelis to freeze the settlements, something people have talked about for a long time but never achieved?

I wouldn't have a discussion about settlements in isolation from the larger issue of peace. So at the same time I was seeking observance of the settlement pledge

that the Israelis have already made, I'd be insisting on the Palestinians to follow through on the commitments they made for security. Our leverage in the region has diminished, and the most important way to convince the Israelis to stop building settlements is to give them a sense that they're getting something back in return that is worthwhile, that is the prospect that rockets won't be raining down and their borders will be secure--the borders of an Israel side by side with an independent Palestinian state.

The Roadmap and other peace plans have ground to a halt over the last several years not just because of a lack of involvement from mediators but also because of an insistence on security first, which may be understandable for the Israelis, but the Palestinians have not had the capability or maybe the willpower to deliver security. Wouldn't that still be a stumbling block, even with the added attention that you would bring? How would you deliver security without having the Israelis come in and try to clean things up themselves? That's why the experiment that is being conducted to more effectively train the Palestinian security forces is very important. We need to give them an increased capacity.



But other efforts have failed.

It's conceivable that the international community would be interested in bolstering security efforts during a transition phase as part of a larger peace package. I don't think that's an inherent barrier. When you say bolster, would they come in as an international force? There is a range of things that are possible. But the point is that if we've got a serious deal that

addresses final status issues as the Annapolis conversation has begun to do, and the parties are deeply invested in that, then I think the international community can help the parties muster both the resources and the capacity to make the deal stick. You wrote in your first book about the seductive nature of talking to big crowds, getting them moved by your words. How does speak-

ing to 200,000 people in Berlin not go to your head?

(Laughs) Because most of them can't vote in a US election. My overriding mood during the course of this trip is a sober one. When you look at the very difficult problem of Iran, the very difficult problem of Afghanistan and Pakistan, continuing difficulties in Iraq, the challenges of Middle East peace, the next president is going to have his hands full. And that's before you start talking about climate change, the economy, and relationships with Russia, China and North Korea. The point is it doesn't take much to puncture any euphoria you may feel because of a speech you've given.

Your conservative critics have suggested that with your focus on your own story, and this campaign's focus on you, there's narcissism in how you've been campaigning. How so?

Because you tell your story so often. When have I mentioned my story over the last week?

Yesterday you started with it. I had, what? Two lines? (Laughs) I think to some degree every presidential race has a biographical aspect to it. John McCain, I think people understand, has been profoundly shaped by his war experiences in Vietnam. And it's right for him to talk about that and it's right for the American people to draw conclusions from it. I'm trying to describe to people who I am. Ultimately, I don't think that's a plausible criticism.

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## Too many boys in Asia are cursed with girly names

WHEN my brother and I were born, my mother applied to a holy man from Java in Indonesia for names for us. I was given the personal name you see in the heading of this column and my brother was named Adil.

Many years later, I went into journalism and my brother went to law school.

"Aha!" said my mother, wagging her finger. "He got it right." She explained that Nury means "person who sheds light" and Adil means "person who dispenses justice."

Clearly this is another example of the existence of the Great Big Sense of Irony in the sky.

Journalists? Shedding light? Since when do endless photos about Paris Hilton enlighten anyone?

And has anyone noticed a connection between justice and lawyers? Surely the two concepts are opposites?

I discovered the other problem with the "your-name-is-your-destiny" theory when I first got on the Internet in 1995. I typed my name into a web search service as one does (assuming one is a raving egomaniac), and it reported that there were 165 people named Nury on the web. All were female.

I wasn't surprised. My personal name sounds feminine to easterners and westerners and I spent my entire childhood listed on the girls' register at schools.

I know a Bangladeshi man named Joy, a Chinese chap named Penny and a Sri Lankan guy named Sally who live similarly miserable lives.

There's a famous Johnny Cash song called A Boy Named Sue. Well here in Asia, we have plenty of boys named Su, such as the macho Chinese author Su Tong.

In the Philippines, you find guys

called Lynn and Babe. In South Asia, you find guys called Prasanna, Praveen and Vicki. In India, boys' names include Shell, Waman and Nitin.

And it's not just that Asian male names are girly to Western ears. Let's face it; having any Asian name can be a burden in an English-dominated world. That's why many of us change Asian ones to Western ones. You ask an Indian guy his name, and he says, "Nitin-er, I mean, Nicky."

In Hong Kong, the tradition is to pick a noun out of the dictionary. Anorak Chen, Sicky Tang, Green Show, Pubic Ha, Chocolate Lin, Alien Lee, Twinkle To, Ivan Ho and Piano Chow are all real people. When I was young and stupid (okay, as opposed to old and stupid), I used to eat at the McDonald's in Kowloon, served by staff named Army, Incredible and Normal.

Psychologists say that if you acquire a nickname that becomes more widely used than your given name, your personality will evolve to match it.

Now that's intriguing. At the shop where I buy my breakfast, the Chinese staff captain struggled with my name for months. The first month: "Noo Ree." Second month: "Noo Wee." Third month: "Loo Wee." Fourth month: "Lewis."

These days, staff politely addresses me as "Louise." I don't object. Louise is a nice name, though I don't know if it is really me.

But since my name has changed, does this mean my personality will change to match? Am I no longer a man who sheds light on things, but a French female (Louise is a French girl's name)? If I start hankering for Chanel-scented Gauloises, I'll let you know.

Send our columnist Louise a message via [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).

