

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Asian eyes on Austr

By Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and the chief editor of the Indian news weekly, *Himmat*.

**TWO-THIRDS** of the world's people are Asians, but is Asia more than a geographical concept?

Asia's countries share no common language or religion. Racially, Asians are yellow, brown, black or white. Differences inside an Asian country are often greater than between countries at opposite ends of Europe.

A Pole and a Frenchman have closer links of religion and race, and more linguistic affinity, than a Moslem Malay has with his Chinese compatriot, or a Bombay Parsi with a Mizo tribesman in the same country. There may be a greater contrast in clothes and food habits between neighbors in an Indian village than between neighboring nations in Europe.

Asians do not always remember that the continent's north is inhabited by white men belonging to a superpower. They are increasingly aware that, to their south, lies another significant white population.

Whether Australians are happy about it or not, a growing number of Asians include them in Asia.

In Kuala Lumpur, an Australian friend and I were enthusiastically informed by a prominent Asian union leader that, at a recent international labor conference, he rearranged the seating and decided that Australia would sit among the Asian nations.

That a successful society, containing Europe's democratic and efficient traditions, should flourish in or so near Asia is a distinct blessing for Asians. Many of them hope that Australia can generate ideas more attractive and practically relevant than those of communism or anti-communism.

Reacting, among other things, to the British withdrawal, Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore, has urged Japan to play a defence role in Asia. He wants the Japanese to change their Constitution, which bans such a role. Lee enjoys shocking people, but his

remark may not have been superficial.

Economic and industrial facts are, without great difficulty, convertible into military facts. With the USA, the Soviet Union and China competing for influence in Asian lands and waters, Japan may be obliged to transfer some eggs from the strictly diplomatic basket to a military one.

Will President-elect Nixon preside over a reduction in America's Asian commitments? Is his reported preference for an involvement with Europe rather than with Asia a firm policy decision? Asians are keen to know his mind on these matters.

Will the Paris talks produce a settlement that gives the communists a strong grip on South Vietnam? Is it possible that many who have hated the war will come to despise the peace? What are America's plans for the support of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and other South-East Asian lands if there is a step-up in communist guerrilla activity in them?

Studying Moscow's mood is as important as understanding Washington's or Peking's. What sort of Asia does Moscow wish to see in the years to come?

Some politicians in India, and also in Malaysia and Singapore, think Soviet power may be a counterweight to Red China. An articulate spokesman for Singapore told me the other day that, for him, a particularly pleasing sight would be a Soviet carrier side by side with an American carrier in Singapore harbor.

On the other hand, Dr Mahomed Hatta, of Indonesia, thinks Asians should be cautious about Russia. "After Czechoslovakia, we cannot be certain about Moscow's intentions," he told me.

Asians may have their prejudices about the West, but they would not like it to cede its influence in Asia to Moscow

and Peking. Their making-up one day to bring communism to all of Asia, or their clashing with each other for control, are equally unpleasant alternatives.

Asians do not expect Australia to be a substitute for the British or the Americans, but they want Australia to play a distinctive role. And they hope that this might have two additional and important implications.

One, it could encourage Asian nations to contribute more to their own security. Two, it could, in a crisis, make American, British and European assistance more likely.

Australia's policy, rightly, is that it will keep forces in Malaysia and Singapore only if BOTH countries want it. Is there something Australians can do in deepening the unity of the two.

More serious than Peking's plans are the divisions inside and between South-East Asian nations that are the target of these plans. The common threat seems not to be enough to produce the cohesion needed.

Here we come to the fundamental Asian problem, which is the absence of bonds and trust between Asians. Asia will really be secure only when Asians are willing to go to their neighbors' aid the way Australians went to the aid of Britain and Europe in the two world wars.

Such a change in the Asian condition is not impossible, although it will involve producing answers that have thus far eluded Western and Asian statesmen. The story of Vietnam would have been totally different if there had been trust in one another among the leaders of South Vietnam, between the people of South Vietnam and Saigon, between South Vietnam and her neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, and between Saigon and Washington.

Is it possible to bring to



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dealings involving Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Canberra, Tokyo, London and Washington the confidence and comradeship that has not existed over Vietnam? If it is, the region will be secure. If it isn't, it may have, one day, to bend the knee to Peking or Moscow.

Statesmanship in a new dimension will be required to achieve these results. Some Asians believe that Australian politicians, industrialists, labor leaders and students can successfully practise this statesmanship. Using the gifts of character and courage they have inherited and cultivated, they ought to try to win divided Asians to a common aim.

Some Australians are doing this already. One of them, a man from Perth, has helped

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Some Australians are doing this already. One of them, a man from Perth, has helped

bring unity between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils of Ceylon. He met a young Tamil newspaperman who was bitter about the Sinhalese and angrier at Tamil politicians, who, he thought, were more interested in their positions than in the people.

The Australian told the journalist that he wanted to use his life to help heal Asia's poverty and divisions. He intrigued, befriended and changed the journalist, who decided to end his bitterness. Later, the journalist arranged a meeting in Jaffna, Ceylon's main Tamil city, at which Sinhalese and Tamils agreed to face their part in creating harmony, and to work to build one people and one nation.

What about economic progress? If enormous American aid has not made an

appreciable dent on Asian poverty, is it possible for Australia to do so? The answer is "Yes" — if Australia can assist in preparing Asians to tackle their problems resolutely.

Every cent counts and Asian nations will always welcome gifts, loans and investments from Australia. If gratitude is not always expressed, it is certainly felt, and deeply.

Yet hand-outs can never be adequate, the pit of Asian poverty being so deep, and they sometimes can hinder self-effort. It is, however, possible so to win the heart, mind and imagination of the Asian that he works with an ardor and enterprise unexcelled anywhere in the world. What some have called the will to death in Asia can be replaced by the will to alter conditions.

If this takes place on a sufficient scale economic misery can be defeated, as has been shown in Japan, Singapore and Malaysia.

Never was communism as discredited as it is today. Yet never has its military power been stronger. Asian lands do not want communism; although sometimes, because of their bitterness towards the West and one another, they have encouraged it.

Nor do they want to stay much longer with the corruption, drift and red-tapism so common in many of them. Can Australia demonstrate and export men and women who possess the secret of eliminating the self-seeking in men? If such a demonstration is not forthcoming, it will not be surprising if men and nations yield before the terror and the attraction of an idea that says those who are held to be self-seeking should themselves be eliminated.

There are Asians who are willing to pay the price that security and progress demand. President Suharto, of Indonesia, said to me a few days ago: "I want to be an unselfish man. When leaders disobey God, the people suffer."

It may be true that if ordinary men and leaders decide to put conscience before what they want, they will reduce human suffering with surprising speed.