

'Eventually, it will be a Ho

Rasheeda Bhagat

BEING in the staff restaurant of the City University of Hong Kong is an invigorating experience. Like anywhere where there is a predominance of grey cells. But few universities would be able to match the kind of affluence and ambience of this huge Chinese restaurant — it can seat 250 — complete with liveried staff. As one course after another appears, some of the faculty members on the table that seats 10, say with a broad grin, "Relax. Lunch in Hong Kong, including the university, is a long affair."

The spirit of camaraderie, and the time on their hands — a full 60 minutes — to in-

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formally discuss various things, from the academic to the mundane, is proof enough that the University does think the investment in time and resources worthwhile. As one of them announces his election as head of an association, ("It was a free and fair election; that is still possible in Hong Kong"), it becomes apparent that if academics can laugh over such politically significant — if not politically correct — statements, then Hong Kongers should not be too anxious about their future post-handover.

But the handover is very much there at the back of their minds, and talk invariably turns to the massive preparations to get ready the university centre where people will view the handover ceremony

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comes. But not so once you retire.

Why?

Because it is expensive and it has no charm. Just look at the place (waving at the concrete box-like structures). It is alright till you are working, and professionally it is a wonderful place.

Really? Are there no internal politics vitiating the academic scene?

Absolutely not.

If you are good, do you rise to the top?

Yes, except in government jobs.. and you cannot be a Vice-Chancellor!

Does a VC have to be a Chinese?

No, no. It is because of the language. You have to interact with the locals. So except for the No. 1 position, you can really grow. That way, Hong Kong is very unbiased. Individual bias may be there, but not organised bias. For instance, Indians may have reservations against Pakistanis and vice versa, but such dislike is kept at the per-

turing Engineering — Prof.K. Venuvinod Patri, an Indian who came to Hong Kong 20 years ago, and who still holds an Indian passport — told Business Line that in the academic world, 1997 has no particular significance. "We may talk about it like so many others in Hong Kong, but when we make plans for the department or the university as a whole, it is nowhere in the picture. I do not think anyone is unduly worried about what will happen after Hong Kong reverts to China this July."

Dr. Patri comes across as a Sinophile (he himself describes the two terms — sinophobia and its opposite, sinophilia) and feels that China, which he visits twice every year in his official capacity, has received a lot of unnecessary bashing in the international media. He is also a votary of better Sino-India relations. Dr. Patri took his engineering degree from Osmania University, before going over to Bombay IIT and later to London for his Ph.D.

Dr. Patri spoke on a variety of issues ranging from the handover to the Chinese way of thinking and acting.

Excerpts from the interview:

As an academic, what do you have to say about the future of Hong Kong?

The scope for Hong Kong's future is tremendous. You should realise that we are talking about an area which is less than 400 sq. miles... just about 360 square miles. We had worked within these narrow confines. Once we become a part of China, the border with China will become much softer. The other day we were discussing the 'handover' in the university and somebody came up with the term 'Greater Hong Kong'... and once that becomes a reality, I think we will be able to beat anybody in the world.

Is that kind of optimism really there?

Oh yes. But only when the optimism is at an objective level... when you are thinking objectively without worrying about yourself. If I am a Chinese in Hong Kong, and I do not have a second passport, this optimism does not translate to my personal life. Then I start worrying about my wife and children.

To overcome this problem, a lot of people

went to Canada and other places and stayed there till they could get a passport and returned to Hong Kong... because you can make more money in Hong Kong. You have to get it clear that they do not want to leave Hong Kong, but the passport is just in case — a kind of insurance policy. You take an insurance policy not because you know you are near death... but just in case...

Have there been many cases of Chinese academics leaving and returning like this?

Oh, yes. Many left and came back.

When did they leave?

1982 was the time when the decision was made (to hand Hong Kong over to China), and it took a few months for the implications to dawn on the locals, and those who could get out immediately did so. A few people dragged their feet, but you will find that in the latter part of the 1980s, there was a sort of exodus (from the academic world). With so many people going, Hong Kong was worried and people even started talking of brain drain. But in the 1990s, people have been returning.

With foreign passports?

Yes.

Were these only Chinese or also others, like the Indians?

Now when you talk of 'Indians', you have to be careful what you mean. I am not an Indian of Hong Kong because I still hold an Indian passport.

When did you come to Hong Kong?

I came 20 years ago, but I still hold an Indian passport. But there are Indians who have been here for three generations; their families were in China and during the revolution they left almost everything and came over here and met with great success. According to one estimate, 10-11 per cent of the export-import trade in Hong Kong is in their hands.

But I am a professional who has come here for a period and will go back. And there are thousands like me.

But why would you want to go back?

Oh, this is a wonderful place till the income

sonal level and does not involve any organisational decision-making.

In my 19-year career, I have never faced prejudice because of my race. Maybe I had to work a little harder to reach this position.

How many universities are there in Hong Kong?

Seven. Hong Kong University is the oldest.

Is that the premier university?

Premier in the sense that it is the oldest with a longer history.

How many Indians are there in academics in Hong Kong?

Very few.

What percentage would that be?

You cannot even talk in terms of percentage. Its only a handful. But on the business side, there are plenty of Indians. And they are not going to be in a hurry to leave because you can multiply your money much faster in Hong Kong than in India, or for that matter anywhere else in the world.

Chinese citizenship

Coming to this ongoing debate on citizenship, why cannot the Indians get Chinese citizenship once the territory reverts to China?

In China, as in Japan, there is an ethnic-based definition of citizenship. Just because you have stayed for a certain number of years you do not get citizenship, as in other countries. The criterion is to have a Chinese (or Japanese) ancestor. One thing with Indians, wherever they go, they do not merge *totally*, just like the ethnic Chinese. Mind you, I am being non-judgmental.

The Indians may go to any part of the world, adapt to that lifestyle, but do not merge. This has its own strengths and advantages, but also disadvantages. In the generations to come they may have problems.

Take Hong Kong, for example. To get a Chinese citizenship, you need a Chinese ancestor. But ethnic Indians in Hong Kong are very strong in terms of dollars per person, but have remained culturally distinct, and absolutely distinct when it comes to marital issues.

This is typical oriental culture, but it does

ng Kong takeover of China'

— Dr. K. Venuvinod Patri

not get you a Chinese passport. Religion plays a minor part in this part of the world, but ethnic issues are very important... and the Chinese are ultra ethnic.

Chinese psyche

That is a very interesting concept. The oriental Indian is ultra religious. So how would you compare the Indian with the Chinese in this aspect?

The Chinese are very ethnic in their thinking; so are the Indians. Hinduism has its pantheon of gods; Christianity has its messiah in Christ and Islam has the concept of a unified god. But for the Chinese, in practice, their god is their ancestors. Their link to the supernatural world is through the spirits of their ancestors. In the psyche of a Chinese, ethnic links through his forefathers are of paramount importance.

Hong Kong never liked China because China is communist — though I believe that this is only political rhetoric in China — but Hong Kong always loved China because it is a place where their forefathers' spirits reside.

If I am a Chinese in Hong Kong, and my father or grandfather came from the mainland, then China is a holy place for me. It is my Mecca and I get goose bumps when I visit China. Love for China is fundamental to any Chinese anywhere in the world.

And does that get translated in getting the flow of investment directed to his country?

Absolutely. A lot of data emerged at a recent conference held at the Administrative Staff College in Hyderabad where there was a panel discussion on the lessons to be learnt from China. There were four international ex-

perts and I was one of them.

There it was shown that a massive chunk of the foreign investment coming into China, which is much, much larger than that coming into India, is directly inspired or organised by the ethnic Chinese. And this, I believe, has a direct bearing to their very strong ties to the spirit of their ancestors.

I love my India, but I find that a lot of prejudice in India towards China comes from ignorance. All they remember is the 1962 war. But that is history. There is a lot of China-bashing going on in the international media because of a lot of fears. But the more I go to China (about twice a year) the less apprehensive I am about it.

There is glowing talk of China's economic reforms compared to the liberalisation in India. How do you see this liberalisation in China vis-a-vis its communist ideology?

While talking about communism on the one hand, China has opened up its economy with the other. I believe that what China has today is mere political rhetoric because that provides political stability. Continuity (in political ideology) is stability and I am convinced that the Chinese Premier, Mr. Deng Xiaoping, anticipated what would happen to the Communist world — Russia and others — which broke up.

I believe that India is more socialist than China. But while talking about it (communism) they have slowly dismantled it. The control regime is no longer there on the economic front. Without talking about it they have opened up the economy and created special economic zones (SEZ).

If you go to Shen Zen, which is hardly 20

km from Kowloon, you will hardly find it very different from Hong Kong. The economic principles and even the culture are very different in Shen Zen, but you cannot judge China from Shen Zen or any of the other SEZs.

You appear to be quite optimistic about the future of Hong Kong under China.

Yes. Hong Kong will become the premier SEZ of China. You see, when the Hong Kong issue came up for discussion in 1982, China advocated the 'one country, two systems' concept. Which other country would have accepted, leave alone advocated, such a thing?

I believe the international community, dominated by the westerners, has not understood this uniqueness of China. This pluralistic approach will only help both Hong Kong and China and we hope that eventually it will not be a question of China taking over Hong Kong, but Hong Kong taking over China. And thus I can justify this optimism about a Greater Hong Kong.

What percentage of people in Hong Kong share your optimism about the territory's future?

Are you really seeking an answer in terms of percentage of the population? Does it really matter what the common man thinks? Among the intelligentsia, it would be 50-50.

And perhaps even greater, when there is objectivity and the thinking is not clouded by personal issues or problems, like what will happen to my family if I do not have either Chinese or foreign citizenship.

In the University, nobody looks at 1997 as a watershed year, when we take administrative decisions pertaining to investment in buildings or equipment or student intake.