

# **MUSINGS AT DEATH'S DOOR**

**An ancient bi-cultural Asian-Australian ponders about Australian society**

**by**

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**Dedicated**

**To my ancestors and successors**

**'It is enough that there *is* a beyond' G.B.Shaw**

## MUSINGS AT DEATH'S DOOR

### PREFACE

Today's Australia is not the nation I entered in 1848. Then, it was (ridiculously) officially racist; today, any intended racism is likely to be subterranean (the yobbo excepted). Then, it was mono-cultural, mono-lingual, and mono-coloured, and very British (the 'wogs' of white Europe had not arrived yet); today, it is multi-ethnic and thereby multicultural, multi-lingual, multi-coloured (although recent black humanitarian entrants are viewed askance by some, mainly because they may not be economically viable for a long time), and traditionally egalitarian.

That is, while the nation has evolved into a modern cosmopolitan, generally integrated people, the 'fair-go' ethos of the 'old' Anglo-Australian underpins both official policies and much of interpersonal relations. As a communitarian small-l liberal, metaphysical Hindu, and a card-carrying Christian, I applaud this. I believe that Australia could become a beacon for our neighbouring nations were we to deal with them with our feet on this platform.

Yet, because of the 'Asian values' which formed me in colonial British Malaya, I do not accept, as an all-embracing ethos, the individualism which underpins Western nations, especially those created by immigrants, viz. the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their human rights record is deplorable.

These very nations seek to shove a 'one-size-fits-all' Western view of human rights onto those nations of interest to us. The intent of this approach is the destruction of tribalism and communitarian values.

In the meanwhile, exaggerated and often self-nominated individual rights have led to the breakdown of family, which has traditionally been the backbone of society everywhere. Excepting those few involved in civil society (I am one of them), there is a rising tide of 'takers.' These are found at all levels – from foreign investors, corporate leaders and politicians, down to the many professionally work-shy welfare recipients.

Pockets of well-meaning individuals, seemingly unable or unwilling to consider seriously relevant policy issues, form glee clubs supporting the takers or those who seek to take, eg. asylum seekers. Communal responsibility and personal respect are thinning out like an outgoing tide at the beach. Since our politicians are pre-occupied with short-term politics rather than long-term policies – the current batch presenting themselves as the worst I have experienced – the community, by and large, reminds me of the movement of an empty stoppered bottle floating on rough seas.

Where goes my adopted nation, to which I have made a substantial contribution, especially in civil society? With little time left, I ponder about those issues of interest to me. These, I believe, are relevant for all thinking fellow-Australians. My musings are naturally filtered through my bicultural values.

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### *An ancient bicultural Asian-Australian ponders about Australian society*

by

Raja Arasa RATNAM

#### **Chapter 1: ON BICULTURALISM**

Being a bicultural Asian in a Western nation has given me a significant advantage. I can understand the divide between those acculturated (as I was) in what the former Prime Minister of Singapore (Mr. Lee Kuan Yew) popularised as 'Asian values,' and those who were conditioned by life in an immigrant-created nation which could not provide extended families and their near-universal role. Newly-inhabited countries such as Australia simply lacked the communal support that one is born into in Asia.

By necessity, I became acclimatised to living, initially alone, later within my own nuclear family, in a society which requires self-sufficiency. In some of us, this situation engenders a wish to contribute to the welfare of one's community by volunteering time and effort. I have thus had my head in the clouds of Asian values (metaphorically speaking), with my feet firmly planted on the hard rock of individualism, which now respects not authority figures and even one's elders.

For individual Asians in this bifurcated society, there is the solace of a spiritual life. This assists me in achieving a necessary balance between two cultures.

Now, who am I? What is my background? And how am I enabled to ponder at some depth about my adopted nation?

I am 83 years old. I am thereby well past my statistical use-by date. No member of my extended family has survived longer. Greater longevity may of course have applied to earlier generations living in our ancestral land in Jaffna in the north of Ceylon; we are known to be a hardy people.

As a tribe, we are also known to have earned an adequate living from a harsh land for more than two thousand years; to have competed more than successfully with the Singhalese majority of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in academe and the civil and public services, while living under British suzerainty. Subsequently, we have adapted successfully to the diverse Western nations to which, as an on-going diaspora, we migrated. Initially, migration was for economic reasons; later, for political reasons.

In Australia, to which I was despatched by either my personal destiny or the spirit world, I have adapted successfully. Indeed, I have also integrated successfully, including holding leadership positions in civil society. My initial preference was naturally for living with my own people in the land of my birth. Why so? Because the land of my birth was, already in my time, multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious; and with a mutual tolerance between the Asian communities there far in advance of that level of inter-cultural tolerance to be reached in Australia by the end of the twentieth century.

It is highly probable that I will be ejected from the departure lounge of life fairly soon. Because my observations of key aspects of Australia, from the vantage point of 'Asian values,' began more than six decades (or about two generations) ago, there should be some socio-cultural and historical value in the attached musings. I need to highlight, however, that my thoughts have been filtered through my anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-communist (that is, freedom-loving) values.

Migration and initial settlement are obviously stressful. It affected my father, who had migrated in his youth to British Malaya. His knowledge of English (he had a pocketful of quotations from which he would select one that was apt) and an innate organisational ability led him to an administrative life in the newly-established public service. Migration also affected me in Australia with its racism and tribalism, but only through a denial of equal opportunity. Being treated as inferior by culture, by skin colour, by religion can be corrosive to one's soul; but I did not allow that.

The Japanese military Occupation of 1942-1945 added further stress to my father, in spite of the prevailing mutual tolerance between the diverse immigrant communities, all seeking to survive, and the tolerance displayed by the Malay host peoples towards those entering their country in large numbers. Further stress was caused by the reign of terror imposed near the end of the Occupation by some anti-Japanese communist Chinese over the region in which the family resided.

He died at 47 through this stress. That triggered the destruction of my life-chances, as seemingly predicated by my personal destiny; this most improbable outcome was actually foreshadowed by a perambulating yogi!

My musings are drawn from my life in pre-independence Malaya and in post-war Australia. I arrived in Australia at age 19 during the White Australia policy era, long before its people joined the Family of Man. My exposure to a range of policies at work, my extensive involvement in civil society, and the racism and tribalism I experienced in my career provide depth to my conclusions.

From age 13, when my boyhood was truncated by the arrival of the Japanese, my life has been a series of inexplicable disasters. These were interspersed by periods of great joy and some peace. Then I would find myself falling into holes which clearly were not there! That is the only way I can describe what happened to me. Since I am certain that I did not initiate any of the major disasters, I have assumed that I was to learn something from such destabilising (but not debilitating) experiences. I like to believe that I have indeed learned; learned enough to understand some complex matters.

This understanding will be reflected in my musings below. Isn't it a truism that the more one *learns*, the less one *knows*? Yet, can one not then begin to *understand* that which is normally only opaquely comprehensible and, occasionally, what had hitherto been incomprehensible?

All my life I have sought to know; later to understand. I analyse anything and everything. I then speculate, seeking possible patterns.

About to 'collect my wings,' I now offer to share my latest and well-considered thoughts with those who care. A prime objective is to cross the cultural boundaries between the individualism of the Western world and the communalism of Asian societies; as well as to highlight the egalitarianism of Australia to our near neighbours. It is this ethos which has led to the less viable of my fellow-Australians to be uniquely offered adequate succour. Am I not thereby a true bicultural Asian-Australian?