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Just another assignment, maybe, but one that is no hardship!

THE first British Viceroy in India was Lord (Charles) Canning. Lady (Charlotte) Canning's name curiously lives on in Bengal in the shape of an Indian sweetmeat called Ledikeni while Charles is forgotten. Being Kelantanese, the diarist is rather partial to anything sweet.

Each journey to India (anywhere, actually) always brings to light some new facet, ancient or contemporary. When you travel, judge not a nation by the standards of another. Until you discard labels, no people will reveal themselves and embrace you.

Look beyond the heat (New Delhi is now between 33 and 20 degrees Celsius), the dust and poverty, to the spirit of the people and you will be amazed: poverty has chastened them into a spirit of acceptance.

However, Indians are adept at modernisation without losing their balance: the spiritual coexists with Bangalore's Silicon Valley and nuclear weapons.

Despite everything, India blossoms and is creative, like a dancer moving in measured steps.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in New Delhi on Thursday, perhaps his last visit as Prime Minister.

His push to revive English is applauded here because Indians have found that there is a causal relationship between English language skills and a globally competitive business environment. Some 85 per cent of the web pages are in English: less than five per cent of the world's top Internet sites are able to respond to e-mail messages in languages other than English.

The Indian media on Thursday was charmed by Dr Mahathir's straight-talking. He even got a rather adoring audience in a packed hall of diplomats, businessmen and others to swallow some unpleasant hometruths about the subcontinent.

He said, without naming India and Pakistan, that flexibility in dealings was crucial for peace and the policy of prosperity-neighbour a powerful weapon.

His attack on the US' intended war on Iraq, the wish for India to continue providing leadership on global economic issues (WTO) and that it was high time India and Asean worked closely resonated well with his listeners.

It was spectacularly Mahathiresque: liberal democracy is not a necessary underpinning for prosperity and stability. If Governments change too often, the people suffer and, he sarcastically intoned, in some cases, "democracy is more important than the rights and welfare of the people" - to great applause.

Nehru's India

TODAY'S India is not Nehru's India. Although Malaysia-India relations are good, they could be warmer.

Indian editors said Dr Mahathir is the only leader left who dares say publicly what others dare speak of only in private!

Dr Mahathir's visit was to boost India-Malaysia trade and observe Indian IT institutions, including Hyderabad's "futuristic technotownship" in Hitech City. He called on President Abdul Kalam (India's third Muslim President) and held discussions with his counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Indians Flying High!

IN the past, foreign education and travel were status symbols for

Malaysians. When the diarist went to the US in 1960, he was perhaps the first Kelantanese, certainly one of only several Malays. Now, it's no big deal.

In India, a new status symbol is foreign travel. Hundreds of thousands of Indians now visit Malaysia, Thailand, Dubai, Singapore and Britain - the new trendy destinations. Reasons: easing of restrictions on foreign exchange, a thriving economy and a fast-growing middle class.

It's a travel bonanza because it's cheaper for Indians to visit Malaysia than some domestic destinations like Goa. The number of Indians visiting Asean has risen 30 per cent since last year, and we are one of the big draws.

Attracting Indian Doctors

MALAYSIA beckons! We have a long-standing and good relationship with India. Our tourism industry is gungho about India's - and China's - potential, as both are emerging as key growth markets. And we are recruiting Indian doctors to help reduce the shortage in rural areas, especially in Sabah and Sarawak. Perhaps we will recruit dentists next.

Two teams from the Public Service Commission are in India interviewing doctors in Chennai, New Delhi and Mumbai. The target is 90. Team A leader Datuk Dr Fawziah Abdullah told the diarist in New Delhi that on average, she and her team interviewed about 10 doctors daily, about 20 per cent of them women in Chennai but none in New Delhi so far. "Many are young and highly qualified, very keen."

Besides, they speak English and should be able to pick up basic Malay soon enough.

In India, the English proficiency of its computer programmers and scientists has helped build a high-tech industry, also a Singapore success story.

We should follow suit. Students should learn more subjects in English, but Malay, Malay literature and agama (for Malays only) must be made compulsory, as are Mandarin and Tamil for Chinese and Indians. Perhaps we should also revive the English-medium schools that were closed in the 1970s.