

November 21, 2004

---

Sommelier, Soprano, Tailor, Chef

There we go again. According to a news report, our Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs Jagdish Tytler, told a meeting of PIOs (People of Indian Origin) in Durban last week that Indians controlled “80 per cent of the software industries and the medical field in America, Canada and Britain.” I don’t know where the minister got these numbers, but it is in the same league as other balderdash such as “35 per cent of NASA employees are Indian” and “32 per cent of Microsoft workers are Indian” – lies spawned on the Internet that have taken a life of its own.

Of course, India has some fine success stories – in small patches. The info-tech story is one such. But to talk it up like it is some world-conquering force is so delusional it makes me wonder what the minister was smoking. As a Times team pointed out in these columns, India’s much touted software exports -- a pitiful \$ 12 billion – is less than what the United States earns from foreign students who enroll in American universities (\$ 13 billion). India’s entire (itals) export to the U.S amounts to less than what China sells to a single (itals) American retailer viz., Wal-Mart.

So here’s a suggestion: every time we get too giddy about our modest achievements, try making a brief trip to neighboring China. It should bring us whimpering back to our senses. Oh China story too much to bear? Well, in that case just go for a drive, a ride, or walk a few blocks from where ever you live, look around, and take a deep breath. That’s should be good enough reality check (unless of course you are one of those mall-rats).

By constantly talking up our IT stories, there is also a danger in presenting ourselves as a nation of engineers and doctors and pressuring our youth, already pressed to follow the well-trod paths of success. Some day, the ministry of the PIOs, NRIs, OIA or whatever should look up and recognize others who may not have the same high profile of our IT demi-gods. There are wonderful, untold stories of Indian successes in unusual fields that are as inspiring as Sabeer Bhatia’s flogged to death story of Hotmail.

Indira Mahajan is one of the most-acclaimed sopranos in the operatic world whose successes include works by Handel, Mozart, Puccini and today's leading composers. Jehangir Mehta is a chef at Manhattan's Aix restaurant whose desserts are so delectable that they call him Jehangir the Sadist. Satish Sanan traded running a billion dollar IT company to start Padua Stables and breed horses that have won him piffling millions. Mohan Ramchandani is a New York tailor whose custom-made suits grace the shoulders of the rich, the famous, and the very large -- like New York's Knicks' seven-footer Patrick Ewing and Indiana Pacers' Rik Smits (7'4"). Alpana Singh, like Vijay Singh a Fijian Indian, is a master sommelier -- a wine expert -- at Everest, one of America's top restaurants; she is among the youngest to make the grade and only one of the dozen women in the world to have the title. Debdoot Das is a video film director whose "The Quick and Dirty Guide to Salsa" has become the highest-selling dance video/dvd on Amazon.com.

I mention these names randomly because I am just bored out of my wits hearing about our all-conquering engineers and doctors. I wish more Indians became sommeliers, sopranos, stable owners, chefs and tailors. Maybe then our media and the ministers will have something new to talk about.

---