

*April 11, 2004*

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## **Touched by an Indian**

On a recent layover at Amsterdam's Schipol airport en route to India, I saw something that speaks better of India's big power status than its nuclear weapons. The time was around 8 a.m., when flights from various Asian, African and European cities come to Schipol ferrying passengers, many of who are connecting to U.S destinations. There is also the reverse traffic of people like me coming from the U.S and connecting to onward flights out of Amsterdam. You get the picture; Schipol was a beehive of activity even at that early hour with people of various nationalities flitting through the airport.

Unlike many modern airports, Schipol is yet to be hotwired – where you can access wireless internet from anywhere in the premises. So I sauntered up the airport's communication center. The lounge offered different services. You could buy internet access on one of their sleek terminals for three Euros for 15-minute slots (or multiples); or if you had your own laptop, you could plug into one of their ports and buy access time at the same price. Or better still, if your laptop had wireless capability, you could buy a whole day's access for ten Euros and work within a hundred yard range of the lounge. You could also rent a temporary enclosed office space and work in peace and quiet.

With three hours on my hands, I bought a day's wi-fi access, and between going about my business, made the following observations. Of the around 40 people who used the center in the time I was there, I counted about a dozen people who seemed to be of Indian origin. Most of them were young or youthful professionals. There was a HR manager of Johnson and Johnson going from Bombay to New York for a company meeting. There was television executive returning from U.S to India after deal-clinching meetings. There was a vendor for Wal-Mart going to their headquarters in Arkansas. A business school graduate on a brief visit home.

The fact that there were so many Indians shouldn't be surprising considering that our teeming billion makes up 20 per cent of the world population. So, one-in-five anywhere would be a par-for-course. But Schipol's communication center surpassed that number easily. The fact there were not so many Chinese could be easily explained – they mostly travel the Pacific route to the U.S. The one explanation was that the scene was out of an hour when both traffic to and from India-U.S converge at Schipol.

Still, I am convinced there is more to that collage than just convergence or coincidence. The Indian laptop warrior is now becoming as ubiquitous as the Japanese tourist of the 1980s. The Schipol scene is being repeated at Heathrow, Frankfurt and other major hubs of international travel. After long years of lassitude, the talent of a nation long circumscribed is indeed finding utterance.

It is not just the numbers, but the seeming ease with these global Indians transacted business that was impressive. Professional career women were downloading large documents. Corporate type men were working on presentations between checking the cricket scores from the second test in Pakistan. I saw a young lady resolve a modem glitch without much fuss. The Wal-Mart guy's screensaver swam with various Indian deities and swamijis.

Long before I landed in Delhi airport and saw the large “!ncredible !ndia” poster in the immigration lounge (where the chaos and misery was indeed incredible), I had seen the shining new face of India outside India.

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