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The (Lost) Generation Ex

The migration of Indian minds to the west, particularly to the United States, falls into three broad streams. The initial flow came in the sixties and seventies when Washington first relaxed its immigration policies to allow large number of white collar professionals to enter U.S academia and government institutions. The second wave came in the eighties and nineties, mostly riding on the technology boom. The third wave, still coming in, is the younger, turn-of-the-century flow, mainly from the university route.

Each group has distinctive traits. Today's immigrants are intimately connected to India. They bring India and Indian-ness to the U.S, from Bollywood patois to Bangalore lingo. They travel home at least once a year; some shuttle between Bangalore and Bay Area with homes in both places. Thanks to cable television and Internet, they can watch Jay Leno in New Delhi and Shekhar Suman in New York, attend a rock concert in Goa and a Hindustani gig in Dallas. They can disembark in Frankfurt or Seattle, rent a car, and drive into town using mapquest or GPS. They are more 'internationalists' than immigrants.

The eighties generation are those who have made it good in the U.S. Many are beginning to return to India after some years of disconnect, seeing it both as an opportunity to give something back and as an investment destination. This is the generation of Vinod Khoslas and Vinod Dhams, multi-millionaire geniuses who make frequent trips to India to part with their moolah and methods. They bring energy and enterprise. I call them "Bobby-boomers" because they left India after the movies Bobby and Sholay.

But it's the first group, the sixties immigrants, we know little about. We can call them the Dilip Kumar generation, although I've heard them dubbed the AT&T flock. This is because they came here when AT&T was still a monopoly and it cost three dollars a minute to call India. Flying home was a luxury so they returned perhaps once in five years, if that. There were few Indian grocery stores, Blockbuster did not stock Bollywood movies, and

there were no cricket games on cable. Many of them submerged their Indian-ness to become all too American.

They are today's Lost Generation Ex of Indian-Americans. They have just retired or starting to, typically as division heads in the government, universities or corporations. They might not be instant millionaires like the tech tycoons, but they have a nice nest egg, they are accomplished in their fields, and a treasure trove of knowledge and expertise. Many have helped build America's infrastructure and information systems, from bridges, dams, roads and metros to designing automobiles and aircraft.

It was one such Gen Ex-er, Dr Tadepalli Murty, who is one of the world's foremost authorities on tsunamis, who has been in the news lately. Like him there are retirees and semi-retirees in many fields. Hal Iyengar is a structural engineer who worked on Chicago's Sears Towers among many famous highrises. Rangaswamy Srinivasan pioneered lasik eye surgery. Haren Gandhi engineered cutting edge automotive technology. C.Kumar Patel did seminal work on lasers. There are hundreds of such cases.

In many cases, these golden oldies belong to a truly lost generation. Their ABCD's (American Born Confident Desis) are married and gone; they have little contact with NextGen grandchildren. Most of them would be happy to give their expertise to India. In the final stretch of their careers, they seek no returns. But they have been disconnected from India for many years. It may be worth India's time to connect to them again.
