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Tour de Farce: Nanny Service

Indian politicians, with rare exceptions, lack a sense of humor, unless you count the buffoonery of a particular Bihar politician as wit. Most netas take themselves too seriously. Bon mots are infrequent, even in our own languages. The list of quotable quotes from our netahood is pitifully thin.

So it is something of a surprise that a sparkling witticism has come from Babulal Gaur, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, who does not have a reputation as the fount of epigrams. On a recent visit to the United States, Gaur had such a torrid time at the hands of airport security that he returned home fuming. Security personnel even peeped inside his ears, he complained, adding, "I told them I'm not carrying anything there, but it fell on deaf ears."

That U.S security personnel could genuinely be hard of hearing is plausible. When you spend a life time with a microphone stuck inside your ear (and your tympanum is being assaulted by VIP sirens and false alarms) it is possible auditory functions have been unhinged. To wit, they must also have been blind not to see that Al Gaur -- no relative of Al Gore, the former veep who uncomplainingly underwent a similar airport ordeal -- is among the more than a million Indians who troop into U.S each year, bringing in desperately needed rupees for the tottering American economy. How rude of them to put him through the wringer, especially since he carried a diplomatic passport.

Levity apart, the Indian government has just announced that the United States has overtaken Britain as the favorite Indian tourist destination, with more than half a million preferring Bush country to Blighty and Times Square to Trafalgar Square. You wonder why given the kind of ordeal that Gaur and many well-known Indians say overbearing American security put them through. After mulling about it, I think I have the answer.

Half a million tourists is not exactly a big number to begin with. Far more Chinese and Koreans visit the U.S. They are more visible in touristy spots such as Disneyland and Niagara Falls, burning up their overflowing dollar reserves.

But the Indian 'tourist' falls in peculiar category. You can see it in desi enclaves such as Bay Area where aunty and uncle set out for walks in the suburbia, often pushing a stroller. They are superannuated Indian parents visiting their children and grandchildren. Counting them as tourists is akin to counting Americans who come to India for medical treatment under the same head. They are accidental tourists.

It's probably politically incorrect to say this, but much of our U.S tourism is mutual-consent nanny service. Few Indians come to the U.S with the express purpose of tourism. Most are visiting family, friends and relatives. Sometimes they are prospecting for schools, jobs, and businesses, and incidentally take in some sightseeing. You would be amazed how much young NRI couples depend on visits from parents and in-laws when a child is born or during school holidays when the brats are on the loose. So it is not just Al Gaur, but uncle and aunty also who endure the security ordeal.

Some of the suffering will be mitigated shortly with the introduction of direct non stop flights between India and U.S. That will save many a ma and grandma traveling alone the hazard of navigating a transit in Europe or Far East. When that happens, Indian 'tourist' numbers will be significantly higher. So whether or not Gaurs and Gowdas come to America, aunty and uncle will continue to visit their children and grandchildren and build bridges between the U.S and India.
