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Baglihar and the Bank: Pakistan's Patelitis

Among the many things that have lately begun to spook our good neighbor Pakistan is the sheer numbers and spread of the Indian diaspora. It turns out that having taken the Baglihar Dam issue to the World Bank, our cross-border kin were suddenly alarmed that the large numbers of Indians who work in the multi-lateral institution could weigh in on the spat. So they reportedly asked to replace Praful Patel, who is the Bank's vice-president of South Asia region, from a panel to review Pakistan's case.

It's another matter that Patel was never in any panel to make any determination under the Indus Water Treaty, as Bank officials have since clarified to me. He is a development specialist -- not a legal eagle -- who has worked on infrastructure and poverty alleviation programs. After he took over in July 2003 as South Asia Veep overseeing the Bank's operations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, he has won plaudits for his fairness. For that matter, there are scores of other Indians in the Bank who have played important roles in developmental issues relating to the region, including Pakistan. There has never been a complaint.

There were no issues last year either when Gen. Pervez Musharraf marched into the Bank HQ in Washington to plead Pakistan's case, with Patel presiding over the region. Patel is of Indian-origin, but he is a Ugandan national. Like many of the Bank's senior management, he is a multi-nationalist. He has studied in Kenya, Denmark, and the U.S, taught at MIT, and in his three decades at the Bank worked mostly on Africa and Europe, before he was brought into South Asia, a region he was totally unfamiliar with. Indian-origin he may be, but Indian national he is not.

Incidentally, the most influential voice in the Bank on the Baglihar issue is likely to be Salman A.Salman, a Sudanese-origin official who is acknowledged to be an authority on the sub-continent's riparian matters.

Like Patel, Salman too is an internationalist. New Delhi has no problems with him or any other national weighing in on the issue. Just as it had no issues with senior officials of Pakistani-origin (such a Moeen Qureshi, who was the Bank's Senior Veep and Head of Ops from 1986-1991 and later went on to become Pakistan's Prime Minister, and Shahid Javed Burki, another Bank Veep who became Pakistan's finance minister) sitting on matters relating to India.

So why the gripe against Patel? Nothing personal, but put it down to Pakistan's growing suspicion and envy of the Indian diaspora, although people of Indian origin are far from homogenous, much less nationalistic. By the way, this wariness is the preserve of Islamabad, because when it comes to home abroad, there are no greater kinsmen than an Indian and Pakistani thrown together in foreign lands.

For many years, Pakistan promoted the myth that its diaspora was as large, or at least sizeable, compared to the Indian population abroad. That has now been busted in the 2000 U.S Census, which puts Pakistanis in the U.S at only 155,000, compared to 1.65 million Indians (1.85 million if you count Indians mixed with other ethnicities).

Pakistanis dispute this and claim they are anywhere from 500,000 to 800,000, but a Pakistani researcher who studied the matter at Stimson Center confirms that the census figure is essentially correct. You can see evidence of this not just at the Bank, but any major institution or corporation in the west. Expect more neuroses in the years ahead. Call it Patelitis, in honor of its first victim.

* Pakistan had even more cause to worry about this in 2006 when Shashi Tharoor bid fair to become the U.N Secretary General. He failed, but the winner, South Korea's Ban Ki Moon, has an Indian son-in-law!
