

March 4, 2005

The Bete-NRIs

Cross-checking a teenager's claim to be a NASA topper isn't rocket science. Hopefully, the Saurabh Singh episode* will have a salutary effect on the new brand of 'gotcha' journalism coursing through the Indian media. What the incident demonstrated is the media's hunger for creating instant heroes and the value of the foreign cachet in doing this. If it's NASA, it must be a phenomenal achievement, is the unchallenged reasoning, forgetting that it's probably harder to qualify for some of India's engineering schools.

The NASA-Singh episode brought to mind my favourite piece of journalistic fiction. Some four or five years back, a story took root in cyberspace that 35 per cent of Microsoft work force and 32 per cent of NASA personnel were of Indian-origin. How and why these numbers (part of a bigger narrative on the "greatness" of India) emerged I have no idea, but even a cursory check showed it to be false. But the tale lived on in cyberia and one day made its way into speeches by a distinguished (now former) minister and (now former) ambassador. The staff of these fine men was as remiss as the reporters who failed to screen the UP lad's claim.

The story of India's resurgence can be stated without hyperbole. For instance, US tech firms such as Microsoft and Lucent have anywhere between 5 per cent to 10 per cent workforce of Indian origin (at the higher end if you count just technical personnel). This in itself is remarkable for a people who constitute less than 1 per cent of US population. So why primp it up to 30 whatever per cent? Besides, a lot of the Indian economic renaissance is home grown.

On a recent visit to Silicon Valley for an event hosted by Intel, I chanced to count some half-dozen vice-presidents in the company who were of Indian origin. But none of them made a big deal of being Indian; they were transnational. The Intel Development Forum, a hothouse for new technologies, had a large number of Indian geeks. There were insider jokes

about "Intel outside, Patel inside." But Intel is now not just an American chip company, but a multinational with a strong presence in India. Outside US and Israel, it employs the most number of people in India (around 2000) doing cutting edge work*.

Sure some of the Indian exploits abroad are worthy of note and I've done my share of NRI priming -- with a sense of proportion and perspective, I'd like to believe. But the NRI mania in the Indian media has reached epidemic proportions, to the extent that an Indian being nominated to the city council in Hicksville, USA, is news, often at the expense of true Indian heroes like R K Pachauri or R A Mashelkar (until they are recognised by western agencies, at which point the reporters will go haring after them).

Call it videshi vindication, but it is a trend that ends up in not just Saurabh Singh but also some dubious NRI eminences taking us for a ride. You have doubtless heard of NRI alumni contributing millions to good causes. But on a recent occasion, a group of Indian-American physicians under the umbrella of Association of American Physicians of Indian-origin (AAPAI) met the Prime Minister to present a check of \$55,000 for tsunami relief (ostensibly the 'first installment'.) Wow, a 40,000-member group of rich doctors presenting 55K! Let's see, that's about \$1.37, or Rs 60 per doctor. The fine folks of Dharavi can do better. But thanks to our NRI worship, that still made news.

*