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Jaunt Action

Till some years back, journalists periodically wrote stories about MPs and bureaucrats peeling off abroad on some pretext or the other to escape hot Indian summers at tax payer expense. A typical jaunt involved the so-called “Bhasha Cumtee” of parliamentarians, which schlepped round the world using the cockamamie excuse of monitoring use of Hindi in Indian missions abroad.

The stories have faded, but the junkets haven't. If anything, they continue with greater vigor and frequency. MPs having now finagled a cut-rate companion fare to counter spousal a-blues. Babus travel at the drop of a hat to the far corners of the world to discuss everything from buying airplanes to selling mangos. And we have no dearth of former prime ministers doddering out to foreign hospitals with their Z category entourage in tow to have their vital signs revived. With some delegation or another abroad at any given time, junketing has become a non-story.

As for private citizens, they are traveling abroad like there is no tomorrow. You can see it at any international airport where our laptop warriors are busy checking e-mail during layovers while their companions are checking out Ralph Lauren and Nina Ricci. During the last cricket World Cup in South Africa I met a septuagenarian shopkeeper and his wife from Asansol who shut store for a month to watch the boys in blue (beaten black and blue in the final). I have since seen desi tourists in Tokyo, bargain hunters in Beijing, and honeymooning couples in the Caribbean. A small country of a billion people is on a roll.

Fact is, foreign travel is no big deal now. Old time immigrant stories began with how someone arrived in America with \$ 20 in his pocket and made it big. Now young tycoons with B-school admissions come here with \$ 100,000 in their bank account and wallets bulging with credit cards. Sarkari mehmaans have the \$ 150 billion forex kitty to dip into. Last week, a friend from Delhi messaged me asking if it was okay to come to Washington

DC on Wednesday -- just to hang out. These are travel times. Foreign is for visiting, not migrating.

I stopped fulminating about parliamentary junkets after an engaging pow-wow with a couple of MPs some years back. Do you know how much we have learnt on this visit, they hissed, after I ribbed them about the tax-payer bankrolled jaunts. The trip had opened their eyes to the United States, they swore. They had gathered ideas and made elaborate notes about urban infrastructure, civic practices, local policing etc and were convinced this was the way to go for India. How much of it they implemented in Chail, HP, and Vijayawada, AP, I never checked, but they said it was a learning experience and I believed them.

More recently, I'm all for netas-babus and anyone else tripping around the world if they can only squeeze some lessons out of it for use back home. Leaving for Las Vegas? See how American genius has coaxed billions of dollars and thousands of jobs from a desert strip, not out of oil or gold, but by merely catering to man's desire and greed. Doing Disneyworld? Check out the millions milked from the power of imagination. Sun and sand in San Diego? Walk the once grotty Gaslamp district to see urban renaissance, the crying need in each of our metropolises.

And now that it's cheaper to go to London or Shanghai or Kuala Lumpur or Pusan than fly India end-to-end, go west and go east. But look for ideas, not just goodies.
