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Pravasi Deus

The chipmeister-turned-venture capitalist Vinod Dham once explained to me why he thought Indian immigrants were so successful in the west. Take public transport in Delhi or Bombay, he said. You are at a bus-stop and you know that at peak hour the DTC or BEST bus will arrive at a random time, crammed to the footboards, and pull up 50 meters behind or 50 meters after the designated stop.

Typically, the driver sees another edgy mob at the stop and wants to avoid packing more people than the 80 he is carrying in a bus meant for 40. Meanwhile, you, instincts honed by practice, are on your toes to sprint in either direction and get a toe-hold and a shirt-hang on a bus that has barely slowed down. It is a survival ordeal we see in India not just in commuting but many aspects of daily life.

Then you arrive in the west and what do you see? Public transport comes to the designated spot at the appointed time. There's plenty of space and no jostling or elbowing. If you are handicapped or injured the driver will even lower automated steps and help you in. He will greet you politely and help you with change and directions. "Life in the U.S is a piece of cake," Dham said a long time back, suggesting that the path to success is paved with good infrastructure.

But that's just one of the several explanations for NRI achievements in the west. One obvious reason for Indians' success is just numbers. In a country of billion people, the top one per cent is a privileged lot. Many immigrants are from this creamy layer. They would be successful anywhere, even in India, but perhaps more so in the west. Some of them may never have set foot on public transport.

At social gatherings in the U.S, I often see Indians from different cities and ethnicities find common links within minutes (sometimes with an American

looking on stupedied). Their common network involves schools such as IIT/IIM or St.Stephens or Doon or Kendriya Vidyalaya; or sectors such as banking, telecom or IT; or cities like Bangalore, Delhi or Mumbai. There is seldom a situation where two Indians abroad cannot find some common link.

“We are a small country of a billion people. Everyone knows everyone else,” I kid to westerners astonished at such remarkable connectivity. Never fails to elicit a chuckle. What I mean is we are a small elite of five to ten million people.

This weekend, many of these offshore elites will wing their way to Hyderabad for the annual Pravasi Divas, a government-organised gabfest for the NRI-PIO crowd. Treated like demi-gods by the giddy Indian media for their success in what Dham said was an easy playing field, many will moan about lousy airports, bad roads, erratic power etc. They will offer prescriptions. To people at home, there is nothing more irritating than pravasis suggesting panaceas.

But over the years, the nature of the pravasis has changed. In an age of collapsed distances, the NRI-PIO folks are as much part of the Indian adventure as home-bound Indians. In the old days, we spoke of two countries -- India and Bharat. Add a third now -- an Indiaspora that is 30 million strong worldwide, which makes it as populous as Canada with perhaps greater income. Many of them are willing to put their money where their mouth is. They ought to be welcomed. After all, the founding fathers of our Republic – Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, Ambedkar etc – were all NRIs at some point of time.