

May 14, 2006

Nearer Thee to Me

Crossing the sea was seen in Hinduism as inviting defilement of the soul. Maybe that's why we never produced a Marco Polo or Columbus and instead waited for explorers and invaders to come to us. Somewhere along the way, we either found a way to overcome the sullyng effect of sea-crossing, or the lure of the H1-B (or equivalent) was just so great we didn't care. All bets were off. We were on our way to becoming the greatest migrating force in history.

Sometime in the late-1980s, during a somnolent question hour in the Lok Sabha, I heard a Member of Parliament ask the External Affairs Minister how many Indians were to be found in countries across the world. Since in our parliamentary system the minister is obliged to provide answers to any question the honorable members ask, the ministry had to send out cables to each of our missions abroad to cobble this information, a task they accomplished admirably even if at great cost.

My recollection of the answer is that there were Indians in almost every one of some 180-odd countries in the world at that time, including four in Iceland and one in the island of Vanuatu. Today, there are estimated 20 million (population of Australia) to 30 million (population of Canada) people of Indian origin outside India, give or take a million or two who are in various transit lounges.

For a brief while I used to feel sorry for that lone guy in Vanuatu, but not any more. My guess is by now he owns half the island and has brought his cousins over from India to manage other islands he has acquired. And don't worry about his sullied soul. He's even built a few temples to propitiate the appropriate Gods.

Last time I stepped into one of these PIO enclaves, they were celebrating Diwali with greater gusto than we do in India. In South Africa some years

back, an Indian family I'd barely met handed me an embroidered invitation for a "Huldee Ceremony," something that had eluded me in all my years in India.

They've begun to do this in the U.S and it's just amazing how far they can go. Bringing off a big fat Indian wedding, complete with sangeet, horse, and the whole nine yards, is a breeze -- and a spectacle for local papers. We now have Indian wedding planners. A friend recently pulled off the thread ceremony of her son in a small backwaters Texas town, complete with rituals, after flying in the priest from Houston and mail-ordering the puja goods from Dallas.

Nothing assures me more that the Indian soul in America is in good fettle than the monthly newsletter I get from the local Sri Siva Vishnu Temple of Lanham, Maryland. The latest one lists the following events for May. Sri Narasimha Jayanti on May 11; Chitra Pournima Celebrations on May 14; Ayappa Puja on May 20; and Venkateshwara Brahmotsavam on May 30. Squeezed between Gita discourses and Sangeeta kacheris, the temple also held a meeting on May 6 to gauge the interest among temple patrons for SAT classes for their young wards. Word of guidance is awaited from Saraswati.

Small wonder in the movie Yuva, Vivek Oberoi wants to marry Kareena Kapoor in the Pittsburg Balaji Temple, not the one in Tirupati. God is omnipresent, but it helps if his house is closer. If things don't go well for Virender Sehwag in the West Indies, I recommend the Ganesh Temple in Queens, NY or the Hanuman Temple in Long Island, NY, both a short flight from the Caribbean.