

*September 24, 2006*

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## **Mal Appropriation**

**S**o Mallus rule, do they? The chatter out of India is that Keralites are heavyweights of the season. Malayalees, it seems, hold several top administrative positions in India. To flog some mal-apropism from college days, that's a pheno-menon extraordi-nair...

At various times, much the same has been said about Kashmiri Pandits, Tam-Brahms, Bihari or Bengali babus etc. We love affixing regional raps, nattering about accents, mannerisms, characteristics, domination etc. Fish-eating bongos, sambar-soaked thambis, hard-drinking surds are all grist for our penchant for exaggerated stereotyping and hyperbole.

It's true that occasionally a confluence of circumstances puts people of a particular geography or ethnicity in decision-making positions in larger numbers. Sometimes, leaders are comfortable with aides from their own neck of woods. Happens in the U.S too, where, for awhile, Texans seemed to have a run of the White House. More often, such aggregation is due to happenstance than design.

Sometimes, such coincidences can lead to happy results. There is this story about U.S Congressman Dan Burton, who, fed for years by Khalistani separatists, remained a ferocious critic of India for what he was told was New Delhi's discriminatory policies towards Sikhs.

One day, Burton met a young Indian diplomat who handled congressional affairs at the Indian Embassy in Washington who happened to be a Sikh. Soon after, he met another diplomat from the embassy who handled the media who was also a Sikh. Months later, the Deputy Chief of Mission he met was a Sikh. India's economic czar at a conference he attended was a Sikh. By the time Burton met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Khalistanis had lost him.

You would think Indians would lose their regionalist outlook when they migrate abroad, right? But often it seems to get accentuated. Even among collegiates. So there are different versions of the rock song Hotel California to suit every ethnic stereotype.

The national upcountry version goes: On a dark crowded highway/  
brylcreem in my hair/ warm smell of parathas/ rising up through the air. A  
'mallu' version goes: On the road to Trivandrum/ Coconut oil in my hair/  
Warm smell of avial/ Rising up through the air. (italics pl)

Then there is the old row about which regional immigrant group is the most enterprising. When Armstrong stepped on to the moon, I've heard it argued in jest, the first person he met was a Sikh mechanic (or dhaba owner). No, insisted another, the first person he met was a Malayali typist (or chai shop owner.) Naw, it was a Gujarati motel owner...

I personally think if Armstrong were to go some decades from now, he would meet a whole gallery of Indians working in dhabas, motels, call centers, universities, hospitals, financial institutions etc. There will be Patel doctors, Sikh typists, Gujarati nurses, and Bengali grocers. And they will be talking only one language: \$\$\$\$. Heck, when you are teeming with a billion plus, you've to put them out somewhere.

Our parochialism came to the fore for me on a recent visit to India. It had been so long since I had been to a railway station that I forgot all about platform tickets. A ticket inspector who I did not see while going in loomed before me on the way out. Oops, I just forgot in my rush to see off a friend, I said.

"Catholic?" she asked, divining a hopeless error. "Indian," I said stonily. "Christian?" she asked hopefully, expanding her vision a wee bit. "Indian," I insisted. The end result of my doggedness was a fine of Rs 253. Small price for asserting Indianness.