

# The "Bisleri" Factor

*The new Indian species called NRI*

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There is a new species of people in India. It didn't exist when we were growing up. Now visible only to a discerning eye, but present in all endeavors, the Non Resident Indians (NRI) are dictating everything from national political theater to the littlest human interactions.

Over a six week visit to India recently, I realized how integral the NRIs have become to Indian life. The so-called "foreign-returned" person that even Hindi films glamorized long years ago pales in comparison with the influence and affect that the Non Resident Indian carries today.

At the top of the pyramid is Lallubhai Pathak, the famous maker of his name-brand pickles and masalas that are distributed abroad. He occupies center stage in the Chandraswami case that accuses Narasimha Rao in a bribery scandal.

One newspaper called him "the most famous NRI." It was amusing because he was camped in a relative's house and every day issued a statement or hurled an accusation against Rao.

I realized his real influence in an Irani restaurant in Bombay. When I struck a conversation with a waiter, he said only someone that rich and someone living abroad could have both the courage to speak and speak the truth.

In that little observation, he had packed a much larger problem. It had the sense of resignation about politics, public life and his conviction that courage and truth are not a common person's commodities. He had given away the power and the hope of a common Indian to the money and the sense of distance that NRIs enjoy.

It was a tragic remark. Not cynical, but very tragic.


Someone has to speak the truth and show the courage, but those rights or virtues not only did not belong to ordinary people, but to Indians who live abroad. The distance offers them an immunity perhaps, or simply brought out courage that is otherwise so suppressed in the everyday suffering of those who live in India.



One of the brochures distributed by Indian tourism authorities calls the Deccan Queen, an "aesthetically pleasing" train. Within India, always a glamorous train, it runs between

Bombay (Mumbai) and Pune. It now has several competitors or alternatives on the same route.

One ticket inspector, an imposing institutional presence on Indian trains, was watching the rain standing at the door. He mused over a cup of tea that it



was because of NRIs that the Deccan Queen had competitors.

Within minutes, he turned his thoughts to NRIs and railways exclusively. The affluence that NRIs enjoyed, he said, had "mixed up the calculations" of the middle working class.

The NRIs in Bombay-Pune area had raised the expectations and the prices of commodities simply because they could afford everything from AC coach tickets to expensive hotel rooms. The NRIs and the newly rich business class, including "company executives," made travel mechanical as much as expensive.

I agreed with everything he said, but his observations, up to this point, didn't have to be directed at the NRIs. The increased industrial and business activity could have caused the same changes.

The ticket inspector continued to talk lightheartedly about NRIs for a while. When I tried to ask him about his own career, family and work life, his tone changed. What bothered him most about people who carried "Bisleri" bottles (mineral water) and tipped heavily (general features of NRIs, according to him) was that they took away the familiar and communal touch that trains like the Deccan Queen offered him.

This came as a surprise to me at one level. Ticket inspectors are villainous figures on Indian trains. One tries not to think of them voluntarily because they wield such arbitrary and enormous power on trains. Here was someone who was soft, showed he had a heart

and he thought with this heart and his reflective mind.

As a member of the Western Railway staff for some 29 years, he had traveled all over the region. He covered this route once every four months. During each of his one or two week long stints of duties on that train, he saw travelers who were pass holders, people who traveled to work to Bombay.

Even in the first class compartments (air conditioned coach), he saw the upper echelons of the working class. During Diwali season and summer, he saw families travel on train. He could tell how often the family had taken a train, because newcomers always wanted to stand at the doors or take the window seats. He found that atmosphere most "Indian" and most congenial.

True, he was mean on usual suspects, but he always walked the children to the doors of the compartments to let them see the mountains in the running trains. He knew the waiters who borrowed money from him often and returned it irregularly. He had a relationship with the crowd that knew how to hang in collectively for a journey of approximately four hours.

The new business class and the NRIs, who "bought their tickets through travel agents" were isolated, selfish and self-centered. They often walked on the train, sat in the first class and paid full fare, obviously prohibitive for ordinary travelers. The trains had lost their souls, he said. There were too many advertisements inside the trains.



Not knowing quite how to react to something that I had felt but not articulated, I told him about how Indian trains are glamorized abroad. I told him about the

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"National Geographic" special on Indian trains. I also told him that I was an NRI myself and that I agreed with him. He reached for his cigarette and looked straight into the monsoon clouds. I think he realized better than I did that a valuable social dimension of Indian life was disappearing and it was painful to be a witness.



Any NRI who has visited India recently knows the phenomenon of STD / ISD booths. The telephone booths to make long distance, international and local calls have sprung up all

over the place. They are always busy; they are ubiquitous and they can be annoying. They demand a separate consideration on their own.

During my brief stay at Mahabaleshwar, which is a summer hill station in Maharashtra, now a monsoon lovers' resort, I went to make a long distance call at an STD booth at the bus station. That evening, it was particularly crowded. I was in line after an NRI, who made a call to London. The phone meter made the cost of his call public. He paid Rs. 1,400. I made several calls for the sum of Rs 250. The 20 year man who ran the booth was pleased instantly to know that I spoke Marathi. We chatted for a while as the evening rush calmed down.

He said that every day, off season, he sees at least four NRI come into his booth to make phone calls. During summer the number goes very high. As I explored this casually with him, each NRI spent an average of Rs 800-1,000.

Friendships are not hard to come by in India. As I got to know him, I realized that he made Rs. 1,000 over a whole year. He received his lunch on a bus that came through his village. He slept in

that booth with an open front and was woken up often for emergency phone calls in the middle of the night. He collected all cash from the day and deposited it the next day, during his lunch hour (15 minutes precisely). He had a debilitating disease, for which he saw a doctor once. He sent 90 per cent of his salary home. The owner who employed him came to check the booth twice a year.

He was never bothered about the cash he carried on him. Nobody had come to rob him at gun point. He was eternally cheerful.

I wondered at the economics of earning Rs. 1,000 all year and spending that much money on a phone call. All the radical views of economic exploitation always made sense, but to see a human face to it was horrifying.

The NRIs are blessed with more money in India by sheer luck. May be they don't exploit workers directly to earn their money as people in business and industry do.

The power of Rs 1,000 that NRIs have is very casual. They have it without earning it. The inequity in that equation is so terrifying that if it does not

occur to some of us, it must be a great human crime. And, if it does occur to us, it also brings an awareness of being complicit somehow in not knowing the full dimension of our pleasure or someone else's pain. Taken together, the reality does not hold up for our human dignity.



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