

---

## Shadow on India rising

Posted by Zia - 2008/03/25 14:17

---

AS A people, Indians today are self-assured, angry, passionate and articulately aggressive about what we believe is our due. Yet, for a country that is perennially protesting, why is it that we have barely bothered to react to the Mississippi horror story of 21st century slavery?

Readers of this newspaper — one of the few national newspapers to track and frontpage the report — are familiar with the gory details. Indian shipyard workers forced to live like 'pigs in a cage', 24 men crammed into single, squalid cupboard-sized rooms, paying Rs1,500 every day for frugal meals of rice and mortgaging their self-respect in return for green cards that never existed. And on days that there was no work, there was no pay.

Most of them had sold land, jewellery and pretty much everything they had, to cough up money for the recruiting agency that ferried them to the US. For more than a year, hundreds of these workers marched on the streets, waved banners and petitioned for help. When nothing worked, they walked out on their abusive employers in helpless despair. Now they were stuck in a foreign land as part of President George W Bush's much-hyped 'guest worker programme' but they had neither a green card nor a job.

And yet, despite the ritual intervention by the government, as a nation, we still couldn't care less. The brutal truth is that the Barack Obama victory in Mississippi has led to more cocktail chatter in India than the livelihood battles of welders and pipe-fitters from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh.

Now imagine if the Governor of Mississippi was not a man called Haley Barbour but let's say Harminder Dua. 'Harry' would wear spiffy suits, he would play baseball and talk in a perfectly cultivated Punjabi-American twang. His Thanksgiving Day dinners would be famous for Ms Dua's (let's call her Maya) incomparable cranberry sauce. His campaign managers would hand out glossy pictures of him posing behind a gleaming white picket fence with two adorable children and a wife who wears pastels and pearls. They would hold hands, chew gum and almost forget they once lived in Ludhiana. They may even be Republican and support tougher laws against new immigrants.

But back home, we would fall over ourselves in juvenile excitement over yet another 'Indian success story'. We would dutifully send our cameras and journalists to 'Harry's' native village and manufacture picture postcard images of the land his grandfather had once tilled. We would file breathlessly romantic reports about how he had dared to dream.

So, why is it that we have no affinity or empathy for the Indian workers who also had the audacity and recklessness to dream? We insist that Bobby Jindal and Sunita Williams are cut from Indian cloth, though both are self-avowedly and aggressively American. But as far as we are concerned, a shipyard worker from Mumbai or Calicut may as well be from Africa or Iraq or one of those countries our elite couldn't be bothered to notice. The fact is that a ghastly class prejudice defines our response to the Indian Diaspora.

We salute Indian women who head Pepsi and Motorola and often impose an unwanted national claim to them, but we couldn't be bothered about the thousands of other Indian women who end up as poorly paid maids in New York. Give us a British Indian who prefixes his name with a 'Sir' or 'Lord' and we will duly bow and scrape in supplication. So what if he hasn't been back 'home' in a decade? Show us a glamorous model who is the toast of New York Fashion week, but once lived in Tamil Nadu, and we will pretend like she never left. We will even take stinging abuse from a Trinidad-born author and pretend he is Indian, if only because we like pretending that the Nobel Prize went to one of our guys. Take our response to the plight of the Indian minority in Malaysia. We have explained away our indifference by saying that these workers, shipped out of the country by the British decades ago to work in the rubber plantations, are now citizens of another land; the Indian government can no longer be the arbiter of their fates.

Really? Would we be as indifferent if a person of Indian origin was the prime minister of Malaysia? (Unlikely as that is.) Or we would then make sure that he was a guest of honour at the annual Pravasi Divas jamboree, designed precisely to lure the sort of expatriate who has divested his stake in the land of his ancestors. Why have we created the People of Indian Origin (PIO) card if it comes with an unspoken class barrier?

Simply put, we only like NRIs who are 'People Like Us' or people richer, prettier and more successful than we can ever hope to be. The other ordinary folk live in an area of darkness that casts an inconvenient shadow on our image of a 'Rising India'. We'd much rather keep the citizenship of 'our' India selective and exclusive, often dragging in achievers who aren't even interested in its membership.

It's a strange, undemocratic and unjust response for a country that has positioned itself as the world's future. India's middle-class knows better than most how hard and lonely the struggle of an ordinary man can be. It cannot now look the other way. Aspiration cannot become a substitute for neglect.

=====

