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GUEST EDITORIAL

Where have our young ones gone?: The coolieization of India

These are voices and echoes on an important issue that not many pay attention to.

The Kerala model

In a book which is the 21st volume of the complete works of E. M. S. Namboodiripad (ed. P. Govinda Pillai, Chintha Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram), he identified the basic problem facing Kerala in 1958 as:

'The State's basic problem was one of non-utilization of its immense human resources. Instead of handling the State's natural resources, Keralites were becoming coolies and clerks all over India.'

The India model

What EMS observed about Kerala, has over the years become true for India. The best and the brightest (IITs and co.) were becoming coolies and clerks all over the world. India's basic problem became one of non-utilization of its immense human resources. Instead of handling the country's natural resources, Indians were emigrating to

A large number of our best and brightest, i.e. 70,000 migrants + 200,000 L1, H-1B and Student visas leave the country for the US.

Human progress is dominated by the appearance of a few individuals of rare, exceptional abilities. If the brain drain is predicated on a filtration process that ensures that the highest trained individuals find it profitable to leave to donee nations (in recent years, almost invariably the United States), the loss to the productivity potential of donor nations would be very huge. The gain to the donee nations is also incalculable.

The brain drain is something that cannot be ignored or wished away.

'The leftovers of the leftovers of the leftover come to join us, only to leave after gaining the platinum touch'

'Just who will build India's roads, ports and bridges?', asks A. M. Naik, the L&T supremo in a conversation with Indrajit Gupta and Rumi Dutta Hardasmalani, that is now making the rounds of the e-mail circuits. The L&T boss, who runs a 30,000-strong engineering and construction

behemoth, has 12,000 engineers. It needs 2000 every year to continue growing at its current rate. Yet, every year, around 2000 leave the organization and finding replacements is not easy. For, not many engineering grads want to work for a manufacturing firm. 'All of them want to work for New Economy IT firms these days'. When he graduated in 1963, there were three streams engineers specialized in: mechanical, electrical and civil. Today, most plumb for computer science and electronics. Even those who do mechanical prefer to work for a firm like L&T for two years, build up domain expertise and leave for leading IT firms. Naik's point is simple: Nobody in the country is conscious of the nature of the brain drain and how developed nations are cashing in on the Indian talent pool. Although global engineering firms are today setting up engineering centres in India, they get their manufacturing done out of China. 'When we are gung-ho about the \$17 billion dollar worth of outsourcing jobs coming to India, we fail to realize that it has created assets worth \$300 billion for others. And for every \$30 million of engineering services that go out of the country, it deprives the country of assets worth \$1 billion', argues Naik. 'There is just no talent available in India. Around 95% of the students passing out of engineering colleges head either to the US or Europe or any other part of the world. The leftovers of the leftovers of the leftover come to join us, only to leave after gaining the platinum touch', says he.

'Have you told the Prime Minister about this?' someone wanted to know. That immediately makes Naik see red. 'The government pats the back of new economy players, like Infosys and Wipro. All management and leadership awards go to them. What makes you believe that they are working towards nation-building? They may be bringing home foreign exchange, but at what cost? It is a vicious circle. How long can we allow India to be used as a cheap source of talent?', thunders Naik, thumping the table hard once again.

The 24 × 7 relationship

'Indo-US relations are at their best', said Richard Celeste, when he was the US Ambassador to India. 'The information and computer industries are improving relations between India and the US because of an economy that demands workers day and night. There is a 24/7 relationship. That

means if you are awake in the US, you want a partner who is sleeping and getting ready to work when you are asleep. The natural place for that partner is India'.

But who is to ask, 'Who works for India when we go to sleep? Who is our natural partner?'

Ubiquitous Indians, or ubiquitous coolies?

Jairam Ramesh, in a very perspicacious article in *India Today* (May 2000) described the first five phases of the Indian diaspora thus:

- from the mid-19th and early 20th century, the British took Indian labour to sugar plantations in South Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, Fiji
- a second phase took what was called kingami/maistry labour to Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Myanmar
- a third phase took free passage immigrants from Gujarat to Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia
- in another wave, workers went to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and other West Asian countries
- in a fifth wave, economic immigrants went to the US, UK, Canada, Australia and western countries.

The IT exodus constitutes a sixth phase, and has a physical immigration component as well as an offshoring component as a wired globe allows the best and the brightest of the country to work on what are essentially overnight cleaning and plumbing jobs for the IT globals from within the borders of India.

The capital stock internationally (read the West) is getting increasingly more sophisticated and the West is not producing enough highly skilled workers to keep it functioning. Rep. Wernon Ehlers (Republican-Michigan) introducing House Resolution 4272 (the National Science Education Enhancement Act) said, 'We are not adequately preparing our students with a solid foundation to live and work in this new economy'. He went on to say that a short-term response by employers to fill the need for skilled workers is being met by literally importing knowledge from abroad through H-1B visas to the United States.

India's finest, for hire

K. S. Jayaraman, writing for *Nature*, from New Delhi asked, 'By collaborating with western companies, are India's research institutes consolidating their positions or allowing their young researchers to be exploited as a cheap scientific labour force?' He expressed the concern of many Indian academics, 'that the country's highly qualified young researchers – its most valuable scientific asset – are being used as cheap labour to address the problems of multinational companies, rather than the issues facing India's developing economy'. For a sum (US\$100,000) that in the United States or Europe might not even cover the salary and lab costs of a single scientist, a premier Indian research institute deployed eight PhDs, 12 M Scs and several technicians for one year. This is typical of the 'wage arbitrage' that takes place, not only in contract research,

but also in IT-enabled services, BPO, e-CRM, e-business and e-commerce, and other backend office functions performed from India in the 24 × 7 mode.

The rise of the techno-baboo: IT is a brain-sink

Rajesh Kochhar (*Curr. Sci.*, 1996, **76**, 1531–1533) described the IT that India is engaged in as 'Information Tinkering' – 'If IT is equated with designing a new bicycle, India's assignment is no more than fixing tyre punctures'. Kochhar goes on to make the point (colonization giving way to coolieization) that

The colonial science that the British took up in India and in which the natives were employed in a peripheral role was not laboratory science but field science (geography, geology, botany, and even astronomy); it was latitude-driven. More than a century later, the natives are once again being employed by the west. This time their activity is longitude driven. The working day for the west now lasts a full 24 h with one difference. The remote office work is got done not by paying overtime, but by one-third the wages.

To wage arbitrage, add time arbitrage, and all the compulsions are in place to seduce Indians, 'of our free will, [to become] a nation of techno-baboos'.

Tom Friedman's view of India's place in the world

I will like to sign off this collection of vignettes with this note. A well-meaning colleague forwarded to me an account of an interview with Friedman which had him say the following:

If you lose your luggage on British Air or Swissair, the person who answers the phone to track it down is in Bangalore. If you have got a problem with your Dell computer, the person on the other end of the phone you're talking to is an Indian in Bangalore. ... The city produces about 40,000 young tech grads every year from different engineering and computer science schools, all of whom get absorbed [to provide] the backroom capability for a lot of American corporations from Bangalore.

Yes, the backroom capabilities; but the 'core competence' jobs remain in the US! Now, we know why A. M. Naik is angry. What Friedman does not see, but Naik does, is that, our cleverest young people are slowly becoming the techno-coolies for the rest of the world. You do not find the cleverest young people in North America or Europe working on back-office functions for the Indians or the Chinese. What Friedman calls the miracle wrought by Infosys and Wipro is that they have collected the cleverest young boys and girls of India and turned them into back-office coolies for North America, and Europe, and Japan. On the other hand, Microsoft, or Oracle, or Cisco, did not become the richest companies in the world by turning the brightest graduates of MIT and Caltech into techno-coolies who work for India and China when we go to sleep. That is an asymmetry that has grave implications. Globalization will then become just another word for coolieization.

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