

Home

“I was reading in the newspaper today about the government rounding up a big group of illegal aliens. They’re going to deport them all back where they came from.

It makes me mad. Who do these people think they are, just showing up somewhere expecting to be taken in as though they have a right to go wherever they wanted.”

My wife listened, with that tiny smile she gets whenever she thinks I’m being stupid. She never says as much, but I can see it in that barely perceptible curl at the corners of her mouth and that certain glint in her eyes

This time, I knew what she was thinking. “It was different for us,” I said defensively. “We went through the proper channels and made the right applications and paid the right fees. Besides, I had a skill that was very much in demand here. These are just a bunch of unskilled bums, doodhwalas and subziwalas.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said.

Thirty years earlier we left our homeland; ‘escaped’ was the way we thought of it. We were near the top of the social scale in India so we were certainly far better off than hundreds of millions of our countrymen. And I had the luxury of attending university where I had become very good at a new field of study, computer science. My degree was a rare commodity when I was a young man so getting good jobs at home was easy. Still, the poverty and backwardness around us was depressing and my new wife and I realized that we had to leave if we wanted to find a better life.

Traditionally, Indians thought of Britain when they decided to leave home but that had changed over the years. While many of us still made that choice, America was a more welcoming beacon because it was advertised as a land of boundless opportunity. Our eyes were open wide enough to know that America had many problems, some even worse than we had in India, but hard work and a little luck could buy a very good life there.

I can still remember the horror in the faces of my parents, and hers, when they learned what we were planning. Poonam’s parents were particularly upset because they had paid a good dowry for her marriage and now they could see only a bad investment.

“How can you abandon your home, Ashok? How can you take away all that education when your own country needs your skills so desperately?” My father said these words with some authority. He was a medical doctor, and he had steadfastly refused to follow in the footsteps of many of his colleagues who had sought greener pastures. “This country educated me,” he would say, “and this country deserves to benefit from that education.” He didn’t plead on the basis of patriotism, just simple fairness.

We argued about how our country funded the education of our people only to have them repay us by leaving. They took not only our free ticket to a good life elsewhere, but they deprived us of the skills and expertise we needed at home to improve our own standard of living.

“People should stay where they are born,” several of our friends told us. “Workers shouldn’t just get up and go someplace else, it disrupts the local economy and the economy of their destination. Their home needs their skills, the citizens at their destinations will complain about the damn foreigners coming in and stealing all the jobs.”

Nothing had ever stopped the Western countries, we responded, from stealing our workers when they wanted cheap labour or people to do the disgusting jobs. I asked: “Why shouldn’t the flow of workers work both ways?” But it seems more than just my father thought I owed India for my education.

But computers were in the early stages of becoming the predominant technology, and the excitement of being on the ground floor of developments that would surely follow made it so much easier to persuade myself that leaving India was not just about the money. India would develop, perhaps a little slower than other countries, although it would get there and it would surely not miss one programmer.

So we had left Chennai, the only home either of us had known since birth, but not without bearing many months of disagreement from our parents and friends. We endured just about every form of argument, cajoling, criticism, condemnation, disapproval we could have imagined. And then some.

During the months of debate, I secured work in the computer industry that was beginning to make its mark in California and with just a few possessions that we didn’t want to leave behind, we took the maximum number of rupees the Indian government would allow us to take from the country and departed. We have never returned. Within less than two years all four parents were dead and although we both had siblings, the long flight always seemed too long and we realized that we would probably never see Chennai again.

When we arrived in the United States, we met the other side of the coin. How could you leave your home and families? Why don’t you go back where you came from? And the predictable ‘what gives you people the right to take away our jobs?’

For thirty years we laboured to build a good life in America, and we succeeded. We knew we would always be aliens, no matter how Americanized we became because we were a readily identifiable minority; and we would always be the people who had taken away American jobs.

That made us sensitive to issues surrounding the migration of labour. Living in California, we heard constant complaints about illegal Mexican migrants. We thought it was hypocritical for Americans to welcome cheap labour while denying the same opportunity to many others. The message was clear that Mexican workers were good enough for the dirty jobs that Americans didn’t want, so long as they were out of sight after the work was done.

We realized it wasn’t just Americans. With the development of the globalization movement, all countries became hypocritical. Everyone was eager to gain access to the markets of other countries, so long as there was no equal access to theirs. Despite all the brouhaha about ‘free’ trade, we could

see that protectionism stayed rampant, with the poorest countries sinking further into debt and their living standards decreasing even further. The more I read about this issue, the more I realized the West has always been willing to take advantage of unskilled cheap labour, either bringing people here to do our dirty work or leaving them home while we built our dirty factories in their neighbourhoods. “People have been redefined as mere commodities,” said Poonam, “as disposable as cheap razor blades.”

We’ve heard some reasonable arguments against allowing free movement of workers. European nations point to their advanced social welfare planning which was built with certain tax revenues and population levels in mind; massive movement of foreign workers into those countries upsets that careful balance. Still, Europeans want access to cheap labour to take care of the lowly and disgusting jobs.

And one thing seldom whispered: even though most migrants are of different religions, different colour, different language, talk funny and eat smelly food, we always deny that racism plays any part in our concerns about allowing easy movement of labour.

But I’m one of those migrants and I managed to fit into America. At least, I thought I did. But I know that other Americans will never stop considering me to be a foreign job-stealer.

And I remember what I thought in the mid-’80s when eastern Africa was going through a terrible period of drought with people dying in the tens of thousands. My neighbours would say: ‘why don’t they just move’, though I knew they would never have allowed those Africans to move across the street from them. And now that large numbers of workers worldwide are trying to move to better lives, my neighbours are offering stiff opposition.

One day in 1999, after I had risen to an important position at Honking Big Ram Computing, the company decided to find a source of labour that would be less costly than the highly skilled techies of Silicon Valley.

At a management meeting, we discussed the idea of moving some of our production off-shore. We could locate labour much cheaper, we could set up our production facility on less expensive land and probably get the local government to subsidize or even completely pay the costs. That would also help us avoid some American taxes, labour laws, quality assurance laws, and a raft of other legislated roadblocks to maximizing dollars.

Management thought it seemed like a great plan: move a bunch of jobs to Singapore or Indonesia where we could pay people next to nothing. After all, in the manufacturing division it was just a matter of snapping together pre-made parts and circuit boards. Even unskilled East Asians could do that and they wouldn’t demand health care, or coffee breaks, or unions, or safe working conditions. But the whole idea made me uncomfortable.

In the end, though, we decided against it because the owner of the company was an aging hippy who said he had a social conscience and balked at the idea of taking away jobs. I, for one, was glad of his social conscience, even if it didn’t run very deep.

The phone rang in the living room and I let Poonam answer it. A few minutes later, she came to get me with a disturbed look on her face. I almost thought her dark skin looked pale as she said, "It is Sunil. You had better take this call." She knew I often avoided Sunil because I didn't like him much, but something in her voice told me this was important.

Half an hour later, Poonam and I sat on the porch overlooking our backyard and quietly talked about what we would do next. I had excellent credentials, but I was nearly fifty-five and mine had become a young person's field. Poonam had never worked outside the home but we had lived well. Still, we had saved only small amounts, spending much more than we should on our children, sure of our future because of the tremendous expansion of computer technology.

The one thing we had not counted on was having my job outsourced. To India. To Chennai.