

Oz 'racism' and the ugly Indian student

RAKESH AHUJA | Aug 2, 2009, 10.27 AM IST

Canberra: Mobility of education services is one of the most positive by-products of globalization. There is no better example of this than Australia, which with just 21mn people has transformed itself into a mass exporter of education.

Australia opened its door to foreign students roughly 15 years ago. More than 94,000 Indians study here, amidst an overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon population with different values. The cultural fault-lines are now beginning to show.

The recent spate of attacks on Indian students cannot be explained by any one factor - outright racism, socioeconomic competition or criminal opportunism. But one fact is uncontested. Seduced by claimed commonalities such as cricket and the English language, Australia was unprepared for what it has wrought with the very best of (commercial) intentions in the Indian market.

The authorities' initial response to the attacks on Indian students reflected that confusion. Racial motives were rejected outright. Instead, Indian students were blamed for inviting violence by displaying their "wealth". But if race was not a contributing factor, why should Caucasian natives not be advised against displaying their technological paraphernalia in public places?

Racism does exist in Australia but it does not mean that society as a whole is racist. The Rudd government readily acknowledged the racist element in some of the violence. It quickly established a Task Force to examine the issues involved. That is no fig leaf. It is well-worn Australian practice to implement timebound recommendations.

In contrast, Indian TV's shrill coverage of attacks under the rubric of "Oz Racism" has been patently unbalanced. Above all, it has ignored one crucial issue: the lack of sensitivity towards local cultural norms by Indians studying in Australia.

Indian students here represent as good a microcosm of the nouveau riche Indian abroad as in any other country. Visible traits imported from home include a sullen unsmiling visage ; disdain towards serving staff (viewed as servants); lewdly ogling women; playing raucous Indian music on public transport; cooking pungent food without regard for neighbour's sensitivities; littering; spitting - and let us not even mention the unhygienic practices in (male) toilets.

The Indian government is conscious of the consequences of such appalling behaviour. In the wake of the attacks, it enjoined students in Australia to "practice the right kind of behaviour" and, curiously to "keep your homes clean".

Indian ghetto mentality actually reinforces these traits. It is not uncommon for 15 students to share accommodation rented for four. The impulse to be with 'one's own' is replicated in day-to-day activities. The outsider is excluded while the insider learns little about the Australian way of life. There is no catalyst for behavioural change.

On campuses, Indian students can be observed huddled together both inside and outside lecture halls. It is rare to see an Indian student with fellow native Australians' Chinese or Vietnamese.

Their motives for coming to Australia? Casual conversations with Indian students who dominate the taxi driving industry, offer fascinating glimpses into their goals. Education is definitely not one of them; permanent residency is. Another is the disturbing focus on race-orientated libidinous aspirations. There is no awareness of current developments in Australia, its history, culture or of multiculturalism. As for Aborigines' "black passengers" are best avoided!

The recent violence can be partly explained by ghetto-induced separateness and latent racism, but there are deeper reasons for the discordance between the Indian student and the Australian city.

At its root is Australia's education export drive. For more than a decade, government funding for tertiary institutions has declined, forcing them to rely increasingly on foreign markets. In the process, they have compromised on educational standards to attract more students' including Indians with barely passable English.

The decline of Australian education standards has meant that it's increasingly drawing customers from Tier-II Indian towns - Ludhiana, Jalandhar' Bhopal, etc. They are often products of the so-called deemed institutions whose teaching infrastructure is highly suspect. This cohort is singularly ill-equipped to deal with Australia's vastly different cultural environment. In contrast to their cosmopolitan cousins in the US or the UK, the semiurban Indian student carries only a provincial mindset and cultural baggage to Australia.

Moreover, coming from small towns and humble backgrounds, their focus is on vocational pursuits. More than 50% are enrolled in vocational courses. They have one objective: permanent residency at any cost. This eminently suits the stakeholders in the vocational education industry: the development of a pool of skills to meet current and future Australian labour shortages; foreign labour fodder at little or no cost to employers for 900 hours of work under the guise of vocational training; and a flood of business for education agents.

The Australian government is dealing with Indian student complaints. But it is not a one-way street. Indian students need to reassess their behaviour. They are subverting the opportunity for an education in their quest for permanent residency. They have no commitment to the country. Yet, they expect to be "protected". Can the police be everywhere? Their best bet is to modify personal conduct, understand local culture and develop networks beyond the ghetto.

In a knee-jerk reaction, education providers now propose pre-departure programmes to educate prospective students about "how things really work in Australia". That is not enough. It is not merely a question of what students should expect, but also, what is expected of them.

The writer has lived in Australia since 1961. He was Australia's deputy high commissioner to India in the '90s