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A Passage From India

By SUKETU MEHTA

ACCORDING to a confidential memorandum, I.B.M. is cutting 13,000 jobs in the United States and in Europe and creating 14,000 jobs in India. From 2000 to 2015, an estimated three million American jobs will have been outsourced; one in 10 technology jobs will leave these shores by the end of this year. Stories like these have aroused a primal fear in the Western public: that they might soon need to line up outside the Indian Embassy for work visas and their children will have to learn Hindi.

Just as my parents had to line up outside the American consulate in Bombay, and my sisters and I had to learn English. My father came to America in 1977 not for its political freedoms or its way of life, but for the hope of a better economic future for his children. My grandfathers on both sides left rural Gujarat in northwestern India to find work: one to Calcutta, which was even more remote in those days than New York is from Bombay now; and the other to Nairobi. Mobility, we have always known, is survival. Now I face the possibility that my children, when they grow up, will find their jobs outsourced to the very country their grandfather left to pursue economic opportunity.

The outsourcing debate seems to have mutated into a contest between the country of my birth and the country of my nationality. Of course I feel a loyalty to America: it gave my parents a new life and my sons were born here. I have a vested interest in seeing America prosper. But I am here because the country of my ancestors didn't understand the changing world; it couldn't change its technology and its philosophy and its notions of social mobility fast enough to fight off the European colonists, who won not so much with the might of advanced weaponry as with the clear logical philosophy of the Enlightenment. Their systems of thinking conquered our own. So, since independence, Indians have had to learn; we have had to slog for long hours in the classroom while the children of other countries went out to play.

When I moved to Queens, in New York City, at the age of 14, I found myself, for the first time in my life, considered good at math. In Bombay, math was my worst subject, and I regularly found my place near the bottom of the class rankings in that rigorous subject. But in my American school, so low were their standards that I was - to my parents' disbelief - near the top of the class. It was the same in English and, unexpectedly, in American history, for my school in Bombay included a detailed study of the American Revolution. My American school curriculum had, of course, almost nothing on the subcontinent's freedom struggle. I was mercilessly bullied during the 1979-80 hostage crisis, because my classmates couldn't tell the difference between Iran and India. If I were now to move with my family to India, my children - who go to one of the best private schools in New York - would have to take remedial math and science courses to get into a good school in Bombay.

Of course, India's no wonderland. It might soon have the world's biggest middle class, but it also has the world's largest underclass. A quarter of its one billion people live below the poverty line, 40 percent are illiterate, and the child malnutrition rate exceeds that of sub-Saharan Africa. There's a huge difference between the backwater state of Bihar and the boomtown of Bangalore. Those Indians who went to the United States, though, have done remarkably well: Indians make up one of the richest ethnic groups in this country. During the technology boom of the late 1990's, Indians were responsible for 10 percent of all the start-ups in Silicon Valley. And in this year's national spelling bee, the top four contestants were of South Asian origin.

There is a perverse hypocrisy about the whole jobs debate, especially in Europe. The colonial powers invaded countries like India and China, pillaged them of their treasures and commodities and made sure their industries weren't allowed to

develop, so they would stay impoverished and unable to compete. Then the imperialists complained when the destitute people of the former colonies came to their shores to clean their toilets and dig their sewers; they complained when later generations came to earn high wages as doctors and engineers; and now they're complaining when their jobs are being lost to children of the empire who are working harder than they are. My grandfather was once confronted by an elderly Englishman in a London park who asked, "Why are you here?" My grandfather responded, "We are the creditors." We are here because you were there.

The rich countries can't have it both ways. They can't provide huge subsidies for their agricultural conglomerates and complain when Indians who can't make a living on their farms then go to the cities and study computers and take away their jobs. Why are Indians willing to write code for a tenth of what Americans make for the same work? It's not by choice; it's because they're still struggling to stand on their feet after 200 years of colonial rule. The day will soon come when Indian companies will find that it's cheaper to hire computer programmers in Sri Lanka, and then it's there that the Indian jobs will go.

Of course, it's heart-wrenching to see American programmers - many of whom are of Indian origin - lose their jobs and have to worry about how they'll pay the mortgage. But they are ill served by politicians who promise to bring their jobs back by the facile tactic of banning them from leaving. This strategy will ensure only that our schools stay terrible; it'll be an entire country run like the dairy industry, feasible only because of price controls and subsidies.

But we have a resource of incalculable worth right here to help us compete: the immigrants who've been given a new life in America. There are many more Indians in the United States than there are Americans in India. Indian-Americans will help America understand India, trade with it to our mutual benefit. Just as Arab-Americans can help us fight Al Qaeda, Indian-Americans can help us deal with the emerging economic superpower that is India. This is the return of the gift of citizenship.

And just in case, I'm making sure my children learn Hindi.

Suketu Mehta is author of "Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found."