

Home, bitter home

From the snowy deserts of Minnesota and the sunbaked Gulf they come, the thousands of Indians who every year bring in foreign exchange often amounting to half of India's defence budget. But how does the country treat them? From the moment they land at our airports, they find themselves in trouble, harassed all the way by health card checkers, immigration men, the customs, airline staff, porters, taximen and private bus operators. In fact, for the Indians abroad who come home on a visit, especially the Gulf passengers, it is often a flight into bitterness.

THERE are as many as 1,10,01,293 Indians and people of Indian origin abroad, living in 137 countries. It is the rootlessness they feel on foreign soil that makes them want to come here again and again, hoping for the warmth of their homeland. But no kind sentiments, not even the foreign exchange—Rs 2,220.6 crore in 1981-82—they pump in every year get them any special treatment. In fact, they come up against the hard realities of India at every stage of their homecoming. It is as if the returning native has to bribe his way in. Often, the bribe has to be in dirhams or dollars. No rupee payment, please. That is the tale Asokan and Ibrahim have to narrate. And hundreds of others like them.

The hut that Asokan lives in at Trivandrum hardly shows the signs of Gulf fortune. He is a welder who found his way to the land of liquid gold. His initial earnings had to be used repaying the loans he took before he left for the Gulf. There were the calls of kinship—from father, mother, sisters, brothers... So he could not save much. It took ten years for him to buy a patch of land for himself.

Last August, Asokan made his fifth visit to India in ten years. While he had smooth sailing at the health and immigration counters, Ibrahim was detained at the health counter on some flimsy ground. With one look at the passenger the man at the counter knows if he can be taken for a ride. And the illiterate, simple Malabaris like Ibrahim are easy preys. The first

Thorough search. A woman customs officer on the job at Trivandrum.

PICS: M K VARGHESE



question is: "Do you have a bottle?" He is then asked to wait without mentioning any reason. The health card which shows that he has taken all the required shots against certain diseases, does not help. The wiser one among the detained would brandish a foreign currency note. Then comes the official nod to leave it on the table. Once that is done, the 'unhealthy' passenger can leave, with no questions asked.

Now the immigration counter. Here too the battle of the bottle has to be waged. If not, a number of queries are put: "When did you actually go to the Gulf? Did you not smuggle yourself into the Gulf in a boat? Aren't these records forged? Look, see for yourself, does your signature of 1981 tally with the one you showed me now?...I am going to put you in jail".

The grim words are spoken mostly in Hindi or English. Often, the victim does not understand what they mean. As he stands dazed, someone in the queue whispers to him that there is trouble but a few dirhams will set things right. No, not rupees. Only dirhams or dollars. Dirhams preferably. They fetch more in the black market. Dollars fetch Rs 11 as against the bank rate of ten. Dirham sometimes fetches over 37.5 per cent more than the bank rate if you sell it in black. Ibrahim got away by paying 10 dirhams. Others have had to pay much more and a bottle of scotch.

Surmounting the initial hurdles on the strength of dirhams or dollars, the passenger then walks into the customs examination hall. Suddenly, realisation dawns that the only difference between that hall and hell is in the spelling.

If it is a Friday morning 18 international flights would have landed in Bombay between midnight and 6 am. The hall has a capacity of 1,400. That is without baggage. With hundreds of suitcases, boxes and other baggage, the hall can hardly hold 600 passengers. There are days when the number of men and women

Will he, will he not? Waiting for attention at Bombay.



waiting for the customs guillotine would be 2,500 or more.

A customs officer confessed that there are days when some passengers have waited for 12 hours in the hall. No chairs to sit on, no canteen facility, not enough toilets. Another official said that one could see women inching their way into the gents toilet at one end of the hall. She might never make it to the women's toilet which is at the other end of the hall as there is an ocean of humanity for her to elbow through to reach her destination.

The Ibrahims and Asokans wait at the end of the queue before the customs counter. There are 45 counters and even if all the customs officers are on duty, with 2,500 passengers in the hall due to flights coming one after the other, there would be 55 before each counter. Even if the customs officer merely exchanges pleasantries with the passenger and lets him off, it would take an hour for the last one in the queue to move out assuming that a minute is spent on each one of them.

The problem however is that all the 45 officers may not always be on duty. Nor are all the 45 counters meant for red channel traffic. Some officers are at the green channel where passengers are allowed to walk through claiming they have no dutiable items to declare. Some would be busy at the re-examination counters, counters for the airline crew, counters for re-export

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forms, foreign currency declaration and a counter for women and children travelling alone. On one particular day, for example, six officers were on leave, and the day shift had a strength of just 36. All these factors besides the customs examination itself contribute to the 12-hour-long wait, during which passengers have been known to faint.

Some measures have been taken to reduce the long wait, and make things a trifle easier for the incoming passengers. For instance, since last April, in the wake of media exposure of harassment to the passengers, the government introduced a new system of self-declaration by the passengers of the dutiable goods. The customs official would then size up the man's statement by the number of suitcases the passenger has got, its size, weight etc. If the officer feels that the declaration does not match the weight and size of the baggage, he would, or rather he is supposed to, send the baggage for a thorough examination. But, whether he orders re-examination or not depends on several other factors.

One is the number of passengers before the customs officer. The other is the time the passenger reaches the counter. If he is there at a time when the officer's shift ends, then he is likely to be let off accepting the self-declaration, because re-examination of the passengers' baggage would mean the officer has to stay on for more hours. But the third factor is the most important one: The money factor. The following is a verbatim version of a dialogue that took place at a particular airport:

Customs officer: "Well Mr... You cannot bring two video cassette recorders. I'll confiscate one and charge you Rs 45,000 for the other. It is an expensive one".

Passenger: "We are two, myself and my wife. She could have stood at another counter and cleared the second VCR, which is

There is a beautiful term for bribe: risk allowance. A Gulf passenger disclosed that he witnessed someone making Rs 10,000 in four hours from four passengers...

for my brother. It is not for sale. I do not have 45,000 to pay duty".

Officer: "How much do you have?"

Passenger: "Twenty".

Officer: "Okay. I'll settle it for 20. You see, I am taking a risk. If I am caught for charging you less, I'll lose my job. So you have to pay for the risk I take. Rs 15,000 is the duty and Rs 5,000 is the risk allowance."

The passenger in question later told the press that on the same day, the same officer collected Rs 2,000 each from two other passengers ahead of him in the queue and a thousand from a third man. A total of Rs 10,000 as "risk allowance" from four passengers in just four hours of duty.

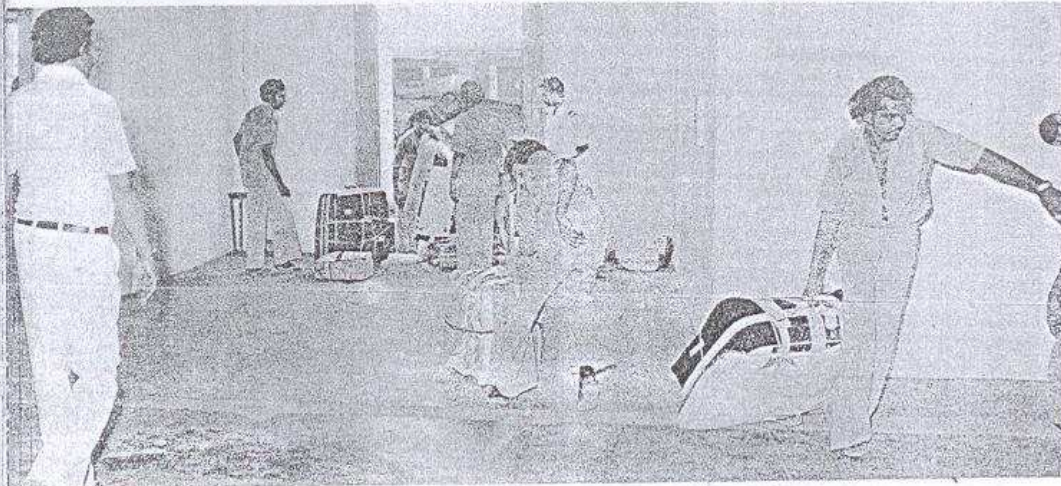
But that is only the beginning of the passenger's problems. As he leaves the customs hall a posse of porters pounce on him offering to load the luggage on a taxi. At Trivandrum airport, in the absence of trolleys, the porter menace begins at the hall itself. And if the passengers are taking the bus run by ex-servicemen from the Bombay international airport he has to depend on the porters to load them on the bus. Although the portage is officially fixed at various airports, the porters too fleece the passengers. At Trivandrum airport, although the per baggage portage is fixed at Rs 2, porters charge Rs 10 for bringing each item of luggage to the bus or taxi plus another Rs 5 for loading them on to the bus. These are done by different men and each has to be paid separately. After which comes the turn of the taxi operators to demand their pound of flesh.

At Trivandrum and Bombay airports cops are posted to hold the taximen in leash. At Bombay international airport, one has to pay at a specified counter, get a receipt and just occupy the taxi that is allotted. No arguments at the airport. However, THE WEEK correspondent witnessed a row between an illiterate passenger and a taxi-driver when the taxi reached Santa Cruz airport. The taxi-driver was demanding extra payment though he is supposed to get the fixed rate from the pool managers at the international airport. Here again the funny thing is that there are two rates for taxis at the airport arranged by the authorities and the ordinary ones just across the airport premises. For the airport taxis one has to pay more. And the explanation given is that at the airport the police take down the number of the taxi and the name of the passenger to take action if the driver misbehaves or if the passenger is waylaid. One has to pay extra for the added security, one is told. But the security is often illusory. Incidents of Gulf passengers being looted on the way are many, in many cases, the taxis halting on the way on the pretext of mechanical trouble and goondas using the opportunity to rob the passengers. Even customs staff have been waylaid.

The passenger's next hurdle is getting a seat on a domestic flight to his final destination. More often than not, even if he has a confirmed ticket he is told that his name is simply 'missing' from the list of passengers.

The missing link can however be found for a sum of Rs 200 to Rs 500 depending on the season and even 1,000, if it is Bakrid, Ramzan, Onam or Christmas. A staff member of the International Airport Authority of India (IAAI) admitted that there were touts operating within the airport premises who arranged air tickets, or hotel accommodation and seats in long-distance buses for those who cannot get the connecting flight. A Keralite who has been working at Santa Cruz for years felt that most of the undesirable elements are Malayalis themselves and the victims are often Gulf passengers hailing from Kerala.

"The link between these passengers and touts is established when the poor man first arrives in Bombay in search of a Gulf



Thank God, it's over. Repacking after the examination

PICS: M K VARGHESE

job," he said. "The agents simply 'take charge' of him. He is taken to the shady joints in Bombay and introduced to the hitherto unknown world of wine and women. Finally, after bleeding him white, he is packed off to the Gulf. The connection is kept alive. When he returns, he is asked to bring back things. If he has no money to pay duty the agents would pay. He cannot sell the goods he brings to anyone of his choice. The touts are the buyers. They fix the price too."

A Gulf passenger disclosed that when he did not get the connecting flight he was escorted to a hotel by Malayali touts promising to 'take care of' all his problems. They were four in the taxi. All the four demanded commission for arranging a room for him in one of Bombay's shady joints. And agent

came offering to buy the cloth he had brought from the Gulf. He took the bundle to another room saying he would measure it. He came back and said it was only half of the length the passenger had told him. There was no point in arguing.

At Santa Cruz, a security man, who had instructions to stop all, except bonafide passengers, from entering the airport introduced a tout to THE WEEK. He was coming out of the airport building. Evidently the board, banning non-passengers, had no effect. Commodore D S Tilak who introduced the ban soon after he took charge as the general manager of the airport, made it clear that the ban was introduced mainly to keep out the touts dealing in airline tickets. But he is facing stiff resistance from his own staff, who have much to gain from the operation of

Despite the ban on non-passengers entering the domestic airport at Bombay, sale of tickets in black continues unabated. Touts freely walk in and out and operate hand-in-hand with airport staff. During the peak period a connecting flight costs Rs 1,000 extra.



Porters too get a share. That is how ripped open boxes reach home.

these touts. But that is not the end of the story for the hapless passenger.

The final stage of extortion is when the passenger fails to get the connecting flight. There are touts who advise him to take a bus. Luxury bus, video coach, only Rs 280 to Cochin—that is the oral campaign. The bus leaves the next day. Or in the evening. So, he is taken to a hotel for rest and relaxation. There he coughs up Rs 250 for a dingy room in which he might spend just a few hours. But he would have to pay that heavy a price for those few hours—and the tout pockets from the hotel manager Rs 30 as commission for taking him to the hotel.

Then comes the bus journey. The promised video may not be present. The conductor explains that it is because of the latest government order banning such luxuries for Bombay-Kerala passengers. Now comes the vital announcement. "There would be special squads of the customs at various points en route. They would check all that you Gulf passengers have. It is better to pay them. So all Gulf passengers are requested to pay Rs 500 each." (This again depends on season. Sometimes the rate could be as low as Rs 30 each.) After arguments they settle for Rs 200. The passengers say, at times in spite of handing over the bribe to the busmen, there are checks midway and further duty is charged. The busmen halt at various checkpoints and return saying they have done the needful. The passengers have no way of finding out if the bribe has been paid or not.

The final indignity is, however, yet to come. The bus never reaches Cochin. Somewhere in Malabar, when the number of passengers dwindle, they are "transhipped" on to a jeep and left at Trichur. "What about Cochin?" "No, this bus never goes to Cochin. The tout who bought you the ticket cheated you. Did he say Cochin? See, your ticket says Trichur only," the passenger is told.

Now the state transport conductor wants his pound of flesh. The porters at the bus station too join in asking for their share of the petro-dollar. And the passenger is still at least 8 hours away from home if he lives in Trivandrum, five days after leaving Dubai. So he pays the conductor and the porters, hoping he will finally reach home. Hoping....

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ