



The Indian **EXPRESS**

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE



THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

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Adventures of an NRI

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Aug 22, 2010

Flying in from Paris to New Delhi airport in the wee hours of a January morning in 1998, I was greeted by a chauffeur waiting to drive me to my destination on the outskirts of Lucknow. I had come on a five-day market visit and for some research with consumers for an Indian client. My research team had already reached the day before to make preparations.

The team members of my research recruiting agent had always been very good to me and they were so in particular that day since not only had I come from faraway France, I had driven a long distance to be on time to meet the consumer group. So they were very indulgent and asked me several times if I needed some refreshment. Even though I was not too hungry, I gave in and asked them to get me some Tiger.

After quite a few hours, the recruitment company manager came to meet me, looking dejected. She apologised saying they could not get Tiger anywhere in the city. I was shocked. Just the week before I had received a report from Britannia that Tiger, the biscuit brand we had created for them, was doing very well in

the market and that it had even reached rural markets. So, I immediately called up my client in Bangalore to ask what the problem was and why was Britannia's distribution unable to make Tiger biscuits available in and around Lucknow. Within two hours the Britannia area manager came to meet me at the research venue outside the city. He said he did not understand what the problem was and took me to the kirana shops just outside the research venue. And sure enough, there were plenty of Tiger biscuits there.

The confusion was cleared when my recruiting agent sheepishly confessed that as I was an NRI coming from Europe and had asked for Tiger, she naturally assumed it must be some alcohol I wanted. She had heard of Tiger Beer and they figured there must be some Tiger drink and so they combed every liquor store in the area. I then understood that I was carrying the image of a stupid NRI. Even though the brand new Tiger brand had become very popular at that time, they could not connect this Tiger to an NRI. They connected alcohol rather than biscuits to an NRI and the irony is that I am a teetotaler.

One of the biggest dreams in my life was to give a certain level of comfort to my parents. They had suffered enough hardship, migrating from East Bengal, the refugee colony where they lived was dark and life at our subsequent rented homes was no song either.

So when I could afford it, I asked them to find a home in a good neighbourhood in Kolkata. On the suggestion of friends, I bought an apartment for my parents at Mandeville Garden in 1991. In the winter of 1992, I came to India to spend a few days with them in their new home. One day, at about 11 am, as I took a walk to discover the neighbourhood, I was thrown off balance. In fact, I remember being totally bewildered as to how my friends could advise me to come to such a place. At every corner, I could see mostly young, well-dressed women, sitting, chatting, laughing and gossiping in front of houses or on the steps before them. I rushed back home in anger and asked my mother why we had chosen to live in such a place; did they know that we were in a red light district? Several relatives had come visiting us and none of them could understand what I was fuming about and why I was carrying on about prostitutes. I immediately marched them all out of the apartment to show the stylish girls standing around in street corners. They burst out laughing and just wouldn't stop. It turned out that these were young mothers who had come to pick up their tiny tots from school. There's a famous school called South Point near Mandeville Garden. As they come from distant places and the children's session lasts three hours, the mothers don't go back home after dropping the children off. They either do their errands nearby or wait patiently to collect their children after school. That was clearly another NRI stupidity I displayed.

An NRI Bengali friend once told me a heart rendering story of how despite the fact that his two sons were born and brought up in France, he instilled in them a great love and sense of belonging for Bengal. On when they were

in a train in Bengal, they said a few words in Bengali but when other passengers continued the conversation they couldn't answer them. Later my friend overheard some passengers whispering and laughing about the "two stupid NRI guys from Paris." He was heartbroken but tried to hide his emotions by making it into a joke. There are NRIs who stay connected to India by watching Bollywood films. My five-year-old grand daughter goes to ballet class in London. When I ask her to show me a dance, she opens YouTube and does a Bollywood number, singing You are my Sonia... with a Cockney accent.

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