

Becoming an NRI at any cost. Is it worth it?

Now even an Indian MP is involved in smuggling out Indians to make them NRIs. The basic details of the sensational news of an Indian MP trying to smuggle out a woman and a teenager on the diplomatic passports of his wife and son from India to Canada are well known in the NRI world by now. But there is a new twist to the immigration ring as illegal human trafficking usually involves shady travel agents and smugglers - now 'an Honourable Member' is also a partner in this crime.

The MP used his VIP treatment enjoyed at airports. An MP's diplomatic red passport means he/she is not checked at immigration like normal passengers. The MPs also get 'a courtesy', which means no standing in line, no showing of passports, no verification. They come in with their secretary or assistant and go to the VIP lounge while their aide checks their baggage, fills up their forms and gets the immigration stamps. When the flight is boarding, they move to the plane without the hassle of queuing up like other passengers.

At New Delhi's international airport, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MP Babubhai Katara followed the same system and was about to board a flight to Toronto with his 'wife' and 'son', when another woman passenger lost her passport. During the checking that followed, it was discovered that the woman was not Katara's wife Shardaben, but Paramjeet Kaur and the boy, Amarjit Singh, was not the MP's son! Thus, the crime was discovered quite by chance! The arrest of the MP in this human trafficking case may just be the tip of the iceberg.

Later, police claimed that Katara had fraudulently taken different people out of the country at least thrice in the past, using his family's passports to take total strangers abroad and forging immigration stamps. Katara is not alone in this crime ring, as some fly-by-night travel agent must have brought in the illegal immigrants.

Soon, this link in Jalandhar was unearthed with the travel agent holding 34 passports and a computer used in making forged visas. And Katara is not the only MP named in this racket as police are set to question some more honourable members.

What makes Indians take such enormous risks to go and settle abroad? Basically, it is the lure of higher income and the so-called 'good life' - mostly for the uneducated or under educated. A rich state like Punjab leads the list - young unemployed Punjabis will pay any price, take any route and undergo any hardship to migrate abroad.

A few years ago, these Punjabis first took a flight to Moscow and then travelled overland to Eastern [Europe](#) and on to Germany before landing in Britain in trucks carrying frozen foods. If they were not frozen to death, they disappeared into the darkness. Another route was to first go to Nairobi in Kenya and on to Lagos and then to Southern Europe or the United States. Others pretended to be singers or hockey players to get troupe or team visas and then disappeared after their arrival.

Now a more dangerous route has emerged as they fly to West African countries like Senegal and take a boat from Dakar to the Canary Islands of Spain and into mainland Spain. More dangerous is the horrendous boat ride from Morocco across the Straits of Gibraltar and on the shores of Southern Spain. Or, the flight to the Balkans, boat into Italy and on to Vienna in Austria and thence to Germany and Britain. Many die of exposure on the high seas. Recently, a group of 35 Punjabis were sent back from their sea ordeal in West Africa. On reaching home, one of them vowed that he would

try again!

Some Gujarati illegal immigrants are equally resourceful. A newer route to the golden state, California, starts in a South American country like Colombia or Ecuador and to Mexico and cross border into the US. All along these long-winded routes, there are gangs of smugglers who keep them moving - never mind proper rooms or food or safety. And all this for less than \$10,000 in cash. Raising this amount for low-income families means they have to sell their home or land; if they do not make it, all is gone.

Once they land in these countries, their ordeal is not over as they are present illegally and work without proper documents. So they work at much lower wages for longer hours. Since their employers take a risk in giving them work, they fully exploit them. After many years of underground living they may get legal status.

Is it worth it? It must be, considering that now even MPs are involved in this racket!

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