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Tongue-In-Cheek

Aliens at Home

You can't really love them, not when they are so insufferably superior. But you can't really hate them, not when they are so inextricably confused. Gitanjali Prasad sketches a portrait of the classic NRI.

It's a play that's enacted everyday. At the Indira Gandhi International Airport. At Sahar. And at other international airports in India. The plane taxis to a halt and disgorges all manner of passengers who melt into the crowd. And the one family that doesn't. This is the NRI family. You can't miss the brightly coloured synthetics as they chatter noisily in accents which falter clumsily between Yankee and 'desi'-Indian. Ubiquitous chewing-gum accentuates the already pronounced drawl.

The NRI family always has in tow outsize suitcases crammed with gifts for relatives, and a vast variety of clothes to cover any eventuality. For them, this is a homecoming, a grand tour of how the 'other half' lives, and a great opportunity to prove to oneself and the markedly less affluent in India, that the decision to abandon the comfort and rootedness of home for better prospects abroad, was indeed a judicious one. There's no doubting for a second that the NRIs have come from a land of 'milk and honey'. Ninny 'Battyea' (she would have been Nandini Bhatia in India) tells daughter Rads (Radhika) and son Ron (Rohan), "Don't touch anything in this country, OK? Mommy will get your cokes out, the moment we're through with the customs." "Yeah. I suppose that would be safer," agrees Shakey (Shekhar Bhatia), "through I can see they've got coke and Pepsi dispensers here too now." "Oh, Shakey," Ninny remonstrates, "they've got Kleenex and toilet paper too, but I still bring my own, don't I?"

Our NRI family receives a rapturous all-Indian welcome, from the obviously affectionate Bhatia family in India. Papaji, mummyji, chachaji, and chachiji, Babloo and Dubloo, Guddi and Soni, all coo approvingly, make all the right remarks, and whisk our NRI family away to a well-appointed flat, where a traditional repast awaits them.

Ninny, like all good Indian mothers everywhere, tries to coax her offspring to eat before she attends to her own hunger pangs. "This is a 'chap-at-tea', honey just like a taco, see?" "But Mommy," giggles seven-year-old Ron, "in New York you told us that a taco was just like a 'chap-at-tea'!" "Sugar," Shakey hushes his son, "In India, we listen to what big people tell us." "But I am not Indian, Dad, am I?" queries

Ron. The 'Battyeas' exchange helpless glances. They look confused. It's not easy being an NRI family. And it's especially not easy to answer the very basic, fundamental questions posed by a child who is unsure of his identity.

The fond grandparents ask their NRI grandchildren about life abroad. And nine-year-old Rads launches into an animated account of the Sawan festival, Mommy and the other "aunties" had organised. "Yes, hon," Ninny interrupts, "but tell your grandparents about Labour Day, and the 4th of July celebrations. I'm sure everyone would like to hear about that."

For some reason, when the Battyeas, like thousands of other lonely NRI abroad, are in New York, they meet often. They celebrate Diwali, and even distinctly rural festivals, like Basant Panchami or the Sawan festival, which are fading out in urban India. Such celebrations, in a foreign country not noted for its warmth or sensitivity, are important affirmations of ethnic pride. Back home in India, however, it's more enjoyable to be American.

NRIs who are willing to go to great lengths, literally, to procure a cassette of the latest Hindi film video and pay an obscene amount of money for tickets to the latest Amitabh Bachchan or Shah Rukh Khan nite, will, in India, yearn for the latest soaps which have not yet arrived, for the latest fads which sometimes cannot transcend their silliness to cross the shores even in today's more compact world.

The evening brings with it an obligatory round of the shops and a guided tour of the local tourist attractions. The Battyeas take in Delhi's Connaught Place and the Qutab Minar. "See that store, honey," Shakey points out to Rads and Ron, "that's a big store by Indian standards. That's because there is nothing like Toys'r'us or Bloomingdales here, see!" "Why's that, Dad?" Ron queries obligingly. "Because India is a very backward country compared to America, son," "And Rads, notice something about the show-windows?" Ninny asks. "They've still got clothes in year before last's fuchsia colour!" Even if keeping up with the fashion fads of New York is a strain when one is there, the lack of them in India, is one more opportunity to indulge in one-upmanship.

A tour of the Qutab Minar has the Battyeas in their element. "The 'Kootub Menar' is a real old monument, kids. And that's a beggar," Ninny says, gratuitously pointing to an old woman obviously spreading out her palm for alms. "There are a lot of poor people in India, aren't there?" Ron asks, a little overwhelmed by the obvious poverty all around. "Oh yes, honey, India is a very poor country," both parents echo.

"I'm not an Indian, am I, Dad?" Ron says, quite worried now. "I am American, ain't I?" "Yes, son, you're American," says Dad, comfortingly. But he looks quite

uncomfortable. Through a non-resident India isn't really an Indian, he isn't – not really an Indian, either. In busy metros all over the country, we have NRIs from all over the globe. All searching for an identity. Unfortunately, that's not something one can purchase in any duty-free store in the world.