

**CHAINS BY GB PRABHAT: A DIASPORIC DIMENSION**

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ABSTRACT

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This article uses psychological and neural dimensions encompassing both cognitive and emotional aspects to show the dividend feelings of diasporic sensibility. Prabhat's *Chains* is about time and presenting individual's clash of thought and feelings in divergent social milieus. The traumatic experience of NRI families with the frequent shifting between countries and the identity crises and cultural clashes will be focused on in this paper. The struggle between personal value and corporate value is critically represented through the effective use of cognitive and emotional bubblings.

Keywords: *Diasporic Sensibility, Belongingness, Corporate Psychology, Culture Class, Identity Search*

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GB Prabhat belongs to the newer generation of writers of Indian Writing in English who have begun to look at diverse dimensions of life from a new angle and create literature from those observations. He is a writer of fiction and non fiction and has been on his way to recognition by Indian as well as international readers. His debut novel *Chains*, published in 2000, raised him to much critical acclaim for the contemporary themes blended into it.

It is the story of John, Janakiraman, a non-resident Indian. He returns to Chennai, his home town after serving a top US corporation in Silicon Valley for a long time. Lured by the prospect of coming back home and relieved by the possibility of bringing up his teenaged daughter and young son in the Indian tradition, he accepts an offer by a leading

Chennai-based industrial group and comes back to Chennai. He soon realizes that his apprehensions about his family adjusting to the demands of Indian life are less daunting than the adjustments he himself has to make to settle down in Corporate India. How Janakiraman handles the grave clash between his personal value system and that of his company's is told in a promising style. Prabhata, a Mechanical Engineer and a computer scientist himself, makes an apt use of his professional credentials and personal experience of frequent trips abroad in weaving the fabric of the novel with the problems that the new global economy has spawned. The traumatic experience of NRI families with the frequent shifting between countries and the identity crises and cultural clashes will be focused on in this paper.



Tell me something .You are a VP in Henderson, one of the most respected companies in the world. You are perhaps affluent by American standards. Why do you want to come back to India?(39) asked LN, Lakshmi Narayan of Tamil Nadu ,who stood for new, first generation entrepreneurship in India with his Rs.5000 million empire. He “had become a demi-god of Indian business” with his companies under ISO 9000 certification and striving to “meet the Malcolm Baldrige criteria”. This was the question put to Janakiraman who decided to go back to India after working in US of A for twenty years. Janakiraman, known in California as John for convenience of pronunciation in America, wondered when his prospective employer in Chennai, India came out with this query.

Why do I want to come back to India? It was 11.30 in the night. Anita who had gone out with her classmates is back. Along with her is an American youth. He couldn't have been more than eighteen.(45) Anita , in her early teens, wants to go out with him,Rocky, then.

Janakiraman shuts the door against him declining her request.

Why do I want to come back to India? Again he ponders. This time it his eight-year-old-son, Rahul bringing a polythene packet containing some powder to be sniffed to “feel real good”.

The boy is too confused to decide what he should do. Janakiraman was horrified.

Why do I want to come back to India? Janakiraman continues to question himself. While surfing a channel he happens to learn that East Palo Alto, close to Stanford, a premier institution, close to the Silicon Valley's best companies has one of the highest crime rates in America (42).

Now Janakiraman has an answer for LN .He justifies himself,

You see LN; the most important reason is that I now find America boring and sometimes offensive. I also miss India. I want my children to grow up at least partly

as Indians if not fully. It is because I have made money that I take this decision. I don't have to fend for a living in Madras. Of course I will need to be in some profession. But the Madrasi style of living should not cost that much. Besides I have a family home. I want to go from unsettled to settled (43).

With this intention Janakiraman set out to India. More than him, his children were caught in the cultural shocks ever since they boarded the flight. The need to cope with the fast changing social and cultural scenario in one's own country was experienced by the family during the very journey. The announcements in an oriental accent, the shabby toilet habits of his own countrymen, the functioning of the infrastructure all around, the harrowing check at the immigration desk, the intolerable heat which led to the eruption of rash and allergy on Rahul's body, the customs officials' suspicious unpacking of his baggage much to the embarrassment of the family, made Rahul yearn to go back to California. S.Muthaiah in his write up, “The chains of unexpectedness” in “The Hindu” dated, 3rd September, 2001 said that “Chains” is a slim, easy-to-read book that's almost Spartan in its economy with words but tells an absorbing tale that R. K. Narayan had thought could not be narrated when he had once told Prabhat, “You just can't write a story with its focus on the world of Indian business. His experience of working with corporates in India and the considerable time he has spent with Indian families in the U.S. during frequent visits to America's computer suburbia, he's welded Chains.”

It was after Anita was born that America began to bother Janakiraman. The extreme predictability of social life began to bore him. The traffic lights worked. On dialing, the telephone always rang and the insurance bills arrived on time (28).

That is why he decided to leave the settled comfortable life style to give his children their motherland's heritage and a sense of belongingness. Muthaiah stated that Prabhat was speaking of both experiences, at home and abroad, points out that the moment you buy a house in the U.S., you mortgage



yourself to America and as the years pass, you grow used to the comforts there particularly that things work. On the other hand, in India, there is this strange mix of brilliant corporate decisions as well as deep faith in things like Vaasthu and offerings to the pantheon to make things work. The question was inevitable. Why didn't you put down roots in America? And I cheered when he said, "Because I love Madras, warts and all". And he went on to explain in a bit of storytelling. There was a VIP from the U.S. whom he was hosting in Madras one day and they started with the car being grazed, proceeded to a traffic jam when the signal lights did not work and no policeman was visible, discovered the visitor had had his pocket picked as they entered a five-star restaurant for lunch and got stuck in the lift when they returned to the hotel. It was an abashed Prabhat who rather diffidently asked his guest how he had enjoyed Madras, as he was about to leave. A broadly smiling visitor warmly replied, "I've never had a more exciting day in my life! You don't know how monotonous life can get when everything works and you do the same thing routinely every day!"

Janakiraman's euphoria about coming back to his motherland evaporated when his table was changed as per vaasthu on the order of the management. He felt the pinch of the superiority of the hierarchy in the work place hither to unfamiliar to him in US. There was a perfect bonhomie between him and his boss in US. To cite an incident, Janakiraman asks Dave before leaving,

"If in a year's time, I find out that it was a mistake, can I come back to my job?" Dave shook his head, almost sadly, "No". The firmness of Dave's answer upset Janakiraman. He almost snarled, "Why, did I not work for twenty years?" Snarling at your boss was a liberty you could take only in America (2). The answer was: "Did I not pay you for twenty years?" The cold, ruthless, nobody-is-indispensable-logic of capitalism (3).

However, the chains of bureaucracy entangled around him. The freedom and flexibility he relished in his top corporate way of functioning came under a great threat in his home town. Rahul's lonely feeling, playing cricket with a baseball bat, his not

being happy with the dirty cricket bats of other boys are realities hard to digest. Even Janakiraman's uniformed chauffeur, the so called driver's servile attitude made the former feel like a medieval king (70). Rahul's problems remained and in fact grew worse with his admission into a school. The boy was offended as his teachers and classmates made fun of his American accent. Janakiraman himself had problems. In spite of being a seasoned Madrasi his language became intelligible to the local people. A lot of confusion with lifts and elevators. But he knew Tamil whereas his son was an American with an Indian name and Indian parents (71). Janakiraman, as a boy, never had any problems with Madras' humidity but the same humidity drenched him. But the native flavours of food surpassed the western pizzas or burrito. He was also pleasantly surprised when Rahul learnt to enjoy cricket better than baseball. The father got nostalgic about how he himself had been a die-hard cricket fan as a student. He fondly recalled how he ate tamarind rice, the coconut rice and the curd rice in neat, banana-leaf laden packets along with his friends. On the other hand Rahul, tired of his grandma's sambhar wanted to eat a pizza, followed by Kulfi, an Indian ice-cream which he relished better than Dreyer's.(93).

As a father he had to face joy and embarrassment when Anita's professors congratulated him for her winning a prestigious award and also told him that she was not a happy child, probably deprived of parental attention and affection. He realized his mistake. Then to his further shock came Rahul having been beaten up by his teachers, a thing unknown in California. *There teachers were terrified about touching the children (157).* Rahul was reluctant to go to school. When the father wanted to know the reason for beating, it happened to be Rahul's Californian accent Tamil. Janakiraman explained to the principal, Ms.Ganapathy, *"If this had been America, this guy would be behind bars for a number of charges-criminal assault, child abuse..." (162)The response was, "This is how things are done in India. I told you this is not an unusual incident. Other parents don't complain" (162).* He was about to leave the school threatening to initiate legal action when the



correspondent of the school intervened to and assured to take care of Rahul.

Disillusioned even with the things at the work place Janakiraman was surprised to get a call from his former American boss Dave offering him the same job that he did as he could not get the right replacement till then. The same Dave who refused him when he asked him if he could come back, Janakiraman was perplexed at the turn of events. A Japanese team of visitors was to visit LN Centre. All the arrangements were made. The visitors arrived. The lift operator was ready to start the lift. Power cut. The visitors were garlanded; kumkum and sandalwood paste were put on their foreheads. It was 40 degrees Celsius. They had to climb five floors. The power cut affected the air-conditioning too. The visitors were panting and sweating. It was an important deal for the company.

These are the practical chains that bind people in India and prevent smooth functioning of things. A chance reading of the following views expressed by an Indian on his coming back to his home country after seven years of stay in the US endorses the effects of the reverse brain drain. Here are the things you might notice, conveniently categorized:

General life: Yes, it is dirty, and dusty. People litter and spit and urinate in public. It was always like this, so you shouldn't let it bother you. If this is going to irritate you, don't come back. Yes, there is corruption. But if you're going to be doing a job (as opposed to doing your own business), you will not be exposed to much of it. Most vendors and service providers are unreliable. They won't come on time. They will not deliver on time. Quality will be lacking. Some will disappear without warning you. (Navin Kabra)

America has its arresting chains too. Man is free yet everywhere he is in chains as Rousseau assessed wisely. More so in case of diaspora. When Janakiraman first landed in Maryland he had problems with lifts and elevators. It took him years to get adjusted to a certain extent though he felt his roots were in Chennai. After his children attained a certain age he wanted them to come back to India for

safety, security, heritage and his own satisfaction. He was too shocked to realize the gap that widened between the east and the west during his absence in India. He was not at home in his homeland and the novel has an open ending with a call from Dave, his former CEO, offering him the job he did for twenty years in US-VP in Henderson and the boss of strategic planning Dave says they are not able to get a suitable replacement in his place in Silicon Valley.

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