



Sujeet Rajan

Across the Border

The issue of how to deal with illegal immigrants is perhaps the most vexatious, perplexing issue in this country. I got a sense of the dilemma two years ago.

One evening summer of 2008 when I reached back home, my wife told me that she had been awakened early that morning by a loud commotion in our apartment building. We lived on the first floor of a four-storey building in Norwalk, Connecticut, opposite the City Hall. Woken up by the rush of feet and incessant banging on a door downstairs, petrified in the dark, she got up and peered through the windows overlooking the front of the building. A police car was parked, lights flashing. Our one-year-old son woke up wailing, and she had to pacify him.

Next morning, I came to know through neighbors and the supervisor of the building that the police and perhaps personnel from the Department of Homeland Security had come by. Nobody was sure of what exactly happened; the super was evasive. But one thing was clear. A bunch of Mexican men who lived in the lone basement apartment in the building were no more to be seen. Were they arrested or had they run away? Nobody knew.

The owner of the building also owned a diner down the road. Mornings as I walked to the train station to go to work in New York, I would see some of these Mexican men trudge to the diner; perhaps to work there. A couple of them used bicycles. I occasionally exchanged nods with them.

The apartment building had a car garage in the basement as well as an open lot behind it on the banks of the Norwalk River. The apartment where these Mexican men used to live was adjacent to the garage. I had seen them park bicycles there. Several times, I had seen some of the Mexican men talk on phones inside the garage and the lot outside. Once, one of them had given a long, wistful look as my wife and I passed along carrying our son from the car. He was clutching a phone. Getting out of the car, I had seen him cut off the conversation.

That evening as I walked through the garage, I saw a metal almirah next to the bicycles. A cord was entwined around the almirah, as if to hold the doors together from opening apart. A small empty glass aquarium was placed on a ledge next to the wall. There was no water, no fishes in it. But it looked clean, as if recently purged of life and its effluents. Or perhaps it was new, never used. There was also a pair of

skates lying on the floor. I thought, for one bizarre minute, of a Mexican man skating furiously on the streets, trying to evade police cars in pursuit.

The previous day had been a revelation for me in more ways than one. The night before I had stayed back in Manhattan, and early morning - the same morning when my wife had been awakened by the commotion in our apartment building - courtesy of a fellowship from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the New York Community Media Alliance, I was part of a group of journalists who were taken on a field trip to White Plains, New York, a burgeoning fast-developing suburb less than an hour's drive from both New York City and Norwalk.

We met the city's mayor, the police commissioner, visited an outreach group center that worked for the rights of illegal immigrants, went to a public school where students of Mexican origin spoke, visited the offices of the largest community newspaper in the city, owned by Gannett, to interact with the journalists there. Nobody had a convincing answer to why the immigration system was broken and flawed, what the solutions were.

At the end of the visit, came the centerpiece: a dinner hosted by a local restaurant owner of Hispanic-origin where several Mexican families had been invited by the city. Officials were there in large numbers, including the Deputy Mayor, as were several police officers from the White Plains Police Department. All the Mexican families invited were illegal immigrants residing and working in the town, without documents. At least the parents were; their children, many of them born in America, came too.

The entire day we had heard from the city officials that immigrants were welcome in town, it was the only way the city could blossom into one of the best suburbs in the country; they could never run short of a pool of labor to complete their building projects in record time, attract more business; grow wealthy.

But the skeptics that journalists are, we looked closely for cracks in remarks, to wedge our own preconceived notions and truths between their lines. But the show was impeccable. None of the officials cracked under intense scrutiny and questioning; including from several Hispanic journalists from the West Coast.

The interaction with the Mexican families in White Plains now seem a surreal experience, with the dire situation in Arizona which threatens to fan out into other states.

That evening, I sat at the same table with a family of six, a Mexican husband and wife, and their two school-going children, a girl, 12, and a boy, 10, and a toddler, and a relative of the husband's. With the two older children acting as translators, and between eating mouthfuls of the delicious food, I gleaned that the family had lived in White Plains for more than 10 years. They lived in an apartment

which they rented; were happily settled.

Behind us on another table sat a group of police officers with some city officials; eating the same food, bantering and laughing. There were smiles all-around. Some 50 Mexicans must have been in the room. Police officers went around the room, addressing some of the Mexicans by name, chatting with them.

Some of the Mexicans said not all those who had been invited had come. Some thought it was a trap to get them all together, to arrest and deport them en masse. But the ones who came knew better: in a city of less than 60,000 people, the city knew where each and every one of them stayed. The city could with the utmost ease, brutally, take their lives away as they had helped encourage and built.

At the end of the dinner, and when everybody came outside, there were photo ops. The journalists and organizers of the trip clapped in tandem. The city officials and the police officers basked, glowed in the attention. The Mexican families slowly drifted away, back to their homes. We took our bus back to Manhattan. When I reached home that evening, my wife recounted her story.

In late Fall of 1998, a few months after I came to this country, and doing a master's program at Southampton College of Long Island University, I used to stay at a large house in town, located on an acre of property. The owner, a stock broker, used it primarily for his summer vacations when he and his friends would come to soak in the sun and the nightlife. For a while, I lived there on my own, house watching. A Mexican man in his early thirties used to work on the grounds, building a decorative stone fence around the house. It was excruciatingly slow going, hard work, but he always had a smile on his face.

Once, while chatting to him, he offered a lift in his car to Queens, NY, as I had told him that I planned to take the train that coming weekend to Manhattan. I accepted gratefully. On the way, as he was driving, he asked me if I had a driver's license. I told him no, was new to the country. He looked at me in his half quizzical, half jocular manner, and said that it could be arranged, but I would need some money. I told him I didn't have the money for a car. He looked at me and said, 'don't worry, when you are ready let me know. You need a car in this country.' We let it go at that. New and naïve to the country, I didn't comprehend the implications of what had been suggested to me. I thought he would help me in getting a license from the DMV and procure a cheap second hand car for me. On second thoughts, maybe that is what he meant.

Soon after, he stopped working at the house, and I didn't see him again. When I asked the owner, he said he didn't know too where he had gone, but he was going to get somebody else to work on the fence.

(Write to Sujeet Rajan at editor@iexpressusa.com)

Kashmir's capital conflict worth noting

Rakesh K. Kaul

The recent flare up in the State of Jammu and Kashmir has resulted in the loss of lives, a loss of hope and a general belief that there exists no governance apparatus which can maintain law and order in the Valley of Kashmir. If there is one lesson that one can draw from the history of Kashmir it is that the application of force, either by the jihadist movement or by the indigenous stone pelters or the counterforce on the part of the security apparatus has not been able to change the status quo. This episode is likely to end up being one more addition to the cycle of violence that has permeated the Valley. Meanwhile one's heart goes out to the suffering of the families who have lost young ones to senseless violence.

Calls are being made to the Prime Minister of India to provide a political solution. Other calls are being made to announce a special economic package that can address the needs

of the frustrated Kashmiri youth who for the last twenty years have been fed on a steady diet of a Promised Land which is autonomous, independent or part of Pakistan depending on the paymaster of that particular group. It is well understood that these forces are bent on exploiting the spontaneous outburst of the youth to undermine the democratic process and bring down the elected government which was a high point on Kashmir's road to stability and recovery.

If there is one lesson that the Kashmiri people have to learn it is to be careful what one wishes for. Per capita income in India Kashmir is more than 2.5 times the per capita income in Pakistan Kashmir, which is only around \$185 per year. Total annual Budget for Pakistan Kashmir is only \$300 MM or one tenth that on the Indian side. It is clear that the political demands are tantamount to committing economic suicide by either becoming a failed

independent state or joining a failing state on the Pakistani side. It is as if the West Germans were told by their leaders that they should join East Germany, leaving behind a successful democratic society for a failed totalitarian one, all in the name of Islamic identity. Kashmiris need to be disabused quickly of the notion that the world would have an interest in funding an emergent, unsustainable theocratic state next to unstable Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The first lesson that the Kashmiris have to ponder is the one from the school of tough love. It is that in life independence is not given it is earned. It is earned by demonstrating responsible behavior not irresponsible violence. If Kashmiris want to achieve their dream then they have to show that they can be trusted with the rights that they want and that they are capable of bearing the heavy responsibility that falls on their shoulders given the strategic location of that state. It

starts with accepting the responsibility for the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley and recognizing that Diversity and Tolerance are core foundational principles that once made Kashmir great and in the future will make it more palatable to the world community in any political solution that is finally implemented.

If there is another and equally important lesson it is that when Capitalist Market forces are subverted by Government mechanisms then they actually can breed conflict. The oligarchy in the Kashmir Valley that rules the State of Jammu and Kashmir has a vested interest in perpetuating the conflict because it increases their bargaining power with the central Government in extracting more and more concessions.

(Rakesh K. Kaul is the chairman of Spheronomics)

(Article will be continued next week)

