



Seeking validation abroad: Borrowed respect, fragile nationalism

True respect does not arrive from visas or tariffs, nor from applause abroad. It is born only when we stop looking outward for validation, and begin to live from inner strength. That alone is dignity. Everything else is illusion

**FIRST
Column**



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For decades, success in India has meant distance. The farther one could go from home, the more accomplished one appeared. Families saved not so that their children might build here, but so they could leave for farther pastures. Coaching centres, consultancies, migration agencies, and an entire economy grew around this one idea: respect lies in being elsewhere. And now, a stroke of a pen in Washington, a sudden hike of tens of thousands of dollars in visa costs, and whole cities in India panic. One order abroad, and our dreams here collapse. Seventy years after independence, should this be what freedom amounts to: waiting anxiously for another country to decide whether our future may proceed?

Borrowed pride is not respect

What we call pride has often been borrowed. Indians abroad were once praised for their diligence and discipline. But let us be honest: much of that behaviour was driven not by inner transformation but by caution. We knew that a misstep could mean losing the only chance to escape poverty, so we were careful. It was not always dignity, but necessity.

Now, with larger numbers overseas and social media encouraging loud assertions of identity, that caution has faded. At times, some of our less admirable habits travel with us: a casual disregard for order, civic lapses, behaviour that unsettles local communities. Unsurprisingly, societies that once welcomed us unquestioningly are beginning to push back. The contrast is striking: restraint once gave Indians abroad a reputation for reliability, but swagger without substance invites resistance. Respect remains fragile when it rests only on how long others will tolerate us.

The numbers don't lie, but they also don't save

Seventeen per cent of the world's people, and barely four per cent of global trade. That is our position. And yet we keep boasting of past wisdom, while present



THE DEEPER PROBLEM IS NOT ECONOMIC BUT INNER. FOR GENERATIONS, WE HAVE BEEN TRAINED TO DEPEND ON SOMEONE ELSE: A RULER, A SAVIOUR, A FOREIGN ECONOMY

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weakness stares us in the face. It was not always so. In earlier centuries, India's exports of textiles and spices were so prized that European powers competed violently to control them. Traders travelled across seas for what was produced here. Today, the situation is inverted: our exports are so easily substituted that buyers can switch to Vietnam or Bangladesh without hesitation. This reversal should disturb us more than it does.

We console ourselves that our services sector proves our strength. But look closer. It is dependence disguised as pride. Dollars flow in not because we are truly indispensable, but because we are largely affordable. Take away the cost advantage, and much of the so-called strength weakens. A nation that leans only on being cheap stands like a man on borrowed crutches: upright only until someone kicks them away.

Why the illusion persists

The illusion persists for one simple reason: comfort feels safer than courage. Parents still urge their children to secure

stable jobs, preferably abroad. Success is measured not by what one builds, but by the salary in dollars.

Even religion, which at its heart is discipline and inner clarity, is too often reduced to spectacle: noise without depth, rituals performed for display, festivals turned into processions of inconvenience.

The deeper problem is not economic but inner. For generations, we have been trained to depend on someone else: a ruler, a saviour, a foreign economy.

To stand alone feels risky, so we clutch at authority the way a drowning man clutches at a floating log: it keeps him afloat for a moment, but never takes him to the shore.

Social media feeds the illusion further. Clips circulate claiming that all modern science was already present in our scriptures, that the West merely borrowed from us. Such tales offer comfort, but they also excuse us from effort today. If we already had everything, why build anything new?

If we were once the cradle of knowl-

edge, then today's weakness must be someone else's fault. Such thinking is convenient because it demands nothing, but it also ensures we never rise.

The cost of performance

There was a time when Indians abroad earned respect through quiet contribution. They studied, worked hard, and built reputations patiently. Today, a new generation sometimes mistakes visibility for value: assuming that identity asserted loudly will command respect. But true respect is never won by noise.

Religion, too, has suffered this shift. What should be an inner clarity is often projected as outward spectacle. Devotional music played at high volume, celebratory rituals in airports, mass processions that inconvenience others: we call this culture and demand recognition for it.

But culture should inspire admiration by its substance, not by insistence. The moment one sprays it on people's faces, it stings instead of delighting.

This performative pride also has consequences. Abroad, it can fuel resentment. At home, it fosters an environment where talent suffocates, seriousness is mocked, and superstition is rewarded. The same psychology drives both: a preference for appearance over substance.

Respect must be earned, not declared

Real respect comes only when you add value. Indians who have built companies, advanced science, or taken leadership roles abroad are honoured not because they demanded respect, but because they delivered it through their work.

The same is true at home. Recognition follows contribution, never the other way around. We have not built enough strong centres of knowledge: universities, research labs and institutions of thought, yet we cover our insecurity with slogans. We confuse volume for strength. But strength does not need to shout to make its presence felt; it stands on its own.

There is no shortcut here. If we want our youth to stay, we must give them reasons to stay: universities that reward inquiry, industries that invite risk, and a society that respects knowledge rather than ridiculing it. Without this, the cycle continues: our best leave, we cling to their success, and one policy abroad unsettles us all over again.

Beyond illusion

The visa fee is not the real problem. Nor are the protests abroad. They are reminders. The real problem lies within: our addiction to borrowed pride, our reluctance to face our own weakness. Borrowed respect is like borrowed light: it shines only until the lender withdraws it. Or like borrowed coins: they may glitter in your hand, but they never belong to you. The nations we depend on today may change their rules tomorrow, and once again we will tremble.

But the real trembling is not of policies, it is of our own unsteady feet. Until we learn to stand without leaning, there will be no standing at all.

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