

The Age

Focus on the human factor

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Illustration: Jim Pavlidis

The assaults on Indian students and members of the larger Indian community in Australia over the past few months have puzzled us all, Indians and Australians alike. The fundamental issue is the growing number of attacks, which seem to be disproportionately affecting Indians, especially in and around Melbourne.

This is at the root of the current problems and it is this that needs to be addressed in the first instance - the violence, and the reasons behind the violence, whether they are racist elements, robbery related, juvenile alcoholism, drugs, opportunism, or growing knife crime.

It is important to understand that there is anger and frustration in India over what is happening. This has found expression not merely in the media or the 24/7 news channels but in Parliament, in Public Interest Litigation to the Supreme Court of India, and in spontaneous demonstrations in cities around India that have sent their sons and daughters to study in Australia, in preference to more traditional destinations.

The anxious parents of the more than 120,000 Indian students in Australia are asking for clear answers to certain questions: Are our children safe in Australia? Why does it seem that only, or mainly, Indians are the victims? Are the assailants being caught? Are they being punished? Is the situation becoming better or worse?

I cannot overstate the importance of keeping the human element in the forefront in providing credible answers to these questions and sending a clear message to parents far away in India, worrying about their children in Australia.

For this, it is important to go beyond rhetoric. We have to make the situation better. It is necessary to see the results on the ground.

India and Australia have much in common; they are both multicultural, multi-ethnic countries that celebrate their pluralism. It is precisely these commonalities in values and traditions - the democratic values, the vibrant political processes, the strong and independent judiciary, and the free press - that have been instrumental in contributing to the robust political debate in both countries, and rightly so, about the reasons why these incidents are continuing.

In the discussions that I have had with Indian communities all over Australia, many members of whom are proud Australian citizens, there is a bright running thread of how Australia welcomed them when they arrived, of how they have made a future for themselves and their children here, how they have had the opportunity to work hard and to prosper and to contribute, in turn, to the economy of the country of which they are now citizens.

The past few years have seen a substantial increase in the numbers of the Indian community in Australia, especially students. The students are here to study in colleges registered and approved by the competent government authorities. Many of them have taken substantial loans in pursuit of education in Australia. They carry their parents' dreams with them.

Some of them work part-time, including at late hours, within the stipulated rules, to finance their education. Even they are adding value to the Australian economy, just as the older, more established members of the Indian community have been doing and continue to do, through their skills as doctors, engineers, accountants and nurses.

We are told that one of the reasons our students are being attacked in Melbourne is that they take public transport late at night. This may well be a contributing factor. In this case, it should then apply to Indian students all across Australia, including the large numbers in Sydney and significant concentrations in other Australian cities as well, most of whom are in the same situation.

However the students in the other cities do not seem to be facing these incidents on the same scale, or even on a scale proportionate to their lower numbers in other cities. This is a question that needs to be answered.

The several high-level interactions that have taken place between the two governments over the incidents relating to the students, notably between our External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna and Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, indicate the seriousness that both countries attach to resolving the issue.

We recognise that several measures have been taken to address the various issues, many of them complex and interrelated. We have the assurance of the federal and state governments that they are doing everything they can, as a matter of high priority, to deal with them.

It is our earnest hope that the various measures that are being put into place bring about the desired results, in addressing both the situation itself - as well as the perception of the situation - in an open and transparent manner.

In conclusion, let me underline that in an open society such as India, which is the largest democracy in the world, the issue has a deep resonance cutting across the political spectrum. It is not only the Indian media that is exercised. In a rare act, the Leaders of the Opposition in both houses of our Parliament personally met the External Affairs Minister recently, and urged the Government of India to use all diplomatic means at its disposal to ensure the safety and well-being of Indians in Australia. I have been called to India for consultations this week, in the run-up to the upcoming Parliament session, beginning on February 22.

The following remark of India's External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna best sums up our feelings: "Australian leaders had time and again reassured India that the Australian authorities were treating the incidents of assaults with utmost seriousness. However, the incidents seem to be continuing ... non-redressal of this vital issue will cast a shadow on our otherwise excellent bilateral relations."

Sujatha Singh is India's high commissioner to Australia.