

Two Nations and One World

Review of *Passport Photos* by Amitava Kumar
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Aao ab milkar badhe, adhikar apne cheen lain
Kafila ab chal pada hai, ab na roka jayega
- *Safdar Hashmi*

Come let's advance together, let's take back our rights
The procession is now afoot, now it cannot be stopped.
- *translation by Amitava Kumar*

Most *desis* would have a similar anecdote. The quintessential third world immigrant experience as it were. Mine is set in Arlanda Airport, Stockholm. I was on my way back from India to the US and stopped over in Stockholm to meet a friend. The customs official was courteous but was clearly suspicious. Not even the customs officials in Bombay airport, always hoping to find something proscribed and demanding we-all-know-what, had gone through my suitcases so carefully. Despite my offering to leave both my suitcases behind at the airport and take just my backpack for the visit, the officer in Sweden insisted that I open each and every parcel. South Indian Coffee. Pickles. Small gift articles for friends. And, of course, the medicines. That was the worst. They demanded and I had to tell them what each and every pill was for. Crocin is for fevers. Dependal is... Presumably having brown skin makes you a likely drug pusher. The whole thing took about 1.5 hours. My fellow passengers had long departed. My friend, a Pakistani himself, was waiting patiently but without alarm. He had been through similar searches himself. As I left the airport, I shuddered at the thought of how it would have been had I not had a visa to the US. And I couldn't help wondering how they would have treated me if I had an American passport. As every traveller knows, your passport and the visa stamp in it summarizes everything about you. Or does it?

It is what is missed out in one's passport that Amitava Kumar, currently a faculty member in the English Department in Pennsylvania State University, explores in his *Passport Photos*. The book is a charming, exhilarating, thought-provoking attempt at understanding and speaking about the immigrant experience in an "undeniably personal and political way." In the author's own words, "The book is a forged passport. It is an act of fabrication against the language of government agencies." The book, therefore, is structured into sections that correspond to the categories in a real passport. Name, place

of birth, date of birth, ... This novel format when interspersed with evidence of Kumar's multiple talents and occupations – mellifluous poetry, skillful language, great photographs – and his passion makes for a great read. Each section shuttles the reader between the diaspora and the home country, between literary theory and political economy, between Bertolt Brecht and Gulzar. What results is not easy reading, but beautiful. As a famous musicologist said in a different context, “too often beauty in music is confused with sitting on your easy chair in comfort.”

Structuring the book in the form of a passport does occasionally constrain Kumar. He is, for example, forced to introduce a category that is of vital importance to immigrants – language, since the passport “provides no information about my language. It simply presumes I have one.” But it is more than simple presumption. The authorities just don't care what your language is. Here, in the US, you speak in English or else... As Martha Laureano, a clerk in a beef-packing plant in Amarillo, Texas, discovered a few years ago when a Texas judge ordered her to speak English to her 5 year old girl. (See Sam Howe Verhovek, “Mother Scolded by Judge for Speaking in Spanish,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 1995).

The book also has some distracting and bothersome features. Despite a structure that allows the author to weave in outpourings from his multiple talents, it is clear at various points that a certain detour in the narrative is occasioned only by the fact that the author has written a newspaper article on that subject. That these newspaper articles are often fun to read is a different matter. Another minor bother is poor indexing. After having read it, I cannot find where some particular subject is discussed, on which page a certain poem is. But these are quibbles and one can ignore them.

Kumar's spirited response to “a set of pressing concerns in two nations and one world” is extremely timely. At no time in the history of this planet has the world been “one” as much as it is now. The forces of globalization – or, to call a spade a spade, global capitalism – have made sure that no part of the world are left alone in the never ending search for “new markets.” Nothing – food, dress, culture – is immune to becoming a commodity. As Kumar writes in one of his poems entitled “India Day Parade on Madison Avenue”:

I have lost India. You have lost Pakistan.
We are now citizens of General Electric.
In this country, there are no new words for exile.
And if you have nothing to sell,
you have nothing to say
that this, or that, is indeed you.

Kumar is too clever to offer a simple solution to this predicament. But it is clear that his hopes are set on a range of progressive movements, both in the first and the third world, and solidarity between them. Immigrants are, of course, usually good activist-material. As Isabelle de Courtivron pointed out in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Having a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is

absolute; it is to realize that social, political, and linguistic realities could be arranged in numerous other ways.” It is perhaps appropriate that *Passport Photos* ends with a list of immigrant organizations, many of which are at the forefront of the struggle for other ways of arranging these realities. *Kafila ab chal pada hai, ab na roka jayega.*
