

The Unheralded Send-off

By AJAY VISHWANATHAN

Sometimes you look at the person next to you and wonder what is going on in his mind. The tearful father hugged his only daughter in the culminating hours of her wedding, as the son-in-law watched from the backseat of his car.

But I was not looking at the father of the bride; my eyes were fixated on another father standing glumly next to him. I tried to gauge the emotions churning in his head. You see, before coming to this wedding, he had just seen off his youngest son at the airport. The son was following his two brothers who had flown earlier to America for higher studies. The boys were chasing a familiar dream while their father had stood stoically—each of the three times—in the face of one of the most under-appreciated and overlooked moments of pain in a parent's life.

I looked back and waved at my parents who were craning their necks to have a last few glimpses of me before I disappeared into the crowd. At that point, like my girls in daycare, I was excited about what lay ahead for me. In that frenzied elation, I was oblivious to the pain that my parents were going through; they had just waved goodbye to a quarter century of doting allegiance.

Countless reams of paper, innumerable hours of Bollywood histrionics, and an infinite number of weepy eyes have focused on the farewell moment of the bride. But not often do we talk about the farewell involving a youngster departing from home to seek opportunities in the West. Both are heart-wrenching adieus, but the latter appears to be the modest and bashful cousin to her more intense and raucous sister. But if you pat her shoulders and talk to her, you will hear of the same vacuum and sense of loss.

You talk a little longer, you notice a lot more.

From the day a girl is born in India, parents ready themselves mentally to let her go some day. Nobody ponders the possibility of losing her the kind of ambition that seeks distant shores. Nobody loses sleep after the birth of a boy—the presumed lifelong caretaker. And no songs have been sung over the continuing trend of Indian youth embarking on a *doli* that carts them off across the globe.

“My daughter got married recently when she was almost 30, but I lost my son when he was not even seventeen!” mused Mr. Mishra. “He hugged me before his

flight and excitedly set off to pursue a bachelor's degree...while we stood there not knowing what hit us. Life was never the same without him.”

It seldom is. As parents grapple with the pain of the empty nest, every little item the child has left behind in the house becomes a souvenir that revives memories of the past. Not too many young men and women come back home for good after their studies or stints abroad, so the goodbye is almost as permanent as the one at weddings.

Once in a while the children do visit India for a few weeks or the parents make a trip abroad to stay for longer periods, but such consolations are far from perfect. “I want to be with my son but I cannot stay in the U.S. for more than a few weeks,” says Mr. Ravinder. “I feel bored and shackled by my lack of mobility. My dreams of growing old with my son in my own house in Hyderabad have slowly taken a backseat to his American dreams. Nowadays no one even talks about it. Not even my wife.”

As we drove off after dropping our one-year old daughters off at a daycare in suburban Atlanta, for the first time since they were born, I noticed tears in my wife's eyes. We had never left the little ones away

from home, with strangers. “Didn't you notice the girls seemed excited to see so many new faces and toys?” I tried in vain to placate her pangs. “Don't worry, they will be fine.”

However, my mind went back 13 years to the scene at Bombay airport: I looked back and waved at my parents who were craning their necks to have a last few glimpses of me before I disappeared into the crowd. At that point, like my girls in daycare, I was excited about what lay ahead for me. In that frenzied elation, I was oblivious to the pain that my parents were going through; they had just waved goodbye to a quarter century of doting allegiance.

What that man was thinking at the wedding reception was something I could empathize with. It was the same thing my father was thinking about in the photograph where he stands quietly with his arm around me. Just before I boarded my first flight to America.

[Ajay Vishwanathan lives in a world of words and viruses. He has an obsession for one, shows appreciation for the other. A virologist with the Center for Disease Control (CDC), he is also a widely published fiction author.]