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Date: Thu, 22 May 97 8:12:59 EDT  
From: Albert Jesupaul <jesupaul@unix.systems.gec.com>  
Subject: Bodyshopping - A story !

> >>Long story. But interesting..... (Source : A friend)

A quite interesting/realistic depiction of the life of a consultant in US, in contrast to the popular concepts/beleifs back in India

This article describes the fate of Indians who come to America, thinking that they could make a fortune and finally end up making one for others and get exploited for their sake. By Indians, I mean software (s/w) professionals who were in a good position in India and who fall victim to the so called Body Shoppers.

Software is a booming market. Entrepreneurs in India start software companies with just a few PCs and then earn thousands by using the talent of so many graduates from any discipline who take up this profession as it is easily available. I have worked with a software wizard who was basically a B.S. in Zoology! Many choose s/w to come to America, now that the door of MS is closing rapidly and also it is prohibitively expensive (with the recent Dollar Rupee conversion hike). Further, it is a long process GRE, TOEFL, admission fee, reference letters, visa, flight fare, working in McDonald, doing other odd part time jobs, staying in dungeons without heat and hot water facility. After all this, attempts to find work usually result in working for a s/w consultancy and doing Financial Accounting. They would have been done much better if they had followed our Zoology hero!

About a decade ago only students from IIT and top Colleges like College of Engineering, Guindy, and RECs, and who had gone through rigorous study in the main branches of Engg could imagine setting foot in this country. But even they had to study for an MS or Ph.D here before they could get a job. They had to start their life in America with a bank balance of at least \$10,000/- because of the expensive courses they had to take.

Thanks to the s/w boom and the tendency of American companies not to hire people permanently, the contracting business burgeoned and spawned numerous companies whose business was to bring people from India, put them in various corners of the U.S., and shift them wherever and whenever there is a client. The Indians who come here are like a commodity, and lead a gypsy life, but one thing they know better than the U.S. President - they can rattle off the area code of most states, even when woken up from sleep, because they have lived there for at least 2 months. For Indians the life here is better indeed as they can save more from the converted currency. But everything depends on which contracting firm they join.

Most contracting companies (hereafter called Company) are parasites, or pimps. The best word is actually BodyShoppers. There is no symbiosis involved.

The system works like this: They bring in the professionals on an H1 work permit (now reduced to just 1 year from 5 years). They put them at the client site, charge the client about \$8000/- per month but pay their poor employee half as much (including all benefits). Thus the Company gets \$4000 per month, per employee. Imagine if they have 50 employees. It is easy to get such s/w professionals as their availability across the globe is 5 lakhs or more.

The worst part is that these companies are owned by idiots who barely know how to spell software. For them Oracle, Sybase, SQL, HTML, C, C++ all mean the same Dollar. Not only that - Rama, Siva, Madhav, Chetty or Rao, Goel or Vemuri all mean the same Dollar. There is no personal touch only money, money sweeter than honey! I relate the experience of a typical victim, and we cant give him a better name than Mr. Oracle Rao.

When Oracle Rao arrives in America he is at first very excited. A GuestHouse (GH) in-charge comes and picks him up at the airport to drive him at a speed of 120 kmph and take him to the guest house that most companies keep. Rao thinks he is in paradise. IT is like the spider's web waiting to trap the expert in the World Wide Web. Slowly things are revealed to him and he is told that he will be charged for food, stay and transport. A rude shock is he has to go through interviews to get a job which could be anywhere from CA to Maine or Texas. The interviews are over the phone and he may or may not get through. If another Indian is interviewing him, 9 out of 10 cases he will be rejected. Indians are jealous of new competitors. The Company may then subcontract Oracle Rao to some other pimp who then sends him to the client.

For every dollar Rao earns, one is earned by each of the two pimps. Till Rao gets a job he is will be paid a small allowance. This is called the 'BENCH', but it is a loss for Rao since he still has to pay for expenses. But the company is not bothered as it continues to mint money through the other Raos or Reddies who are available in plenty.

The nightmare is that Rao gets the bill from the GH in-charge even before he gets a paycheck! And even the paltry allowance he gets is multiplied by 35 and he is told "You are paid one lakh rupees for doing nothing". Rao does not dare to retort, "But I am paying back Rs. 75000/- by way of rent, food and transport!"

Typically the GH houses about 3 to 4 victims, and each of them pay about \$500 per month for their room rent. Also they have to pay about \$15 per day for food and about \$3 for transport. Since the gypsies dont have a driving license, they are like a bird without wings and are exploited to the fullest extent. They have to depend on the Company for everything and pay exorbitantly for even basic amenities. Most GH occupants are on the 'bench'. The GH is conveniently located about 3 miles from a shopping center, so that the birds cant even walk there and are bound for transport to the GH incharge.

I should describe the food in detail. Only breakfast and dinner are provided for \$15/- While breakfast is just bread and eggs, dinner is mostly potatoes and egg curry or some cheap vegetable like beans. Groceries are bought from wholesale clubs like BJ's at unbelievable prices. You could not buy a loaf of bread for 50 cents anywhere in the U.S. except at these places. Although Indian pickles are served with the meal, I was shocked to find one day that those pickles had expired 6 months ago. The food is definitely is not worth \$15 - hardly \$5 - but Rao does not realize this at the beginning since he would not have drunk

juice or seen a microwave yet. The worst time is between projects. A project can be closed for various reasons. Lack of funds, availability of other Indians at a cheaper price - or due to change of s/w platforms. Sometime the Company itself will be responsible by pushing another employee (victim) to make more money. But for all that, Rao is the one blamed, and he is told that the project is over because he did not do well. Till he gets the next project he may or may not be paid. Rao is on his toes. Since he has to pay the rent, phone bill etc., he has signed a lease, got a car, registered for some extra-curricular activities. Imagine if he had a family with a school-going child. Before his child would have adjusted to the new school, he would have been shifted to another state. School admissions although easy have indirect costs like paying for medical, dental and psychological checkups which are mandatory before admission. Rao pays for all these.

Not only all this, he will also have to buy technical books to update his knowledge for daily work. When he asks for reimbursement it is turned down saying that only if the client demands will these be paid for. Clients are not bothered because even if Rao is not there some other Chetty will be. Rao is fed up and buys them at his own expense. The Company will take the profit accruing from his knowledge, but he has to pay himself for getting it. The expense list is unending - Rao has to pay for gas, auto insurance, car depreciation, furniture etc. When the project ends he may have to shift to another state and the lease has to be broken. When he asks his company to pay for lease breakage they coolly tell him "We don't normally get involved in leases". Rao thinks, "what nonsense! Are you guys involved only in profits?"

Frustrated, he tries to join the Client itself. Americans are much better than *Desis*. But even that is prevented by the Company - who threatens him with a law suit, and the client is asked to pay a huge amount (about \$10,000/-) as finder's fee.

In short, when he tries to go his own way to feed himself, he is prevented. Is he a slave? What happened to basic human rights in this country? Is it not worse than the slavery of Indians under the British for which Gandhiji sacrificed his life. Rao is allowed neither to live nor to die.

The Client is obviously unwilling to pay the 10,000. Furthermore, it realises that it can no longer continue to pay \$8000 per month. The client prefers to hire someone local, or with a green card. Hence, good bye to Rao. Once again Rao has to be on the 'bench'. In case Rao joins the client by paying the finder's fee, he is as good as dead for the Company.

Rao's trials continues... In case he has asked the company to process his Green Card (for the lack of which he has to suffer like chicken on barbecue fire) and yet wants to leave the Company, it will recover from him the \$4000 cost, in addition to the \$2000 for leaving within a year of joining.

This brings to my mind an old Tamil proverb. An elephant while alive and even after death earns thousands for its mahout. But at least the mahout takes care of the elephant. Finally the company gets about 1 lakh for doing nothing even when the victim leaves.

## NOTE

When I received this story from a friend, I wondered how far this is true. There are exceptions to these type of companies, but they're very few. I experienced such companies in my past and so I couldn't deny this in total.

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Ami is a techie, who loves programing and 3d computer games, but her mom is more worried about Ami's eyesight. "Don't sit on the computer Ami", she says, "there are things to be done!" Ami's mom can't be blamed. We can be proud of Miss Universe because she is doing girl things. But when it comes to software talk, people say – 'this is not women's business'.

It all begins when we are kids. When parents buy a new computer, it usually goes into the boy's room. Or, take something as simple as computer games, which introduce children to the basic technology of computers. Kids who play these games have an advantage over kids who don't. Currently, the majority of computer-game players are boys. I think that this is due to the types of games on the market; most of them appeal to boys rather than to girls. They depict violence, emphasize competition, and demand strong hand-eye coordination. I have come across very few games that require practical, or real world problem solving capacities (not military strategy!). They fit in with the way boys tend to be socialized. It's a vicious circle - computer games are mostly made keeping young boys in mind and this gender bias of the games industry contributes to girls' lack of interest in computers.

It's the same story in school. "All right, everyone! You will need to share a computer", says the teacher. The boys don't move; they have already begun to manipulate the software and play games. This is a classic junior school computer class scene. Instead of encouraging girls to use technology, teachers sometimes turn us off, both subtly and forcibly. Often, teachers will ask only the boys the 'technical questions', and mock girls' ignorance of techspeak.

If a girls feels that something is wrong with a machine or a programme, she is often told 'you wouldn't know', or, 'don't bother, they (the boys) will fix it'. I have heard this said very often in class when a group of boys were trying to debug code and a girl tried to join in.

One thing that girls do like is Internet chat. For many girls, chat rooms become the gateway to more challenging online exploration. They apply the technology to the kinds of interests they have off the computer. They form clubs and communities instead of just competing all the time.

It's not that girls are not encouraged to take up 'techie' courses or jobs. We are expected to be well-trained, but not too ambitious, or creative with technology. We are socialized to view technology and technically-literate people as belonging to the male world of 'Geekdom'. Its not as if we are told, 'you cant reach this far if you are a woman' but we are constantly reminded about how extremely unlikely this is. 'Tech stuff is difficult for boys. Maybe... but it is even more difficult for girls!'

But the reality, I feel, is that this is not a 'biology' issue at all. It's just the way we are made to grow up. That is why there are, for instance, few women hackers in India. Not because girls can't hack. Why can't a girl hacker be accepted as something natural?

After all, people on either side of the gender divide have ten fingers each, and a brain to think with. To be a techie you just have to be a particular kind of person. Gender need not be an issue.

Hopefully, it will be possible for us not to make a 'big deal' out of women doing well in the technical arena or to be surprised by it. Someday?

**Ruchika Agarwal**