

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

Newspaper Cartoon Aggravates India-Australia Tensions ^[1]

MUMBAI – Earlier this month, attempted murder charges were filed against a man who allegedly broke into the home of the Danish cartoonist whose depictions of the Prophet Muhammad have caused an uproar in the Islamic world.

But while the attention of much of the world was focused on the three-year-old Danish cartoon, the work of another editorial cartoonist here in India caused tensions this week between this country and Australia. And that newspaper cartoon is contributing to worries in Australia about that country's second largest industry, higher education, which is now troubled by a plunge in the number of Indian students who want to study at Australian universities (Disclosure: India sends more than 1,600 students to USC, more than any other country, according to the latest data .)

The cartoon was commenting a series of attacks on young Indian men in Melbourne, Australia. In the latest attack last week, the third in ten days, a 29-year-old Indian was doused with flammable liquid and set on fire, and it became the lead story on India's television news channels and on India's newspaper front pages.

When Australian police officials over the past weekend denied the attacks were specifically targeting Indian men, this too became major news.

At one newspaper, India's Mail Today, the police statement was ridiculed in an editorial cartoon depicting a figure wearing an Australian police badge and unmistakably dressed in the white robes of the U.S. Ku Klux Klan, saying "We have yet to ascertain the nature of the crime." The cartoon was immediately picked up by Indian television and achieved rapid notoriety.

By Friday, the Australian government had condemned the cartoon and its suggestion of racism.

"Any suggestion of the kind is deeply offensive," said Acting Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who added, according to the BBC, that she had not seen the cartoon.

Her statement, in turn, caused a reaction here in India, starting with an editorial yesterday [Sunday] in the newspaper that published the cartoon.


"This paper has received a torrent of angry mail from Australians because of a cartoon depicting an Australian police officer as a member of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist organisation that did so much to terrorise African Americans in the southern part of the United States," began the editorial. "Like all cartoons, the depiction was a caricature, an exaggeration if you will. But that is what political cartooning is all about."

“As Mail Today reported,” the editorial concluded, “Indian students comprise some one per cent of the population of Victoria State (whose capital is Melbourne), but they have faced 17 per cent of the total robberies and assaults that have taken place there in the period July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that race is a factor in their being targeted.”

And fears that race is indeed a factor in the attacks has “caused diplomatic relations to sour” between India and Australia, according to the BBC. The newspaper cartoon has only increased the tensions between the two nations.

But this is not just a journalistic, or diplomatic, debate: this is about big money. Australian government officials are worried the widely reported crimes are discouraging Indian students from applying to universities in Melbourne and other Australian cities, according to reports. And indeed, the Indian government has issued a travel warning to Australia-bound Indian students, and Australian government officials have published data showing the number of Indians who want to pursue their studies in Australia have dropped by almost half.

Of the more than 300,000 international students in Australia, more than 70,000 were from India, according to the Australian Tourism Forecasting Committee.

After a visit to Australian university campuses last year, I reported on this blog that leaders at universities from Melbourne to Auckland were quite candid about their goals for attracting large numbers of students from Asia – and they were equally candid about the financial contributions those students make to their economies. Australia in 2008 received more than Au\$15 billion (US\$13 billion) from international students, according to a government report  which describes education as the second largest export industry in the country, behind only coal and iron ore.
