

# THE FINANCIAL FANTASYLAND OF THE FOREIGN SERVICE

by Laurel Pardy

The copper plate was delicately embossed and intricately patterned. It glowed in the shaft of sunlight striking through the open entrance to the dusty shop. I envisioned it gleaming on my Ottawa mantlepiece.

"How much," I asked.

"850 rupees, special price for memsahib."

"500. See how dirty it is. Look at this corrosion."

"No corrosion. It will clean. Very old. Handsome. 800."

"I'm in a hurry. 700 and no haggling."

"750 and I will clean it for you."

I handed over the 750 rupees realizing then that I'd come up 250, while he'd come down 100, waited 15 minutes for him to rub Brasso into all the tracks so that it would never come out, and left with a \$115 doodad worth probably a tenth of that.

Why?

The money was only an extension of the unreality I was living in. It looked different.

There were so many bills in my wallet it was bursting with paper money. It was the wrong colour. I did not know what were realistic prices anyway. There were no fixed prices, everything cost whatever the seller could get for it. The pieces of money really had no value for me.

## RUPEES, YEN, KRONER, PESOS: IT'S FUNNY MONEY

Whereas one would be reluctant to spend \$100 for a whim, one can quite easily spend 850 rupees, 550 francs or 2000 baht because they have no instinctively internalized value.

They are "funny money". And the lure of the foreign marketplace, with its exotic, unique, beautiful and compelling variety calls to all our senses, except our common sense.

Early in the posting, just when the lure of the market place is the strongest, we are faced with the problem of quickly making a home for our family.

Crown accommodations are not furnished with enough items to turn them into homes without the addition of artifacts, paintings, rugs, hassocks, sofas and throws. Whatever we already have is usually the wrong colour, weight or texture, size or style, and must be replaced with local offerings. This is not covered under the allowances.



These temptations the determined dollar-watcher can avoid. What about the real costs?

To name a few obvious financially inefficient moves that foreign service people must make:

- selling and buying cars to the dictates of the posting season,
- doing home renovations and maintenance all at once instead of at planned intervals because "we might get posted",
- acquiring and maintaining cabinets full of entertainment equipment (how many of us really use 32 cup percolators or butler's trays or 24 person serving platters?) and table linens including napkins that have to be ironed,
- squirreling away our savings in low interest securities because they have to be left unattended for years at a time,
- not being aware of, and thus not taking advantage of, the new set of acronyms that mushroom into existence everytime we are away - RRSF, RESP, RHOP, GIC, MURB,
- virtually eliminating the option of being a two income family in a society where one income families are becoming a minority, and the cost of living adjusts accordingly.

Financially, many foreign service people live inefficient lives.

## ALLOWANCES

In an effort to compensate for the downside of frequent international moves, the Department has established a system of allowances and benefits. These, if understood and carefully managed, can allow one to live in comfort. They are not perquisites, but directives installed to maintain the quality of Canada's foreign service and its representational activities. They apply only when we are posted overseas, however, and lead us to the illusion that we are better off than we are. Servants, larger houses, assisted leaves, private schools and import privileges do not pay bills, or build retirement savings.

Without the allowances and benefits, most of us could not afford to stay in the foreign service. Yet, ironically, the better the system, the less independent it makes us. We get used to departmental allowances, to subsidized holidays, to travel, to having drapes and carpets that match (most of the time), to a certain social life, to a certain amount of deference, to rent shares with utilities included, to escaping harsh climates, to import privileges that allow us to avoid the hard realities and have the things we want - peanut butter in Morocco, theatre tickets in London, Lego blocks in India, cars in the USSR, spacious accommodation in Warsaw, air conditioners in Tanzania.

We are not used to long term planning or long term waiting. And we are not used to doing things for ourselves.