

A Maiden's Voyage

By Amita V. Sarin

Ten years ago, when I first journeyed to the United States, I was wrapped in that warm cocoon of confidence which comes from complete ignorance. It was my first flight ever – my maiden voyage – and there were many things I had yet to learn about international travel.

For instance, I had no idea that there were three airports in the Washington area and that I was flying to the wrong one.

Back in New Delhi, Palam was the only international airport we had. There, tearful relatives said goodbye to garland-bedecked travelers and thronged the balconies to greet returning voyagers.

Thus we welcomed my brother and sister who had immigrated to America, whenever they returned. Uncles, aunts, cousins, and in-laws flocked to Palam, no matter what the hour. Every arrival was a social event and every departure called for a farewell committee.

A similar host of family and friends gathered at the airport on a midnight in May when I left to visit my siblings in Washington. I was clad in a bright gypsy skirt, the kind sidewalk merchants in New Delhi sold in those days. My crazy college pals urged me to take America by storm, and I, poised on the edge of adventure, promised to do just that. Effervescent and 21 years old, my dreams were buoyant then.

I did not know that magic midnight would separate me forever from the warm familiar world I knew; that life would never seem the same.

When I landed in New York, 24 hours later, there was no one to greet me. True, I had blithely turned down my brother's offer to meet me in New York and fly back with me to Washington. Those were my I-can-handle-it days.

Why then, was I suddenly sorry to read his message at JFK: "See you in Washington." I had not thought I would be so weary at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. But in New Delhi, it was already another midnight.

Disappointed but undaunted, I picked up my bags and proceeded to the information desk. There, a very busy lady informed me that I had missed my connecting flight to Washington and that she had booked me on another. Timidly, I commented on the initials NW instead of the NA on my ticket. Brusquely she brushed me aside.

I did not know I was flying Northwest Orient to Dulles airport instead of National Airlines to National Airport, where my brother anxiously awaited me. Instinct warned him that his goofy, scatterbrained sister would manage to mess things up.

Back in New York, I was learning that JFK was not an airport but a city; that one had to wait on the curb with all one's bags and take a bus to another terminal. I was learning that everyone there had an I-don't-have-time-for-you-will-you-please-hurry-air.

I was beginning to feel chilly and a bit silly in my bright gypsy skirt. The cold was gnawing through my warm cocoon and creeping downward to my feet. To this day I get cold feet when I think of JFK.

At the Northwest Orient terminal, I tried to call my family in Washington. How difficult can it be to make a phone call? Well, when you don't have any American coins and you have to persuade an unfriendly store owner to let you have some change, you start losing your cool. Especially when you have to repeat your request three times before being understood.

That was when I realized I had an Indian accent. Funny, in all my 21 years, I had never noticed that.

Then there was the matter of the area code. My sister had stressed in her letter that I must dial the area code *first*. The telephone operator, with her American accent, confused me further. So I dialed the area code and waited and waited . . .

Bereft of buoyant dreams, I landed at Dulles airport at 7 pm. My spirits were beginning to wilt, but still, I smiled. Why should all those polite, silent strangers see that the newness and strangeness and silence – their silence – was getting to me.

And then it dawned on me. *I* was the stranger, not they.

I called my sister from Dulles, but her phone was busy. I had been missing for five hours. As I later learned, she was frantically trying to trace me through the airlines in New York. Fearfully she recounted my scatterbrained ways. Guilt-stricken, she regretted talking my brother out of flying to JFK as he had planned. "Surely she is intelligent enough to change planes by herself."

My brother was re-estimating my intelligence at National Airport where he had paced several hours. He must have muttered a million "I told you so's" while he waited. His harried head conjured up all the catastrophes that could befall a befuddled scatterbrain at JFK.

Meanwhile, at Dulles, I decided to retrieve my baggage and take a taxi to my sister's home in Silver Spring. Yet I had no idea she lived 30 miles away and that the cab fare would have run into hundreds of rupees.

At the baggage claim, a miraculous encounter with a college acquaintance saved me from that cab ride. Like a guardian angel she took me under her wing. She got through to my sister, paged my brother at National, took directions to his apartment in Chevy Chase, and drove me there.

Empty silent and large – that is how America seemed to me on that first day. And beautiful. I stared at the sky and wondered why the sky over New Delhi never had such wondrous hues. And I never knew Washington would be so woody and green. Time and time again I have traveled that route. Never has it seemed so lovely, so long and lonely as that first time.

When he finally found me safe and sound, my brother's concern for my safety erupted into fury. "Why didn't you call us from New York?" he scolded. "How can anyone with a master's degree be so dumb?"

How was I to know that Washington has three airports, I countered. How was I to know that parking was a hassle and rush hour was a pain. How was I to know that visitors from India were always a nuisance.

I only knew that I felt small inside, unsure. I had shed my warm cocoon, but instead of a butterfly, I felt like a worm. Just a midnight ago I was a somebody. Now I was a stranger. America had turned the tables on me, taken me by storm; changed me into a foreigner with an Indian accent and sweaty palms.

My sister sensed my sinking self-esteem. She could remember when a decade before, America with its airports and highways and newness and strangeness and similarly assaulted her confidence and corroded her courage.

Well, the newness wore off long ago. Today, I am a seasoned globetrotter. Regularly, I change planes and miss planes, lose baggage, and lose tickets. Very busy ladies at information desks don't intimidate me anymore. I argue in my Indian American accent.

Yet, whenever I land in New Delhi, I look forward to the eager, familiar welcoming faces in Palam. But even there, parking is becoming a hassle and people are being "picked up" and "dropped off" instead of being "received" and "seen off." Many more Indians are traveling today and not as many tearful relatives are bringing garlands anymore.

Now, living in Washington, I fret over visitors from India. I warn them in my letters. I warn them on the phone about the airports and the distances. Still, they manage to surprise us and land at the wrong airport.

The Stranger Syndrome

By Amita V. Sarin

Often strangers to a new land metamorphose into strangers. Outnumbered and surrounded by the unfamiliar, some are emotionally paralyzed. Their perceptions of themselves change, they become self-conscious and start seeing themselves as foreigners.

This change in self-concept is pivotal to a whole range of allied emotions: loneliness, low self-esteem, alienation from the majority. This core of experiences can be termed the "stranger syndrome." It can be accompanied by changes in behavior: apathy, withdrawal, or nervousness and even a defensive aggression.

First-time travelers to this country are often overwhelmed by its size and intimidated by the super-mechanized environment. They become easy victims of the stranger syndrome. Those who dress differently or speak another language may be hit harder. Capable, intelligent people mistakenly sound stupid even to themselves as they flounder through a foreign tongue.

But this experience of turning from "somebody" to "stranger" is not confined to visitors from the east. At some point in their lives most people undergo similar feelings of isolation and alienation. Texans moving to New York, Americans working in the

Middle East, even a patient hospitalized for the first time, may suffer from the stranger syndrome.

Some people recover fairly rapidly from the stranger syndrome and are able to knit a new identity for themselves. Others, seeing themselves as aliens, become alienated. They start hating foreign ways and resent the necessity to adapt to the new way of life.

Hatred of the unfamiliar is not limited to foreigners or to the person entering the new situation. The natives or "old hands" are often suspicious of people who look, dress and speak differently from themselves.

In the world of tomorrow, populations will be more heterogenous, not less and job markets will become increasingly international. The best adjusted citizens of the future will be those who have traveled as children, those who speak more than one language, those who feel comfortable around "foreigners."

They will never be strangers and the world will belong to them.

Published in the *Potomac Almanac* August 1983