

MY TRIP TO INDIA
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In May, 2012, I took 3 weeks of vacation, which is all the vacation time that my job entitles me to per calendar year. I was led to visit my birthplace, India, and to visit my two sisters who I had not seen in 30 years! Now, I have 3 cats, and Joann Neal volunteered to take care of them in my absence.

This trip required some planning. I had to book my airline ticket a month or so in advance. I went to Liberty Travel in Selden, NY. The cost for a round-trip air ticket from New York to New Delhi was approximately \$1,500.00. The Travel Agent booked me on Air India, leaving JFK on May 5, 2012. However, one sister, Tripti, lives in Bombay, and another sister, Preethi, lives in Baroda. So I had to book domestic flights from New Delhi to Bombay, and from Bombay to Baroda. I then had to book a return flight from Baroda to Bombay for Tripti and myself. I would then leave Bombay for New Delhi to catch my international flight to JFK, New York. The total cost of the domestic flights was approximately \$700.00. The Travel Agent booked me on Jet Airways for the domestic flights.

I then had to get my shots. I had my hepatitis A and B shots and my polio shot. They then gave me some anti-malarial medication to take a week before departure.

On Saturday, May 5, 2012, I got a call from Air India, telling me that my flight was cancelled for administrative reasons. So, on Sunday, May 6, 2012, kind Joann Neal drove me to JFK. I walked with a light step into Terminal 4, and Joann left to go home. I had my passport. When I reached the counter, the Agent asked me for my passport, which I gladly handed over. He reviewed the pages and asked me where my Visa was. Visa? I was an Indian by birth. I had quite forgotten that I was now a US citizen and would need a travel Visa to visit India. Crushed, I turned away. The Agent directed me to the Reservations desk to reserve a flight for later on in the week, when I would hopefully have my travel Visa. I then called Joann. She was in Hempstead by this time, but the sweet angel turned around and picked me up. I explained the situation to her. Since it was Sunday, the Indian Consulate was closed. Angel Joann offered to take me to the Indian Consulate the next day. Joann's granddaughter was having a First Communion party the same day, so I partied that day with her and her family! I left my luggage in her vehicle.

When I got home later on that Sunday, I called up Air India. They told me that I could apply for a travel Visa online. I went online and discovered that the Indian Consulate had outsourced their Visa application process to a company called Trivisa Outsourcing. I filled out the Online Application-quite a lengthy one with numerous attachments! I called up Preethi and her husband, Venkat, and explained the Visa situation to them.

Monday, May 7, 2012 rolled around and Angel Joann picked me up around 6:30AM so that we could be in the city-Manhattan, by 8:30AM. We went to the Indian Consulate.

They informed us that we would have to go to Trivisa Outsourcing, which was 15-20 minutes away, also in the city. Angel Joann found parking in a garage for her vehicle. I went upstairs to the 2nd Floor with my paperwork. Joann waited downstairs. The Trivisa Outsourcing Agent examined my papers, while I waited with my heart in my mouth! All I wanted was a travel Visa! The Agent told me that I needed a name change document, since the name on my passport: "Mary Shakti Unny", did not match my Naturalization Certificate of: "Shakti Kumar Unny"! What next?! They gave me their fax# to fax the document when I had it. I called up the attorney who had done the name change for me, Andy and Gail Wolk, but regretfully, that file had been put in storage. Gail told me that I would have to go to the Riverhead County Clerk's office to get that document. Angel Joann drove all the way from the city to Riverhead to pick up this document, which I had notarized. Joann picked up a copy of the deed to her house while we were there. That was how Monday, May 7, 2012 went.

Come Tuesday, May 8, 2012, Joann again picked me up early in the morning and we went straight to Trivisa Outsourcing. I submitted all my documents. Thankfully, everything was in order. I asked them if they could expedite the process, since I had already booked my flight. They said they would try. Joann and I spent the day in the city. We had a leisurely breakfast with coffee, then found a place to park where we would not have to pay the exorbitant parking fees. I kept calling Trivisa Outsourcing. They said I could try contacting the Indian Consulate directly, around 2PM or so. So we went to the Indian Consulate. The Consular Officer told me that I would have to pick up my travel Visa from Trivisa Outsourcing, but that my Visa would be ready that day. So Joann found a parking garage close to Trivisa Outsourcing, and we walked over to Barnes and Nobles and spent a few hours there. At 5 PM, we drove to Trivisa Outsourcing. They said my Visa was not ready as yet, and to check back in 45 minutes. So we waited some more. Finally, Joann and I walked upstairs. My travel Visa was finally ready, and I could fly the next day! Elated, I called up Preethi and Tripti and told them the good news!

Wednesday, May 9, 2012, Joann took me to JFK, Terminal 4. This time, Joann waited for me outside. I went to the Reservations desk. The Air India Agent told me that my flight was cancelled because of a pilots' strike! Luckily for me, they booked me on Jet Airways. We had to go to a different terminal to catch that flight. The flight would go to Brussels, Belgium, and then to Bombay, India. Joann did leave then. I caught my flight. It was a 7 hour trip to Belgium. We then had a 3 hour layover. I then caught the flight to Bombay. By the time I reached Bombay, it was close to 12 midnight, IST (Indian Standard Time). I had to go through immigration and customs. It was hot, in the 90's. I went outside with my luggage. My sister, Tripti, signalled to me. She finally recognized me after 30 years! We hugged. It was good to see her.

Thursday, May 10, 2012, we drove in an air-conditioned cab to Tripti's apartment. I changed clothes, cleaned up, and went to bed. The next day, Tripti made me some good Indian food-Uppama, paratha and sabji (vegetable dish). I met some of Tripti's friends. I

did a few laps in her compound. I got my hair done at an Indian hairdresser's-she did a pretty decent job too. I was delightfully surprised when Tripti paid for an all-day

sightseeing tour of Bombay (Bombay “Darshan”) in an air-conditioned cab. We [Tripti, Nimisha (Tripti’s roommate) and I] visited friends and neighbors I had not seen in 30 years, we went to my old High School, we even saw my mother’s old dispensary (She had been a General Practitioner). We went shopping for gifts to take back to the US-for the people I work with, for Cindy, and Angel Joann, and her family. Tripti told me that her deceased husband’s will was still in probate court.

On Sunday, May 13, 2012, Tripti and I flew to Baroda to visit my oldest sister, Preethi. Baroda was even hotter than Bombay, around 100 degrees or so! I drank gallons of ice water. My brother-in-law, Venkat, had air-conditioning in his room. I did not use it however. We had fans, and I dressed lightly. Preethi cooked some more delicious Indian food. We ate mangoes. We talked about our parents. We went through numerous photo albums. Preethi has 2 sons who are both in the US. The older one, Bhaskar, is in California-he graduated in Computer Science and Engineering. The younger one, Neeraj, is in Gainseville, FL, at the University, studying for his Masters in Computer Science.

I took pictures of Preethi, Tripti and Venkat and their apartment on my mobile phone.

Preethi took us to a spiritual class that she attends, called “Satsang”. The class was held primarily in Hindi, which was difficult for me to understand completely. The leader of the group, Sant-ji, spoke in English for my benefit, the first session I attended! I met some of Preethi’s fellow Satsang people-they were all very nice. On the last day, Sant-Ji gave Tripti and myself some gifts. It was so very generous of her.

Venkat very graciously treated the three of us to a trip to Mount Abu, a town at a very high altitude in the state of Rajasthan, about 6 hours by train from Baroda. We spent 4-5 days at a very nice hotel there, going to various temples, and eating out. Venkat had even hired a driver with an air-conditioned car to drive us around and about Mt Abu. It was hot in Mt Abu as well. From what I understand, tourists generally go there in October, when its cooler.

I could not believe how quickly the time flew by. I was on tenterhooks because of the Air India strike. I wondered if I’d be able to make it back in time to resume my job. On Wednesday, May 23, 2012, we went to the Air India office in Baroda. After spending a few hours there, the Agent booked me on a flight leaving Friday, May 25, 2012 from Baroda to New Delhi, and on Saturday, May 26, 2012, from New Delhi to JFK, New York. I called Angel Joann with my flight details.

I left Baroda sorrowfully on May 25, 2012, around 7PM, kissing and hugging my darling sisters. It was painful to leave them. I arrived safely in New Delhi. I called up Preethi and Tripti. Tripti would leave on a flight to Bombay on the 26th. From New Delhi, we

flew to Paris, France. This flight took about 7 hours. There was a layover of a couple of hours. I got a cup of coffee at the airport in Paris for \$7.00! Whew! That’s more than the price of coffee at JFK! We then caught the flight to JFK, New York. That took 8 hours. I arrived at JFK around 12 Noon or so, went through customs. The Agent said:”Welcome

Back!”

Angel Joann picked me up. She had a friend, Lydia with her, and her adopted daughter, Shaniqua. I got home and unpacked. I fed the kitties. It was good to see them. Angel Joann had done a wonderful job of taking care of them. I don't know how I could possibly thank her for her kindness toward me. I was exhausted. I had mixed emotions- the weather was much nicer, it was not as congested as India, but, gosh, I missed my sisters!

I'm probably going to retire in India and live with Tripti. As soon as she gets money from the will and buys or rents a 2BR flat. I'll take my cats with me. Hopefully, my company will come out with a nice buy-out package. Thank you for your attention.