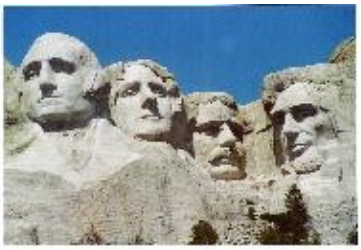
A Passage to America

By : Juggernaut

Practically, if opportunity is given, every South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan)would like to live in America (USA). This short story is about how to reach Swargaloka (i.e., USA).



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By

Subba Rao

â Dad, do you know how America got itâ s name?â My twelve years old daughter asked.

She caught me off guard, â was it Columbus who gave the name?â

â No,â

I knew she was preparing for her social studies test. â Alright, you tell me.â

â Waldseemuller, a German mapmaker in 1507 gave the name America in honor of Amerigo Vesapucci who first realized the land-mass Columbus discovered was not Asia.â

If the question was put to Indians, no one among the billion people could answer either. But surely, if they were allowed to enter the United States of America or America, or the States, the entire Indian sub-continent would be empty.

In the sixties when Americans were feverishly working to land on the moon, Indians were at work too, but to find a passage to America. In sixties and seventies, through Inter-governmental agreements, several Indian bureaucrats, scientists and doctors were allowed to visit America for short visits. The short stays were extended longer, and longer, and many Americans of Indian origin today are the descendents of those over-stayed Indians.

Our family friends, a medical doctor with his wife visited Michigan in the United States for a short stay in early sixties. On their return, the doctorâ s wife never completed a sentence without mentioning Michigan. As the time passed, we could not stand her repeated talk on Michigan. My brother and I competed against each other to count the number of times she mentioned the word Michigan during her visit to our house. Eventually, we named her â The Michigan Ladyâ . Whenever we saw her coming to our house, we hummed the following melody we made up:

The Michigan lady coming down, coming down, coming down,

The Boring lady coming down, coming down, coming down,

The America lady coming down, coming down, coming down,

We are all running out, running out, running out, running out,

For Indians, going to America was like going to â The Swarga Lokhaâ (residence for most Hindu gods). My own uncle visited New York in early sixties for an advanced medical training at a large New York City Hospital. He could not bear the separation from his wife who stayed back in India to look after their five young children, all girls, so he hurried back in less than three months. Every time he was offered a fruit like mango, orange or banana, he compared it to the Big Apple, and then explained how the City of New York was named Big Apple for the size of apples sold on the streets of New York. Only after I lived in the United States for several years, I read somewhere that New York City was named after a popular show named Big Apple and not for the size of apples sold in New York. My uncle was a genius and recipient of several gold medals, so I never argued with him on the trivial matter of Big Apple.

My mothers cousin, a bright man from a well know university in South India spent a few years in the early sixties at a prestigious Ivy League University in the United States. He returned to India unwillingly to join his family back home. He brought several fancy things such as camera, tape recorder, transistor radio, modern kitchen appliances, electric shaver and ballpoint pens all in their original styrofoam packages. I was young and particularly curious towards the white fluffy Styrofoam packing material. When I tried to touch the stryofoam to get the feel of it, he gently pushed my hands away and kept me away from touching his other treasures. His â Samsoniteâ suitcase and the briefcase became the status symbol. After all, everybody used metal boxes called trunk boxes for travel in those days. He protected the â Samsoniteâ from outside elements with covers made from custom made thick khaki-fabric.

Almost four decades after he visited America, he still ponders over his short stay. When I visited him recently, once again, he gave the details on his short stay in America. He even cried on a bus when I mentioned about Ithaca, the town he lived. I cheered him up by telling stories he told about the girls he met at the university campus in Ithaca. Back at his house, he showed me the styrofoam packing, still intact in the original boxes after several decades like artifacts. This time he did not protest, when I touched them.

In the sixties, several of my professors visited America to receive higher education. When they returned home, everything about these men had noticeably changed. Their accent was Americanized and courteous words like â thank youâ or â appreciatedâ were used for every thing. They wore shirts with button-down collar and checkered-jackets even in warm weather as a show off. Some grew long hair and wore T-shirts and blue jeans. Students on the campus never had the courage to wear such clothes at that time. The name-plate at each professorâ s office boldly displayed the degrees received at the various universities in America like M.S. (University of Kansas, Manhattan, Kansas), Ph.D., (University of Missouri, Colombia, Missouri) or M.S. (University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida), Ph.D. (Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas) etc. I read their name-plates with envy and at the same time hoped that one day I might receive degrees from America to list on my name-plate. It was not so much the degrees but the name of a specific university or the State they visited, made these professors very proud and made me envy of them.

My sister and brother-in-law, a doctor, came to America in the late sixties when waves of medical doctors were allowed to come to America during the Vietnam conflict. My sister sponsored me to come to America. I waited 5 years to enter America with a permanent visa or green card. But this was 20 years ago. Hundreds and thousand of Indians entered the United States by the route I took; sponsorship by a close relative.

My sister also sponsored my mother, and she in turn sponsored my younger brother. This caused a huge family feud back home that resembled an Indian movie.

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My sisterâ s mother-in-law, a seventy years old woman with heart problem was upset that she was not sponsored like my mother was sponsored. My sister explained that it was her son who had to file papers for her to immigrate to the United States. Both my mother and my sisterâ s mother-in-law lived in the same town, and were close friends. But, their friendship went sour over this episode. For some reasons, my brother-in-law was not keen on sponsoring his mother. Eventually, a big fight broke out between my mother and my sisterâ s mother-in-law. Our relatives compared the fight to â Mahabharathaâ , an ancient epic story of family feud. At last, my brother-in-law sponsored her mother and she came to the United States jubilantly with a permanent visa in hand to join my mother in America.

After they spent a few weeks in America, none of the women liked their stay. Here, the women complained that the place was too clean and streets were too quiet. They missed the jostling street crowds, the noise from autos honking for no reason, the visits to dusty markets with odors that emanate from rotten vegetable trash and the bargains with vendors to save few cents here and there. Both agreed that the vegetables grown in India tasted better than grown in America. My mother compared the size of eggplant here in the US to pumpkin in India. My sisterâ s mother-in-law compared the taste of tomatoes grown in the US to that of cardboard. They missed green-mangoes used to make fresh south Indian chutney. After they went back home to India, they slowly patched up their differences that aroused over â passage to America.â They realized after all that the stay in America was not as satisfying as they imagined. Nevertheless, they constantly talked about their visit to America with their friends, mostly older women who listened with envy.

Years later, I settled in the United States working in the recycling business. Once, while returning from Yakima in Washington State to Seattle on the company business, an American who sat next to me asked, â you must be from South India?â â I can figure it out from your looks, and accent,â he was pretty down to earth in his conversation.

I looked at him with pleasant surprise that somebody recognized my roots just from my looks and the accent.

â Were you visiting Yakima on business?â he inquired.

â No, actually, I was returning from Sunnyside, a town few miles south of Yakima, I was on the company business.â I was brief in my conversation.

â I was born in South India near Madras, my parents were missionaries, I came back to the States with my parents when I was twelve,â he said in a matter-of-fact way.

â Oh yeah, you are the first American born in Madras that I have met in USA,â I said with a friendly smile.

â Well, I went to India several times later. I was in aircraft parts distribution business.â

I realized that I was speaking with somebody with substance, I meant materially, and otherwise.

â You know, every politician or bureaucrat I met in India on business requested me to sponsor their children to come to the United States,â he said, as if he disclosed some important information.

While munching on the snacks, I asked, â have you sponsored any from India?â

â Yeah, in fact I did, several children of the Indian bureaucrats, who gave me the business contracts in return.â

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â Good for them. At least these people did not have to jump over the hoops to find a passage to America.â I thought.

The flight was short between Yakima and Seattle. I said good-bye to him and departed from the plane in Seattle.

Indians approached â Moksha.â or salvation step by step, a tedious and time taking process that needed lots of patience and sacrifice. They applied the same technique to find a passage to America. Indians took every opportunity to leave India; for Singapore, Indonesia, Africa, Middle East, West Indies, Latin America or any other country that accepted them; that was the first step towards â Moksha.â The next or the second step was to reach England or Canada or Mexico. The journey completed when the final destination: America or â The Swarga Lokhaâ was reached, and â mokshaâ was fully attained. A passage to America became a three-step process.

Years ago, I met a young Indian doctor in Niagara Falls on the Canadian side. We both took a boat ride to watch the Horseshoe Falls at a close range. While I was busy taking pictures of the waterfall, the doctor in soaking wet raincoat was busy sizing up the height one had to scale to get into the American side. After the boat ride, I gathered from him that he completed two steps to â Mokshaâ (one from India to Barbados in the Caribbean and the second to Canada), but the third and final step to America appeared elusive to him. When I mentioned that I live in America and drove to the Canadian side to get a good look at the Horseshoe Falls, he was full of envy. He jokingly mentioned whether he could hide in my car trunk to drive pass the immigration on the American side of the bridge. I left him on the Canadian side assured that he would succeed somehow to get to America soon. He smiled flashing his white-teeth and said good bye to me as I drove off.

While teaching social studies to my daughter I learnt that the word â conquistadorâ meant, â to conquerâ . Hundreds of years ago, many conquistadors from Spain came to Americas for gold. In gold rush days, Americans from east traveled to the west to find gold. Now, many Indians from India are rushing to America to sell gold jewelry. Across the United States, the kiosks that sell gold jewelry in shopping malls are either managed or owned by the Indians. It is a kind of a gold rush to the west or a passage to America to sell gold. In the twenty-first century, the East Indians were bringing gold to America while their brethren, the American Indians in sixteenth century lost their gold to the Spanish conquistadors.

In our town shopping mall, I came across one or two kiosks that sold 14K gold jewelry are managed by Indians. On one Sunday, while my wife and daughter were shopping in the mall, I struck a brief conversation with the manager of the one the kiosks that sold 14K gold jewelry.

â Do you work here?â I asked.

â I own this and several other kiosks in Indiana and Iowa, you know, I lived in Canada for sixteen years before I came to the United States,â he said.

The jeweler quickly established that he completed the three-step trip from India to America via -Canada to attain â moksha,â a no nonsense achievement.

â You know, we, the Indians like gold jewelry made with 22K gold not 10K or 14K jewelry, he said placing the chains back into the showcase.â

I agreed with him. For Indians, pure gold jewelry was more like an investment rather than ornaments to wear on a daily basis.

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I sat on a bench in the mall to relax and reflected upon my first encounter with an Indian jewelry salesman in Las Vegas years ago. I strolled up and down on the strip during the daytime while most visitors to Vegas generally come out in the late evening for the entertainment. On a hot tarmac, I came across a sweaty Indian carrying a brief case. We both took a shelter in a building from the fiery hot sun like two animals of the same species resting in the shade of a tree in a concrete jungle. He was a salesman who sold Native American jewelry made in India. I was bewildered to hear from him that some of the Native American jewelry was hand made in India since it was cheap than to make it over here in the United States. I suggested that he should consider making aboriginal jewelry to sell to gift shops in Australia, a country closer to India.

During a trip to India to attend my cousinâ s wedding in early 90â s, I landed in Bombay airport. As usual the place was chaotic for the first few hours until most of the passengers had left the airport. Those waiting for the local flights were transferred to the domestic airport.

An American couple in their early sixties traveled with me in the courtesy van from the International airport to the domestic airport. The couple were civil and dignified in their appearance as if they were from a university town in the United States such as Ames, Portland, Austin or Seattle know for civility, not that Americans from other cities were over-bearing or outlandish. The man was baldheaded and wore a sweater, and the woman was wearing slacks. These folks were pleasant and gave handsome tip to the porter.

They were constantly looking around as if they were expecting to be met by someone at the airport. They both looked at me several times to make an eye contact. I thought they might need some help, given the chaos at the airport. Eventually, they sat next to me and asked casually if I am in the Information Technology (IT) business. I told them I am in the recycling business. They did not bothered to ask any further questions. But, they caught up with an Indian woman in her late twenties sitting not too far from me.

Again, they posed a similar question to the Indian woman; the man asked if she is in the IT business. I was curious and listened closely to their conversation.

â Yes, I am currently working as computer specialist, just returning from Singapore,â the woman with tired looks disclosed.

â There are plenty opportunities for IT specialists in the United States, you know,â the manâ s voice was encouraging.

â Oh really, I once tried through an employment agency in India but never got through,â she explained with some excitement in her voice.

â Sure, we could get you a decent job and even a green card that allows you to stay permanently in the US and even become a citizen.â The American woman now took her turn to talk to the Indian woman. The American woman almost offered instant â Mokshaâ without going through the traditional three-steps to find a passage to America to the young Indian woman. They both exchanged the addresses to correspond later.

The American couple moved on with their neck stretched like ostriches in the crowd to see whether they could find any more â IT workersâ to offer a passage to America.

During my air travel within the United States on business. I came across several young Indian fellow travelers. Most of these were engaged in computer or Information Technology (I T) business, brought to U.S. as â I T workers.â All of these workers attained instant â Mokshaâ since America needed â IT workersâ to fill up the vacancies in a hurry.

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I think it was at the Minneapolis airport, I first met Dattatraya, a young man in his early thirties. We both were waiting to catch a delayed flight. From his mannerisms I realized that he recently entered U.S. as an IT worker from India. His wife, a slender, quite and shy person holding a toddler was sitting next him. He was looking at me in a friendly manner and several times tried to make an eye contact and eventually walked towards me, and sat next to me like a shy child, trying to get-over his shyness to receive a candy from a stranger.

To break the ice I asked, â what part of India are you from?â

â From South and our first visit to America,â he expressed certain amount of warmth and closeness despite the fact he never met me before.

â Are you living in the U.S. for a while,â he said.

â Yeah, for some time now,â I said.

â Are you in IT business?â he asked.

â No.â

â Are you a doctor?â

â No, I am an engineer.â

He realized that I was not in a mood for a chat. Luckily, the flight was ready to take off and we all got into the plane.

I met Dattatraya or Dan as he called himself later, in our town shopping mall with his wife and child. This time, they both were bold and self-confident in their conversation, particularly his wife.

â Do you know how we could get the green card to stay here indefinitely,â she asked, while her husband looked sideways as if he was not interested in the subject or he assigned the responsibility of getting the information to his wife.

â It was long time ago I came here, perhaps the best thing is to get in touch with an immigration lawyer to get good advice, you know,â I said.

Dan now took his turn to ask questions of his own. â If we conceive a child here, could we get to stay here permanently as parents of an American born child.â

I was sorry to get caught up in this situation to answer these questions about immigration to these folks whom I hardly knew expect I met them briefly in the airport a few weeks ago. At the same time, I wanted to be friendly and not to be rude. While I was thinking, the manâ s wife asked me how she could bring her sister here in a hurry before the immigration rules changed.

â That was it, I thought,â before I said anything, my twelve year old daughter came running to me to hurry up to get into the movie theater. This saved me from Dan and his anxious wife for the time being.

Indians were always good with numbers and computing. A great Indian mathematician â Aryabhattaâ in 500 AD was believed to be responsible for inventing alphabetical counting system and the number sign â 0â for Zero. It was not surprising that many storefront computer training schools were churning out hundreds of thousands of trained â IT workersâ from India to find their way into other countries for jobs.

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Not that I did not want to help Dan and his wife in their pursuit to get green card, I was not the right person to advise them on the matters of immigration. Since our town had a computer manufacturing company, dozens of Indian â IT workersâ landed temporarily as migrating birds do. At social gatherings, the IT workers with visa application approved commanded more respect than those whose applications were still pending. The permanent US visa approval status became a status symbol among the IT workers.

Thousands of IT workers like Dattatraya found a passage to America in 21st century without going through the traditional three- steps to achieve â mokshaâ like their predecessors went through because of a great need for IT workers in the United States.

During my air travels and lengthy wait at the airports, every time I came across Indian IT workers with their families, the song â Exodus, Movement of the Peopleâ by Bob Marley, the famous reggae singer from Jamaica comes to my mind again and again. My thoughts invariably would go back to my boyhood days when my brother Srinivas and I made up the tune â The Michigan Lady.â

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