

May 29, 2005

Coming to America – post 9/11

N.S.Venkatratnam, 75, and his wife Rajeshwari, 68, headed out to the United States to visit their sons like thousands of Indian parents do each year. They had passports in order and a ten-year multiple entry visa valid till 2010. They did not anticipate any problems returning to a country they last visited in 2001. When they landed in Los Angeles after a tiring 18-hour journey, U.S Customs and Border Protection agents stopped them. It seemed they had overstayed their entry permit during their last visit.

The couple said they had applied for and received an extension on the visa. The CBP agents said their computer wasn't showing it. But they had received an extension, they insisted. The onus was on them to prove it, the agents said; did they have a document showing the extension? No, they didn't. Too bad, said the agents, we will have to put you on a flight back -- unless you can prove your case in 24 hours.

Outside the airport terminal, their son Harish Venkat had been waiting several hours for his parents to emerge. They were finally allowed to phone him and explain the situation. Harish and his brother Suresh knew they had gotten an extension, but how to prove it at short notice after five years? Suresh then thought of what he felt was reasonable proof -- he had a cashed cheque used to pay for the extension. The next morning, he obtained it from his bank's microfiche, copied it, and faxed it. CBP agents said they could not read it; the resolution was poor.

The Venkatratnams meanwhile spent the night at the airport sleeping on the floor. They declined a meal of mushroom and noodles. Mr Venkatratnam developed blood clots. With the deadline closing in, Suresh had another idea. He produced tax records showing he had taken a deduction the year his parents visited and the IRS paperwork had their extension permit number. When CBP agents ran the number against the computer, it did not show up.

The system had simply failed to record their extension, possibly because someone had misspelled their name.

The Venkatratnams were put on a flight back to India that evening after a brief, tearful meeting with their sons and new-born grandchild. So you think the lesson in this story is to keep every scrap of paper with you, right?

Punit Modhgil returned to the U.S after attending a wedding in November 2001. An agent spotted a card among his papers that identified him as a photographer. He was accused of working beyond the scope of his H1-B visa that enabled a tech job with Siebel Systems. Punit explained that he was an amateur photographer and had never been paid for his work. They weren't convinced. He was put on a flight back, not even given a chance to quit his job or vacate his rental apartment.

Such nightmare stories are more the exception than routine. Most people sail through without problem. But such snafus are also why people like Modhgil say America is losing it. Some weeks back, he returned to the U.S for his first visit since the screw-up, visiting his old addas in Silicon Valley. He told a local tech writer that the old buzz, the positive energy is missing from the Valley. Bangalore, where he eventually plans to settle down, is more like the Silicon Valley he left; not the one he has returned to. Being expelled from the U.S may have been the best thing that happened to him. America isn't the best place to dream anymore.
