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The Big Fright on the Big Flight

It will be five years since 9/11 next Sunday. Flying has never been the same since. Stories abound of profiling in airports and on airlines. Most of them seem exaggerated -- notwithstanding incidents like last week's snafu in Amsterdam involving 12 Indians -- and discount the burden on security officials tasked with ensuring our safety.

Indians are among the biggest group of international flyers these days. You only have to look-in at European hubs such as London, Frankfurt and Paris to realize this. One friend joked that airports there are starting to look like Indian railway stations -- soon there will be people champing on neem sticks and hanging towels around.

Given our numbers, it is inevitable there will be an occasional kerfuffle, not because of religion or color, but more likely because of unacceptable or odd behavior. A few days after the Amsterdam episode, one of the most read stories on Times of India online was about Indians being ill-mannered flyers.

We think the security folks give us a hard time, but how do we treat them? I was returning from Peru some years back a day after a bomb explosion near the U.S embassy in Lima. So it took inordinately long to clear immigration in Dallas, testing my sore limbs (I had climbed Machu Pichhu). To top it, the USDA guys took one look at my mud-stained boots and wanted to know if I had been near a farm or livestock. I said I had been hiking. So my boots were taken in and returned some minutes later, cleaned spotless. "Hey, I got some dirty laundry too," I blurted out.

It was clever, and unnecessary. The last thing a guy who has handled thousands of passengers on a heightened-alert day needs to hear is some such smart-assy remark. My immediate contrition saved my batootie, but it's probably why El Al advises passengers to save their humor for a better occasion.

Some days after 9/11, I met Abu Saleh Shariff, chief economist of India's NCAER, on a London-Washington DC flight. When we landed, I cleared immigration first and waited, with some concern, to see how they treated him. He cleared faster. You could say that was before paranoia set in. But Shariff has been to the U.S many times since then. He can recollect only two instances of being singled out.

In one instance, an officer had a page by page view of his visas, identified ones for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and asked reasons for the visit. He accepted Shariff's explanation that he broke journey to see the pyramids and undertook 'Oomrah.' On another occasion, he was taken aside for questioning in Newark because he was taking a photograph of an impressive artwork. On neither occasion, says Shariff, did he feel particularly discriminated against or profiled. Some others might have felt differently.

In major American airports, the line for non-U.S citizens at immigration is always longer than that for U.S citizens. Native-born Americans are in a minority on incoming flights. Airplanes disgorge an astonishing medley of languages, races and ethnicities as people from every corner of the globe continue to come to America.

Returning to Washington DC last week, I was buttonholed by a woman from Andhra Pradesh who spoke only Telugu, traveling alone to visit her son. She had to be helped with her immigration and customs forms. Officials struggled to comprehend an old Afghan woman who spoke only Pashtu. Given all this, I find it remarkable that U.S immigration folks still manage to smile and say "Welcome to the United States" after due process.