

Plight of a Nepali at Indian Transit

By Dr. Sanjaya Gajurel
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In this 21st century, the obvious question is whether we still deserve the abusive treatment by our neighboring country, India.



It had already been eleven years that I had not visited my country Nepal.

The excitement rushed in as I was visiting my family in Nepal after that long span. On top of that, I was not worried about my visa and ironically, the saying in Nepali “even a river returns after twelve years” was getting materialized this time. The US Embassy in Nepal has always been unpredictable granting visas. My mother was denied a visa even to attend my Ph.D. graduation in the United States. In this Nepal visit, the heartrending incidents at Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi, India, incited an acrimonious flash-back. Going back in 1995, I vividly remember Nepalis being harassed by Indian custom officers at several check points on the Nepal-India border.

On the way to Jaipur, India, I was exulted; why not? It was my first visit to any other country and I was attending Regional Engineering College (REC) in the pink city. My joviality, however, could not last long and my confidence went into a tailspin. The adrenaline level dipped as I went through psychological torture at the frontier. My luggage, consisting of just few new Jeans along with other regular clothes, got screened through many check points; frequently stopped by the Indian custom officers; some of them probably fakers. Logically speaking, there cannot be more than couple of checkpoints within that mere distance of about a kilometer. The officers were brazenly demanding money for my luggage to get through irrespective of the stuffs that I carried. Being incapacitated, I and my father acquiesced and paid IRs 40 at each check point. The rip off continued even in the bus to Gorakhpur, India. I was actually more tormented by the poignant scene of other poor compatriots being robbed. They were trying to earn meager sum of money through drudgery in India.

My flight to Kathmandu was booked in such a way that I would be claiming my luggage only at the destination. I reached Delhi via Gulf Air and walked to Air India counter. I saw bunches of young Indians there. I was initially delighted to see the younger faces thinking that these people would be the responsible sophisticated people exposed to International norms. Unfortunately, though the Delhi airport has adopted the latest technologies, the mentality of the people there has not progressed. I found them swearing in their dialect not heeding their clients in the queue waiting for the service. Finally, after half an hour in a queue comprising of only three people, I

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was told to wait for the personnel from Gulf Air to take care of the luggage first. Does that make any sense to you? Why should you as a traveler be worried about your tagged luggage to be transferred from one airline carrier to another?

After another half an hour wait, a Gulf Air personnel came and got away with our (there were other Nepali passengers too) passport info and baggage claim receipt. An hour elapsed and then a guy from Air India appeared. He feigned helpful and wanted us to follow him to get our boarding pass. I didn't see any logic behind it; why should I follow him to get my boarding pass instead of him getting one for me. I hesitated for a while but I had no other choice. "If you want to catch the plane, follow me", he said. I needed to get to the plane to make it to the auspicious festival (Dashain) day at Kathmandu else I might get stranded in this chaotic airport; I don't know how many hours or even days.

We followed the guy who appeared to be friendly. Now, he wanted us to fill out the declaration form and checked out our own luggage from the baggage carousel. What the hell? Wasn't Delhi just my transit? Even worse, in that declaration form, we needed to enter the name of the hotel where we never stayed in. I was totally lost and exasperated but helpless. My declaration form got marked (accepted); however, I did not find my luggage at the baggage claim which is still in untraceable state. Some of them in our group collected theirs. Most of their luggage again went through screening right there, a flagrant trap to steal money complaining about the stuffs in the bag which were actually validated earlier through all other Airport check points. Now, we were finally in the Air India ticket counter. The guy in the ticket counter asked me if I was going to Kathmandu. He was actually thinking of ripping a meek Nepali guy off some money. When my answer was yes, he wanted me to pay for the weight in my carryon luggage where as two foreigners in front of me with larger carryon luggage than mine were never interrogated. Where else on earth that can happen? That made me so vexed that I became very vocal after that which finally got me the ticket. Now, I could not help thinking about other ingenuous compatriots who were returning to Kathmandu with meager amount they earned at Bahrain from grueling hard labor. The fret still continued after getting the ticket. We had to fill up another declaration form and submit it to the officer before going through the security check. At the security, the officers were asking if I worked at US; how much I made, how many electronics gadgets I got, and other totally unrelated ridiculous questions. The same luggage was passed through security checks at other airports without any infringement. I had a laptop and a camera as electronic goods, still they were complaining about them, thinking that they would end up getting some money out of it. With all those hassles, I had to run to the gate to get to the plane in time. I didn't find any luxury time to saunter through the highly touted Delhi airport.

Finally, I arrived at Kathmandu airport and reported my lost baggage to Air India. I waited for their follow-up call but in vain. The number I was given for contact just kept ringing without any answer so I went to the airport after few days. I was surprised to find Air India's counter located inside the airport security. I had to ask the security personnel and wait for Air India's representative to check for the baggage status; worse, after few visits, they wanted me to contact the country manager at Hattisaar, Kathmandu in person. The country manager wanted me to contact Gulf Air and American Airlines – my previous carriers. The unfounded flustering news that I heard from country manager was there were several other travelers whose baggage is stranded at Bahrain Airport. It is easy to understand one or two misplaced luggage once in a

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while but that many lost luggage is beyond my comprehension. Are they negligent or is there a cartel that takes advantage of the lost luggage containing valuables? Hesitatingly, I tried to contact both Gulf Air and American Airlines few times but I was consistently transferred to Air India – my end carrier.

While returning from Nepal the first bizarre incident happened while boarding Air India to Delhi at Kathmandu. There was an extra security check setup at the staircase of the airplane itself. I was totally clueless but submissively yielded to them. The plane landed at Delhi airport and again at the Air India counter, I ended up with the same sets of people. What a nightmare! They noted down the passport and ticket information and asked us to wait until someone from the airliner brought the boarding pass. There were few other travelers who were stranded there for more than six hours waiting for their boarding pass so as get in to the facilitated travel lounge. Worse, they were not even made aware of their missed flight. One American lady was laughing at the banner scrawled with “World’s #1 Airport”. “Kathmandu Airport though very small is far efficient than this one” she said. Hours passed. When we got the boarding pass, there were only forty five minutes left for us to get through the security and got on to the plane. We had to run for our flight again without being able to savor the much-hyped hi-tech facilities at Delhi airport.

There are stark evidences of India's wrong motives towards Nepal; time and again they have been taking advantage of Nepal's dependency as a landlocked country which has in fact exacerbated Nepalis' antipathy towards India. In this 21st century, the obvious question is whether we still deserve the abusive treatment by our neighboring country, India. Putting it in another way, are we bound to endure their mistreatment? Since the mentality of so called sophisticated people has not yet changed, I would like to request both Indian and Nepali government to be serious about these abuses. This also depicts bigger picture on how India always has inner motive to put a crimp in the development of Nepal feigning to have worked towards Nepal's interest.

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