

Karma in America

By RAJIV SONI

In a daze after the long haul, I joined the immigration line in San Francisco, patiently waiting for my turn. Each visit, over the past 12 years, had been a brand new experience in itself. I marveled at the systems that regulated entry into the United States. No doubt they had become extremely strict after 9/11, but that was to be expected. My thoughts were interrupted when I heard a loud and clear voice: “Counter number six please.” A pretty but tough looking lady peered into my eyes and said: “Passport please.”

“You have been coming here over the last 12 years. Why have you only now applied to work in the United States?”

“Because ma’am, I am 40, and do not want to miss the opportunity of working in this beautiful country....”

“That’s a good enough reason,” she said with a smile as she stamped my passport, wished me luck and directed me toward customs.

As I wheeled my luggage toward the exit, I saw two familiar faces waving—my brother and Peter-Prakash Mirchandani, CEO of a successful consulting company in the San Francisco Bay area, the company that had invited me to the U.S. to work. He was also a common friend, known to a

longtime friend from high school.

“Welcome to America,” Prakash thundered. “I have good news for you, and some bad.” Without waiting for a reaction, he carried on, “The good news is that you’re here, past immigration, past customs. You’re in America! The bad news is that...that...there’s no work for me here as of the day before yesterday, and so there’s no work for you.”

Without batting an eyelid, Prakash added, “I sold off my company the day before yesterday, and in the new company the management is revamping.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “So what does that mean?”

“That means that you are laid off,” he said quite nonchalantly, as if he were telling me about the temperature outside.

“Laid off? But I haven’t even started working here.” What now? I thought. I was already jobless within the half hour of stepping foot on the soil of the most illustrious nation in the world! Should I be heading straight for the departure terminal?

My sense of disorientation—closing shop back in India, the speed of events over the past week, topped off with a flight of more than 22 hours—seemed to be underscored by the magnitude of what I had heard in the last few minutes and its possible implications.

Officer Lakes Remembers

Officer Kenneth Lakes, still on duty at San Francisco International Airport, remembered his encounter with Rajiv Soni in an interview with SPAN, and was almost apologetic about not being able to accept a hug or a drink.

“After 9/11, we’re all a little paranoid. I can’t even let the Hispanic ladies I work with hug me and it’s just part of their culture,” Lakes says. “We have very strict points and security regulations about not getting personally involved with people. Our job is to provide security at the airport, to protect the borders. We also try to treat people right. I enjoy helping people. A lot of people from the Middle East and Asia are unsure of how things are here after 9/11 or what’s going to happen to them when they come here. We have training about this, not to discriminate because of race or national origin. I enjoyed meeting Mr. Soni. He’s a nice guy.”

As my brother drove us home, I wondered why Prakash had not told me just 24 hours ago. I would have deferred my coming to the U.S. and waited till the employment opportunity was totally cleared. It was not as if I had never been to the U.S. before or as if I had wanted to come at any cost and for any work.

My thoughts were interrupted when my brother said, "Hope you have kept your money carefully."

Money. Money! Oh gosh! Where was my money? My \$3,000. The money was in a leather pouch. But where was the pouch? It also had my passport, immigration

and check. An hour-and-a-half later, it was highly unlikely, but still worth a try.

We finally located the exact spot in the sprawling lot. The cart was delicately balanced next to the railing. But no pouch.

Fifteen minutes later, a family of six came along. Had they seen a pouch in the cart? A father figure came forward with his teenaged son. "Scott discovered a pouch in this cart when he was moving it so that I could park our car and on opening it he saw a lot of money in it, presumably yours. He brought it up to me and we thought it best to hand it over to the security office inside the airport."



Rajiv Soni tours San Francisco Bay in 2002, after his dramatic entry into the United States.

papers, international driving license.

I looked around in the car frantically for the ten-by-four-inch leather pouch—at first gloomy, then angry, tired, frustrated, helpless. Where on earth was that pouch? As if getting laid off within minutes of arrival in the U.S. was not enough, I had lost all this too, on a late Friday afternoon.

We spun around at the next exit on the freeway and raced back to the airport.

We two brothers started our search at the first assistance booth. The lady was helpful but several phone calls later gave up. About 90,000 passengers pass through the airport every day. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. We spent the next hour talking to officials, but it all pointed to my going to the Indian Embassy on Monday to report the lost passport.

Maybe, just maybe, I had forgotten the pouch in the luggage cart after we had loaded the luggage into the car. We should go back to where the car had been parked,

How do you locate a security officer, amidst over 1,500 of them, whose name we did not know? Two hours and a myriad counters later, we were face to face with Officer Kenneth Lakes.

"Yeah, I did receive a black leather pouch with travel documents, money, etc. But not knowing who it belonged to, I went through the contents. I found a used one-way Lufthansa ticket and I was going to their office to get details."

I was amazed. Without thinking, I asked, "Can I hug you?"

"No, you cannot," he said matter-of-factly.

"Can I buy you a beer?"

"No, you cannot," he said.

Officer Lakes took us to his desk. I saw my black leather pouch. Everything was intact, the \$3,000 too. I tried to offer a small gratuity, but he refused.

"I was just doing my job."

Running out of options, I finally asked, "How do I say thank you?"

"Just say it, man, just say it," he said.

It then occurred to me that I should at least write a note of appreciation to Officer Lakes' supervisor, and so asked for his business card and the name of his supervisor.

As we headed back home, I thought of the events in the past five hours. Was I being tested? Whatever had to go wrong with me had! That was it! From now on, it would all be well! I was going to witness the birth of a new world!

Over the next few weeks, the challenge was to find a job, rather a "pay stub." Even as a CPA interned at PricewaterhouseCoopers and highly IT proficient, I couldn't have come at a worse time, in mid-2002, when the entire Bay area was reeling under a nationwide economic recession and a spate of lay-offs.

Right from arrival, I had been hanging by a thread. Despite the American job market ignoring me, daily life culture scoffing at me, and the American woman rebuffing me, I plodded on, remembering my father's mantra, "Appreciate first, Understand later."

Over a year had gone by. Thanksgiving 2003 was approaching and along with it the cold months in the Bay area.

I took out the single suit that I had brought, hoping to get it drycleaned. Rummaging through the pockets, I found a business card. Officer Kenneth Lakes.

Geez, I thought. Over a year had passed and I hadn't written the note of appreciation to Lakes' supervisor.

I tried to exonerate myself but couldn't. I put the card in my pocket. After several calls I located Officer Lakes, who had moved twice. He recognized me instantly. I took down the contact number of the Chief of U.S. Customs & Security.

I was pleasantly surprised to receive a reply from the chief, saying that a note about the good deed had been put into Officer Lakes' personnel file. And Officer Lakes received a letter of appreciation from the head of the Customs and Border Protection force, Commissioner Robert C. Bonner. □

About the Author: *Rajiv Soni, a chartered accountant based in Gurgaon, near New Delhi, is a teacher, writer and consultant. His book, Armaan Inc., is being prepared for publication.*