

AGONY AND ECSTASY- EXPERIENCES OF A REPATRIATE EVACUEE

I have a ten year multiple entries Visa for the US ending in 2026. When I entered America on 3rd February 2020 and was leaving on 30th April 2020 they stamped it on my passport. However, when India closed its airports from 24th March to 3rd May, I had to apply for extension of Visa and shell out around \$500 for fear of being deported. On 5th May, I registered for return of Indian Nationals stranded abroad and also agreed to undergo a 14-day mandatory quarantine, on payment basis in a hotel, bear the travel expense which was exorbitant and abide by all the rules.

On 7th May at 9.30 p.m., I received three phone calls from Ms Mini Nair of the Indian Consulate at Atlanta, on Sr Linehan's mobile, as I did not have a personal phone number in America. She very kindly also sent me a recorded message, asking me to call back immediately. When I called her she informed me that I was to be evacuated to India on Monday 11th May from Chicago by Air India (AI) Flight-126. I had to arrange for payment of my air ticket from Chicago to Mumbai and give my AI ticket number to the Consulate by 10.00 a.m. on 8th May. I was in South Carolina and had to reach Chicago six hours earlier. Almost an impossible feat, given the time frame and lack of facilities!

The agony of not having money to pay for all this, within a few hours, no credit card nor personal phone number, and under obedience of getting permission from my Provincial Superior and Treasurer before the deadline, was a nightmare! The ecstasy was that the consulate staffs were very understanding and my Provincial and Treasurer acted fast. My students in the US, especially Mr. Suketo Shah of St Xavier's, Mumbai were a source of moral strength, help and guidance. Air India was a pain in the neck. They would not pick up the phone, gave me wrong phone numbers and made me hang up for long stretches of time. When asked in Mumbai if they would accept Indian currency for the ticket they refused. Finally my Provincial asked me to borrow money and go ahead with the procedure. Sr Linehan the Springbank Treasurer agreed to lend me money immediately. After filling all the forms and struggling to pay via her credit card, we paid Air India online for my ticket. Mr Prasad from the Consulate helped us with this.

The next immediate hurdle was to get a ticket from South Carolina to reach Chicago six hours early for medical check-ups etc to board the evacuee flight to India. I had to get a ticket with my baggage paid for as well, as the airports in the US do not accept cash and I had no credit card! After struggling for a while with the direct flight to Chicago suggested by Mr Suketo, we could not find the option to pay for the baggage. In panic mode and exhausted, we both decided to take what was available and booked a ticket online for fear that I may not get a ticket at all to Chicago.

My AI ticket to Mumbai had still not come. Ms Archana from AI did not issue me a ticket and I went through hell waiting for it, as the Consulate needed my air ticket number. Finally Ms Archana got in touch with me accusing me of not paying for my ticket. This again was very unnerving. When I checked with Sr Linehan, the money had not been taken out from her credit card. This was a relief. Now Ms Archana had the audacity to ask me to pay for my ticket in Indian currency. It was Saturday and all banks in Mumbai were closed. After making numerous calls to India I informed her that the earliest I could pay was Monday morning after the banks opened. She then sheepishly took the money from Sr Linehan's credit card for which she had authorization!

I was two hours away from the airport and thus had to leave four hours ahead to catch the flight at 6.50 a.m. at Charleston airport. There was no transport available and so I had to arrange for someone to take me to the airport. It was only then, that I realised that I had to leave at 2.50 a.m., change my flight at Charlotte airport where I had to wait for 5 hours and 35 minutes. This was another nightmare,

as I am a cancer survivor with numb hands and feet especially early in the morning and at night. Who would help me with my baggage at that unearthly hour and use their credit card to pay for my baggage? I had not slept properly since 7th May and I was already feeling the strain. Besides, I had to wait for six hours at Chicago and then fly 15 plus hours to Mumbai!

I had to get a direct flight to Chicago. I prayed and Mr Suketo did the needful. He succeeded in getting me a direct flight to Chicago, paid for my baggage and even got my boarding pass. This was an ecstatic moment for me. Ms Marcia, a Canadian drove me to the airport to board the 2.38 p.m. flight to Chicago and Sisters Anita and Mary Noel helped to pack food for the journey, weigh my baggage etc. I reached well before time and was wheeled to the Gate to board my flight to Chicago. The airport shops were all closed. There were very few passengers and social distancing was strictly adhered to. Heavy fumigation and sanitization was going on all around in the airport. I ate an egg sandwich and fruit while waiting for my flight.

But when I boarded the flight and ate my peanut butter and marmalade sandwich, it looked shrivelled up and unusual, but the taste seemed okay. Soon I began to feel unwell. I ate a dark chocolate pretzel thinking I would feel better. But it did not help. I began feeling feverish, dizzy, and nauseating. My eyes were bloodshot red and watering and I felt as though I was going to have a black out. I went to the washroom but left the door unlocked. The flight was landing. I informed the airhostess that I was not feeling well and needed a wheel chair. I thought I had contracted the Corona Virus and would be quarantined in Chicago. I abandoned myself to God and disembarked. There were no wheel chairs so we had to walk a short distance and wait. I was sweating in my cardigan and windcheater and the airport was very hot. I sat in a corner awaiting my turn. There was a big crowd for wheel chairs. Suddenly from nowhere a man appeared and signalled to me. All eyes rolled as I was wheeled away to collect my luggage.

All passengers collected their belongings but my two suitcases were missing. I was taken to the lost and found counter but it was not there either. Mr Hector and a few American Airlines staff members stood with me, while the other man went to look out for my missing luggage. After sometime he returned with my two suitcases. I was relieved. Mr Hector then took me to the international airport in a bus. Outside it was freezing. He could not manage me and my baggage and asked for help and confessed that he had never done this work before. He was also feeling sorry for those who did this job every day. What humility and sensitivity! They finally left me seated in a wheel chair at Chicago International airport near the Air India counter.

Many of the AI passengers were already there but the Air India staffs were not ready for us. After a while they came, but by this time the crowd had increased and there was pandemonium as there was no one to wheel us for the medical test etc. People started pushing, grumbling, using influence etc. I was still on my wheel chair feeling hungry. I removed my sandwiches but soon realised that they had shrivelled up further and looked bad, so I threw them into the bin. Initially, I thought that the bread was stale, but later after checking about the bread, I realised that they perhaps got contaminated due to the sanitizers and chemicals around. Desperate I finally managed to push myself and my baggage and reached the medical testing. I was tested okay. What a relief! I was then shown the way to proceed. But when I reached the counter breathless, I was told it is Business class. When I retracted my steps to the economy class and reached the counter, my in-flight bag was weighed. It was four kilograms excess and I was asked to pay \$ 240 and put it in the cargo. The Consulate had told me to carry water, food and medicines for the journey and friends advised an extra set of clothes in case of emergency.

Besides, I needed my medicines on the journey. I felt utterly helpless and the Air India staff seemed heartless.

Finally, with numb hands and great difficulty I managed to throw out some items and put some things into the cargo bags which seemed to burst at the seams. My handbag was stuffed into the stroller. When I tried to re-enter, I was stopped and asked to join the serpentine queue all over again. I refused and the AI staff member was ruthless. I again threw myself into God's hands as by this time I had no energy even to move or argue! I just stood there paralysed and speechless, trusting God would do the rest and She/ He did. A middle aged staff member who had been observing me struggling to repack came and opened the ribbon and took me in. He even helped me to drag my luggage to the counter. Another elderly man came to my counter and told the lady at the counter not to charge me for the excess baggage. I was dumbfounded. Soon I was given my boarding pass. When my passport and boarding ticket were falling out of my numb hands, I pleaded that I be allowed to carry a tiny sling bag around my neck to hold them. The rest was a cake walk.

At the gate, we had to wait for a very long time and were shunted from one gate to another. We were 300 repatriates all clambering to be evacuated. Here again, I was miraculously taken into the plane first. We were seated cheek by jowl. No physical distancing. We had to wear a mask plus a headgear, no AC as it is not good for COVID 19. It was like an oven. Silence spoke loudly for the fear that lurked all around, while a child gleefully kept singing and dancing in the comfort and security of her mother. An elderly lady fell down in the aisle while a young careless youngster left her plastic bags and bottles floating around in the gangway for others to trip and fall.

We reached Mumbai safely and people began to talk. We sat in the plane for a long time. First the Chennai passengers were let out. There were no wheel chairs. We walked for a short distance and then sat down on chairs and did this for a while. The Mumbai airport was like a furnace with no AC and no open windows. We were finally made to sit and wait for medical clearance etc. I was the second last to reach this place, as I decided to walk slowly with an elderly old lady who was very handicapped and the passage was very lonely and scary. To my utter surprise when two wheel chairs came I was put into the first one and wheeled out. The crowd began to make a noise but the man quietened them telling them that he called me.

I did not know this man. He was a God-sent. His name was Mr Bharat Patel. He saw me through the medicals, Arogya Setu, immigration, customs and even waited with me till I chose my hotel to be quarantined! The Government organised transport by AC buses to the Hotel together with police protection. In the bus a huge very obese selfish youngster began to quarrel with me for not using my mask for a short while. I was feeling suffocated in my mask and head gear, while a skinny youngster helped me and three other women carry our heavy bags into the bus. The obese guy bragged about being a high caste Brahmin which took me by surprise. The caste system was alive even during a crisis situation! How sad! He however, shut his mouth and stopped bragging when he learnt that his College Principal was my neighbour and his School Principal was my friend. The rest of us connected very well.

I am now quarantined for 14 days at Kings International Hotel, Juhu in Mumbai where the hotel and BMC doctors monitor our temperature etc. Kudos to the Indian Consulate-Atlanta, the compassionate Air India staff; and all the government officials who served with much love and dedication! May God alone be their reward.

Dr (Sr) Mudita Menona Sodder RSCJ

15th May 2020