

# Mr. Gupta and the Madam From Canada

This sorry tale of woe begins on March 5th, 2007, a Monday morning. If I manage to turn the radio on during the rush hour I feel a satisfied priggishness that I'm NOT in my car stuck in some two hour traffic jam because I'm at home with nowhere to be for the next few hours.

That morning, though, I must have been busy trying to find suitable, comfortable, decent clothes to present myself to an official place — the High of Commission of India in Toronto. So I failed to listen closely or register the fact that ice was in danger of dropping off the CN Tower causing the authorities to close the Gardiner Expressway. The car radio hasn't worked since September which didn't help this state of affairs. I was driving into an emergency without the right information, a journey onto roads not being in my ken.

I had done some research (though I'm not very interested in the internet and its potential) but whatever site I took information from reassured me that the address of the High Commission was in the same location as the last time I had to get a visa for India.

I set off knowing that you must get there early (to avoid DISAPPOINTMENT). HELLS BELLS! The Gardiner was a MESS (as they say on the radio). I took that motorist's gamble and chose the Lakeshore. Oops. Wrong.

A mistake. I can't be stuck here for hours. I think, OKAY, I can go north on High Park, deke up Keele. Negotiate that always tricky Annette/Dupont intersection and eventually wind up at Dupont and Avenue Road. The High Commission is near the cemetery on Mount Pleasant. It's a bitterly cold day. We're not really used to them anymore. I park and trudge up a slight incline, my eyes watering from the sting of Canadian winter. Relief at finally reaching the building is mitigated by an awareness that all is not right. A rather modest sign in the under-renovation ground floor tells me that the Commission has relocated to Bloor Street East. Near Jarvis. Hey, if I had stayed on the Lakeshore I could have been there by now, if only I knew they had moved, of course. I take some comfort that there is a fellow visa searcher who I can give a ride to Bloor Street.

There was a time when entering the High Commission in Toronto was the first shadowy presence of India: a pungent, overpowering sense of waiting; a mass of people. No longer. It feels almost antiseptic. I soon discover why.

“No,” the efficient woman at Enquiries informs me, “You cannot get a visa in person. You must mail your passport in.”

This is not like the last time I had to get a visa! Apparently this rule came into effect the previous November.

“But how long will that take?” I ask.

“Ten business days.”

Too late. My flight is on the evening of the 19th. I can't have my passport — my very IMPORTANT, only safe source of international identification — in postal limbo when I have a plane to catch.

“What shall I do? I already have a ticket.”

“You have to apply for an emergency visa,” she tells me. It's for one month and costs double the price of the standard six month one. I need a visa.

“Okay, I'd like an emergency visa.”

“You can only get this emergency visa 72 hours before your flight. You must come back exactly 72 hours before your flight.”

That would be at 7:00 p.m. on Friday the 16th. I feel panicked. The High Commission will surely be shut on a Friday evening (and Saturday and Sunday).

“Can I come on Thursday?” She inclines her head and smiles as if bestowing a favour on a small child.

“You can come on Thursday if you like.”

I was relieved but also knew that I would now have ten days in which to fret about NOT having a visa. Besides, I had an obligation that Thursday morning. Now I'd have to re-arrange things. Make excuses. This wasn't going smoothly.

Despite thinking the worse, worrying that I would remain visa-less, it did all happen: I managed to shift my schedule. Arrive at the High Commission in good time. Have the right amount of cash, look tidy. Find parking. And the reward was a full spanking page of delicacy imprinted upon my passport. The visa isn't for a full month, despite the inflated price. It has to be issued 72 hours before my flight and not the day of. It's really only a three and a half week visa.

The efficient woman at Enquiries reassures me that I can easily extend the visa for the extra days I need. I imagine myself sauntering into some remote police station outpost in India — in the Punjab or in Udaipur (the two places I know I will be in apart from Delhi) and getting a friendly official to stamp another page of the passport. This scenario was to prove to be a figment of the imagination — a Utopian dream.

March 12th

Time is running out. Neither Udaipur nor the Punjab presented any possibilities. The *Lonely Planet* guidebook indicates that it is a fairly simple process to renew a visa and lists a credible address where I present myself the next morning at 11:00 a.m.. I trust the *Lonely Planet*. After lining up for half an hour the gruff man at Enquiries tells me I have to go to Jaisalmer House on Manmohan Singh Road to get a letter.

“What letter?”

“The letter they will write you.”

“Are they open now?”

“Yes. Yes.”

He gave me no choice. To Jaisalmer House it was. It was quite a long way away. In the diplomatic, elegant part of town. Guarded by soldiers in their smart khaki brown uniforms. They had their rifles slung casually across their shoulders. But they weren't going to let anyone pass. They directed me to a room marked Reception. I wish I had paid more attention to my first impressions of that room, because at the time I didn't realize I would have to wait there four more times. And somehow my memory of the physical space is corrupted by that aspect.

But back to the present. I am dimly cognizant of people sitting around the sides of the room. I walk to the front desk and ask the man in charge about needing a visa extension. He tells me immediately to come back the next morning. At 9:30 a.m.. I am flabbergasted. I've just come all the way from the Foreigners Official Registry Office. But he wasn't going to brook any of my pique.

“Can I come at 8:30 a.m.?”

“I don't care what time you come,” he informs me coldly. He's in a bad mood, he's tired of people like me coming in and acting as if it's a straightforward, simple procedure to conduct the official business of the Ministry of Home Affairs. As I stand there fuming for a few moments a young Westerner with a curly Art Garfunkel halo begins keening and swearing. He is beseeching, almost screaming. He's perplexed, he's frustrated, he's not getting what he needs (a visa extension?). As I leave Jaisalmer House another foreigner comes striding through to the room marked Reception. He looks confident, as if he's used to things going his way. He's wearing a leather sun hat. I wonder how he'll fare with Mr. Grumpy in charge.

I'm at Jaisalmer House the next morning by ten after nine. Surprised to find a queue of about 40 people waiting on the street. The man in the leather sun hat is at the head of the line. He often explains procedure to other tourists. The Nepalese family in front of me squat on the pavement. The Afghani man behind me has children (two girls) who occasionally appear and disappear. The sun is getting hot and there is no shade. Several monks take shelter under the cover of vermilion umbrellas. At ten o'clock a peon stands at the gate to Jaisalmer House — next to a soldier — and gives us little pink chits with a number stamped on them. Some people in the line are refused a pink chit. They argue uselessly with the peon

but a visa extension seems innocuous enough and he hands me my pink ticket. My number is 101.

We pass through to the room marked reception and are herded into the seats. People take stock of each other. I notice a couple who were there the day before when I was summarily dismissed. He: a slight Indian man in his early 30's. His wife: demure, mute, dressed in a blue salwar kameez. She kept her eyes lowered, silent. The Essential Indian Wife. No children though. An elaborate black bindi graced her fair brow. Her blonde hair was parted neatly and tied in a bun.

Mr. Grumpy, in charge, and his sidekick, Mr. Surly, are processing everyone. Asking for the pink slips to be presented along with your request. Though there are numbers behind Mr. Grumpy and Mr. Surly (correlating to the pink chits) just like in butcher shops, people who obviously are not so close to the number currently being called are being served. It seems mysterious and we must be patient or they will shout at us. When your number is called and you can get to the desk, fighting off the butters-in, Grumpy or Surly writes down your details in a ledger and exchanges the pink slip for a white slip with a scribbled hieroglyphic.

This white paper gets you past the soldiers outside who point you toward the big house — an inner sanctum. Up the colonial stairs into a room full of milling around people looking miserable. First thing to do is approach the harassed woman behind the Arrivals desk, who tries to remain calm, in spite of needing three or four brains to take in all the shoving of papers she has to face.

She gives me a form that I must fill in in triplicate and attach a copy of my passport picture and information, visa and airline ticket. These copies can be procured downstairs at the photocopying station, which is quite a little workhorse-like operation and rarely breaks down. There's a small line-up but apart from one butter-in everyone is well-behaved. This man keeps reaching over me to present his papers to the photocopying young man. There is a woman standing next to him. Perhaps she can control him.

"Is this your husband?" I accuse her. Unfairly, as it turns out.

"No," she replies meekly, "this is my husband," indicating the quiet, polite man beside her. Definitely not a butter-in.

Though slightly chastened I stand my ground against the pushy guy and am successful in the obtaining of the necessary documents. I feel triumphant.

I return to the harassed but calm woman at Arrivals. Her desk is circled by rows of pushers and butter-ins. She is accepting peoples' forms in triplicate with attached photocopies and piling them willy nilly on the stool beside her. She rises several times to take this paper somewhere but is constantly waylaid by new requests. My heart sinks. I turn to take a seat and wait for the next stage, though I don't know what it will be. It's still on the stool beside Harassed.

A young couple ask me how to fill in parts of the form — type of visa, from to, length of

stay, place of issue, date of issue, number. They are Israeli. They paid for three month visas in Hong Kong. Somehow the ones in their passports are only good for one month. They are number 28. I guess it will be a long wait.

I sit near the Essential Indian Wife with the blonde hair and her pleasant husband. Opposite me is a Portuguese girl, volunteering with an NGO in Rajasthan. She has a visa that, like mine, expires a week before her return flight (though in several months time) — not in two days like mine. She tells me she woke at some early early hour to take the bus to Delhi because it is the only place in India to get visa extensions. Surely not. The *Lonely Planet* didn't say that, but then again I was pointed by *Lonely Planet* to the WRONG place — at least in terms of square one.

The Letter. We wait. I realize that at the end of the room they have been calling names, numbers, and countries, but no one comes to our area to find us. Those dossiers could be us.

I move. There are four long desks with four men behind them. They seem responsible for geographical areas or nationalities. Number 54. German. HERRFREDRICTSHICSTEIN. Herr Fred was an amiable father trying to get his son a visa extension. The official behind the desk would ask (brusquely) for photocopies of various passport pages with smudgy entry stamps and the father would patiently flip through the two inch thick sheaf of photocopies and give the official the one he was requesting. Herr Fred was a veteran of this Kafkaesque world.

Germany and Canada belong to Mr. Gupta. He has hennaed hair slicked into a 70's business model. When he calls me I jump and take the seat opposite. I am grateful. Number 28 couple are still waiting. I'm not prepared for his next question.

"Where is the proof that you were born in India?!!" He barks.

Everything that ever came before: all my resentment against the patriarchal structures that are my culture reared up and the little hairs on the back of my spine made contact with a weird bile that rose up through my body. I also knew that this had no bearing on my visa application.

"I was born a long time ago in rural India. They didn't value girl children in those days so rarely registered them. As," I reminded him, "they still don't. Look at your situation now. Not enough wives for all those cherished and desired sons."

He glared at me.

"Come back at 5:30 p.m.. You will receive a letter in a manila envelope. Under no circumstances must you open this envelope. You will take this envelope (unopened!) to the Foreigners Official Registry office. Under no circumstances must you open this letter," he admonishes one more time. I must hang on to the white chit in order to get this letter. The Portuguese girl and I work this out as we leave the Inner Sanctum. Despite all her efforts she was told by her Mr. Gupta to come back in July. A wasted journey all the way from Rajasthan. It began to dawn on me that she had no idea how to get to the place she was staying. We set off to engage in the perpetual dance of bargaining/haggling with the rickshaw drivers outside.

They are all aware that foreigners who come out of the building are usually discombobulated, spinning from their experience inside. They quote outrageous prices. I can often charm them with my heavily accented pidgin Punjabi — direct (no subtitles). They tell me, when disarmed, that they are obliged to try to cheat me. The Portuguese girl, rickshaw driver and I set off to circle an enclave of Delhi for an hour before we find her lodgings.

I return at 5:00 p.m. — half an hour earlier than directed. I fear I will arrive at the time Mr. Gupta told me and I'm TOO LATE. I recognize many of the faces waiting in the room marked Reception. There is the Essential Indian Wife and her husband. There is the Nigerian man who is looking after the affairs of a fellow countryman who is in the hospital. He told me at the photocopying machine that he had been required to bring affidavits from the doctors — such a lot of paperwork. I sit next to the Israeli couple. They still hadn't seen their Mr. Gupta when I left the Inner Sanctum earlier this afternoon.

"How did it go?" I ask the girl. She turns her large brown eyes to me and tells me that she cried. Then they were nice to her. She believes that her letter will fix the problem. We wait.

A woman in a very smart sari and a flower in her hair comes in with a box of documents. She is NOT harassed. She calls out numbers, names, nationalities. 101, Bassi, Canadian. Me.

"You must not open this envelope. You must take it to the Foreigners Official Registry Office tomorrow morning."

"Saturday?"

"No, no. Monday. But you must not open the letter. The Foreigners Official Registry Office officer must open the letter."

But my visa expires tomorrow at midnight. I'll be illegal.

"No, no. Don't worry," Beautiful Sari tells me.

I voice my concerns to friends that my visa has expired during all this shuttling to and fro between these bureaucratic offices, and in fact they had criminalized me and could legally deny me the right to board my return plane to Canada, or the right to enter India, and I would have to live in the transit area of the Indira Gandhi International Airport (like Tom Hanks in that movie *Terminal*) for the rest of my life. Everyone assures me that since the Letter is dated the day before the visa expires everything will be okay. But what if this sealed envelope contains a letter that says 'Don't give this person a visa extension'? I have no idea. I guess I'll find out on Monday.

## March 16th

I make sure I arrive at the Foreigners Official Registry Office at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning. There are already 20 people outside. Somehow this place isn't as fraught as the

Ministry of Home Affairs. We queue patiently. We are finally allowed into the building and wait for Mr. Gruff to open our Letters and deal with our situations. Despite the line a steady stream of men bypass us and go to the only wicket that is open. It is only for Afghani. The man behind me — another Art Garfunkel look-alike — becomes agitated. He wants to go there too.

“You can if you are Afghani,” I tell him. He’s abashed. He doesn’t want to be seen as an imperialist.

Mr. Gruff takes my manila envelope and slits it open deftly. He frowns. “They have not complied with the request. They have not issued an extension of your visa.”

“WHAT?” My worst nightmares. Come true. I look at the back of the letter. If she pays the penalties we won’t look on her as subversive. Is not viewed as hostile.

Could Mr. Gupta have written that! Maybe the letter didn’t use those exact words but that is what I understood.

“What shall I do?” I plead.

“You must go back and receive a correct letter.”

“Jaisalmer House? Manmohan Road?” The room marked Reception. The soldiers. Mr. Grumpy. Mr. Surly. The Harassed lady. Beautiful Sari.

There’s a rickshaw driver waiting outside Building number 8, Section 1. He’s used to people like me. Going from pillar to post.

“Jaisalmer House?” He smirks.

“Yes, but I’m only paying you 50 rupees.” He knows he has me over a barrel. I’m desperate. I’m illegal. I’m officially a criminal.

I go into the room marked Reception. There is Essential Indian Wife and hubby. Perhaps their letter was negative too. I go through the same motions as before. The peon gives me a piece of paper which I eventually exchange for a sweet little white form from Mr. Grumpy. One thing strange about Grumpy and Surly — they are NOT grumpy or surly towards CERTAIN PERSONS. In fact, they are positively OBSEQUIOUS. Kissing their hands, even. Shades of the pope. What could these CERTAIN PERSONS have done to deserve this appreciation?

Back in the Inner Sanctum. Harassed lady is living *Groundhog Day*, as is my paranoid self in Tom Hanks’ *Terminal*.

I can see that Mr. Grumpy is pleased — not because he is seeing me again — but happy in the knowledge that I failed...that the Letter in the manila envelope was a crushing defeat. I sign the ledger one more time and they give me a white chit. The soldiers examine the chit carefully in case I have somehow been able to forge one while waiting in the room marked Reception — perhaps when Messers Grumpy and Surly were kissing and shaking the hands of CERTAIN PERSONS and their attention was wavering.

Harassed lady hands me another form to fill in triplicate and I must make more copies of my passport, visa, and plane ticket. By the time this fiasco is over the two Government Offices will have between them 4 copies of my passport/visa/plane ticket/pictures and duplicates of long, long forms asking for such things as my father's name and other irrelevant information. It made me wonder where all the duplicates of this madness that has been going on since Partition in 1947 are stored. (My dossier is pretty slim compared to most peoples)'. In some underground bunker in Connaught Place?

As I start to write up the details, clutching my passport in one hand and my pen in another, a Pakistani woman asks me to fill in HER form. She can't read or write. She tells me it her TENTH visit to this office. She doesn't understand why they won't grant her a visa extension. I'm petrified that I will make some mistake and she will have to come an eleventh time.

I sit next to the Essential Indian Wife. I am nosy. Who is she? Where is she from? Why is she behaving like an Essential Indian Wife? She's Bulgarian, I winkle out of her, after about sixteen questions.

Mr. Gupta bellows out my name, number, and nationality. He acts as if he's never seen me before. I want to ask him why he did this to me but I'm afraid. I have been advised by a Sikh man downstairs (in the room marked Reception) to ask not for a visa extension but an exit permit. So instead of asking to stay a few extra days in the country I am actually requesting to be allowed to leave a little later than the date the Indian High Commission in Toronto granted me.

Mr. Gupta taps at a box on the form — the one that asks what type of visa you have. He yells at me.

"Why did you put Tourist here?"

"Er...because I asked for a tourist visa in Toronto."

"No!" he screams, pointing at the X that is marked on the visa in my passport underneath some Hindi writing. "This is an entry visa. There are no extensions allowed on a tourist visa."

I distinctly remember requesting a tourist visa on the form in Toronto. I didn't tick the box that said Business/Student/Research. I don't remember anything like Entry. Is this why Mr. Gupta didn't grant my request? Somehow I don't think so. I must have upset him because I didn't cower enough. I must change my attitude. I must behave more like the Bulgarian Indian Wife woman. Not a peep. Not a squeak. Yes sir. I'll do exactly what you say, sir. I'll even pay for your daughter's wedding, sir.

A man comes to the desk. He ignores the fact that it is in the middle of MY TURN and starts telling Mr. Gupta that his three year old son's emergency visa is about to expire but he, his wife and boy have return tickets for a later date.

It's clear that there has been no communication between the High Commission in



Toronto and the Mr. Guptas of the Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi.

“Why are you people getting emergency visas instead of proper ones?” shouts Mr. Gupta.  
“Where’s the proof you were born in India?” He yells.

The man looks baffled.

“Where’s your son’s birth certificate?”

The man gives Mr. Gupta the boy’s Canadian passport.

“No!! I said birth certificate!”

“But please that is at home.”

“Then give me your marriage certificate.”

The look of bewilderment deepens.

“But please — that too is with our papers at home.”

“Sorry,” says Mr. Gupta, “then there is nothing to be done.”

To me he says, “Come back at 5 p.m..”

Familiar faces line the seats of the room marked Reception. Bulgarian Indian Wife and Husband, Nigerian Good Samaritan, Pakistani Woman who now considers me her Best Friend. It almost feels like home. Beautiful Sari comes in with her stack of Manila Envelopes and the ritual of handing them out begins. Woe betide those who have misplaced their white chits from the morning.

I stare at my manila envelope with a sense of foreboding. It would be typical of Mr. Gupta to play a cruel trick on me.

## March 17th

Mr. Gruff takes my letter.

“You still have the letter from yesterday,” I say. Something tells me I should somehow retrieve it since it is dated before I was officially in the country illegally.

“No,” and he takes the new letter, opens it, and hands me a new form to fill in triplicate.

“Do I need another copy of my passport, visa, photo, and ticket?”

Of course I do. I am very worried by this new form. There is no box that says exit permit. In fact I’m afraid of answering most of the questions in case I make a mistake. However, the official I see this time (after waiting an hour) keeps repeating to my enquiries about should I have filled in this line, “No, not important. No, doesn’t matter.” He gives me a form and tells me I must pay the cashier 1,800 rupees for a visa extension. But wasn’t I supposed to get an exit permit?

Perhaps it’s better not to question this anomaly. I hand over my 1,800 and receive a receipt, which I must take to the woman behind the desk opposite. She has a decided air of

being sane. Something akin to the traits that marked the Good Fairy in the Sleeping Beauty tale seems to emanate from within her. She is to sign my passport and then this saga will end. But she notices something.

“Your visa expired on the 14th. Why did you not come earlier?”

I try to explain but to no avail. I repeatedly tell her that Mr. Gruff has both the letters signed by Mr. Gupta. She calls over to Mr. Gruff but incredibly he can't find them. They were there an hour ago.

A foreigner who looks just like Art Garfunkel (what is it with all these men, Indian or otherwise, living in a hair world of thirty years ago?) is frantic. His plane leaves in a few hours and his passport has gone missing from the Foreigners Official Registry Office. Good Fairy tries to calm him, but I can understand his paranoia.

Good Fairy explains that since my visa has already expired I must pay an extra penalty of 4,000 rupees. I am aware of my eyes widening into bovine saucers. I feel like a cow when it dawns on her that her sweet meadow with its wildflowers is just a stopping point on the road to the slaughterhouse. So that's why Mr. Gupta refused me the extension. He knew I would be required to pay this fine. The toad!

Good Fairy notices my distress. I recount everything — the ice on the CN Tower, the Emergency Visa, the 72 hours, the to-ing and fro-ing between the Official Foreigners Registry Office and Jaisalmer House, Mr. Gupta...

She confers with her colleagues. “This Madam from Canada is very upset.”

I hear them whispering.

She leans forward confidentially. “Madam from Canada, you must never speak loudly to Mr. Gupta. You must smile, nod, and agree. You must NEVER shout.”

Good Fairy takes pity on me and waves her magic wand. For some reason I am no longer required to pay the 4,000 rupees and, furthermore, she refunds my previous 1,800 rupee fee.

I don't really know why this has happened, but I do know that I never want to enter another Indian Government Office ever again.