



Kal Aur Aaj

Visiting the Homeland!

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Visiting one's hometown is always a big deal. Even when the hometown is just a hundred miles away! The place where one grew up and made early memories always has a special appeal. But when the hometown is thousands of miles away, with an ocean in between, and visiting it needs a lot of time and green, the appeal rises exponentially. The planning, preparation and the anticipation of the visit are as scintillating as the visit itself.

Kal - Planning a trip to India involved a lot more than a few clicks on a plastic mouse. The Internet was just making an appearance and booking by clicking was unheard. As with so many other things, fellow-Indians were a valuable resource when it came to buying airline tickets to India. It was very important to have a friend who could recommend a reliable travel agent. This *Desi* travel agent was able to procure discounted tickets to India at a much better price than that was quoted when calling the Airline services directly. Most of the time, such travel agents were running their travel business on a part time basis; so getting a hold of them was an effort in itself. A lot of people, however, went through this process. They would introduce themselves as a "dear friend" of so and so, who had highly recommended their travel agent. (Never mind that they had met this "dear friend" just the previous day! It was important to *masca lagaav* as much as possible, so that the travel agent could work on discounts on their ticket!) Once this was set, letters would be sent home.

Next step was to start the shopping. Lists were made, with every effort to take at least a little something from America for as many relatives and friends in India as possible. Heavy photo albums and tiny perfume bottles were all loaded into every inch of space in the allowable luggage. Since the Tampa Bay area had no Indian store, 220 volts electronics were specially ordered from New York or other metropolitan cities, to take home. Little items like digital pens and watches were carefully arranged in the folds of *Saris* and *Salwar kameez* to escape the lurking eyes of custom officials at Indian airports. Anything that appeared fancy, or not available in India, found a place in the suitcases traveling to India. By the same token, the suitcases that came back from India were by no means light either. Apart from the latest fashions of Indian attire, they were packed with precious homemade snacks, pickles and masala powders. A trend that will probably never go away, for what can beat home food made with loving hands?

The shopping and planning of these travelers set their friends circle on a buzz of excitement as well. Most often, the lady of the house, with a kid or two in tow, would plan to spend quite an extended time in India. In those days, friends would invite the family for exclusive dinners, just because they were planning a trip to India!

AUR AAJ: Forget about the tradition of inviting people for dinner prior to their trip to India. Quite often, one does not even know that one of their acquaintances is visiting India, unless they happen to be in their close circle. Spending extended time in India is a thing of the past. Two-to-three-week stay is becoming the norm. Booking international flights on the Internet is becoming very common, with competitive rates. As for shopping? With the opening up of the Global Market, most everything that is available here is available in India. One hears stories of how some people from USA did their shopping for American brand name products in Indian Airport malls. Customs clearance is not a harried part of arriving in India any more.

The availability of things in India came back full circle to me on my last visit. The very first time I went to India; I had taken a portable cassette record player. A much coveted item, in those days. Of late, I had been looking for a palm size, cassette record player, without the attached earplugs, which I find cumbersome. Because of the MP3's and iPods, I just couldn't find what I needed. I mentioned this in India, and my aunt bought a small, hand held tape recorder, made in India, and presented it to me. I brought it back to USA!

Travel between the two countries now offers more conveniences. Direct flights eliminate the hassle of changing flights in places in between. Grandparents and grandchildren get to meet each other more frequently.

Time has changed, and is still changing. But that is another story...

