

A Waking Dream
Memoir of a Fulbright Scholar
In India

by
Bernard John Poole



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“Hope is a waking dream.”

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

Dedicated to my father,
William Gerard Poole,
born March 18, 1909,
in Maymyo, Burma,
then a province of India,
now the independent country of Myanmar.

My waking dream is to travel
in the childhood footsteps of my dad
to the hill town of Maymyo,
now Pyin Oo Lwin

Prologue

Two weeks from today I'll be on my way to India. It's the end of a journey that began in early 2005, when one of several form letters crossed my desk in my office at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, USA. The letter was from the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), which administers the Fulbright Scholar Program of the United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The letter invited me--and a thousand other professors like myself—to apply for a Fulbright Scholarship.

It was not the first time such a letter had crossed my desk. But it was the first time I'd taken the time to read one of them and to take the trouble to follow up on it. The timing was right. I was ready for a new adventure.

The Fulbright application process, though straightforward, took a while and had its ups and downs. A note of acceptance into the program was followed by an announcement that I was on a waiting list. I waited and waited, my acceptance into the program being dependent on pending administrative decisions in India.



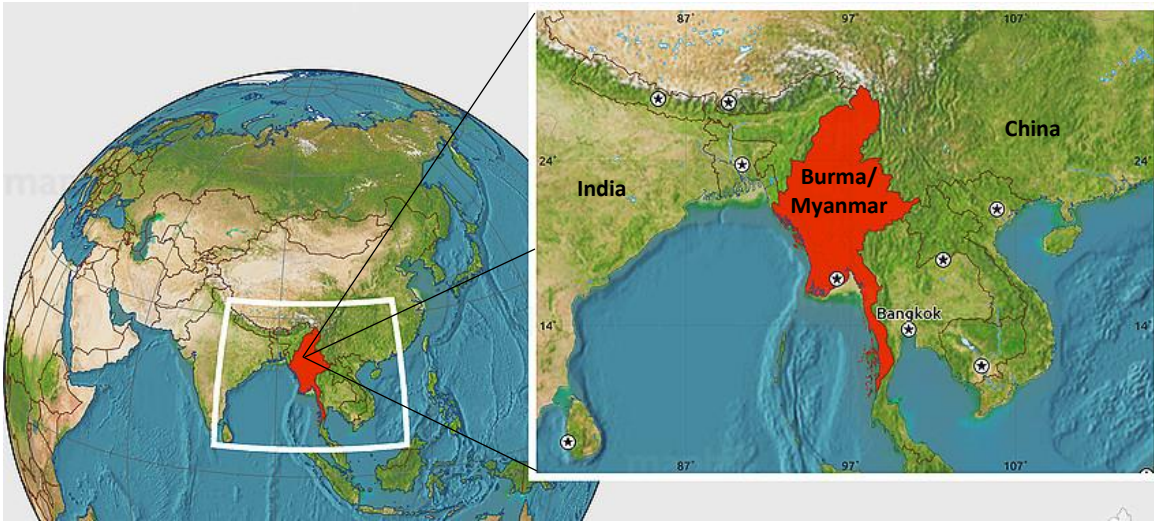
As luck would have it, I won an award as a Fulbright visiting lecturer at Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam, an all-women's university in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, South India, some 150 km (about 93 miles) from Chennai (formerly Madras). I'd be there for six months, from December 2006 to May 2007.

This blog tells the story of my stay in India. My academic specialty in the Division of Education at my university is Instructional Technology. I had introduced all my University of Pittsburgh Education majors to the use of blogs as a tool they might use with their future K-12 students to practice and improve their creative writing skills. It was thus a natural fit for me to write a blog of my own so as to keep some kind of record of my adventures in India and, above all, to share my experiences, in real time, with my students, colleagues, friends and family around the world.

I hope you'll find what follows interesting reading as you accompany me on what turned out to be the experience of a lifetime.

Some background

I have always wanted to go to India. You might say it's been my "waking dream" since as long as I can remember. My father, William Gerard Poole, was born in India on March 18, 1909, in the town of Maymyo (now Pyin Oo Lwin), in what was then the Indian province of Burma. My grandfather was a Regimental Sergeant Major serving there and elsewhere in India with the 6th (Poona) Division of the British Army, a division made up of Indian troops commanded by British Officers.



Burma/Myanmar in the World

In peace time, my grandfather's rank qualified him to serve in India accompanied by his wife. Their first three children were thus born in India, my dad being the firstborn. Indeed, my dad was already six years old when, in August 1914, after England had declared war against Germany at the start of the First World War, my grandmother and the three children were bundled onto a steamship for evacuation to England while Granddad stayed behind and prepared to go to war with his troops in the swamps of Persia/Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq).

In 1858, Burma had become a province of the British Raj, otherwise known as the British Indian Empire, when the rule of the British East India Company was transferred to the Crown in the person of Queen Victoria. Later, in 1876, Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. At the time my father was born, Maymyo was a hill station and summer capital of British Burma. During the hot season, the establishment in Burma (civil, commercial and military) escaped there from the high heat and humidity of Rangoon (now Yangon). In 1937, Burma became a nation in its own right and a separate British Colony until, in 1948, the nation of Burma achieved full independence as a nation state.

Today Maymyo/Pyin Oo Lwin is a sleepy town “on the road to Mandalay.” That’s a highly evocative phrase for those of us who grew up in England in a military family during and after the Second World War. Rudyard Kipling, a journalist who spent much time around military men, wrote his famous poem: “On the Road to Mandalay” when he was travelling in Burma back in 1890, and when Grandad was just 12 years old. Six years later, in 1896, Grandad Poole signed up for military service in the British Army and progressed through the ranks, as described above.



Both my grandfathers fought in the First World War. My grandfather on my mother’s side, Grandad Garbett, was invalided out when shrapnel shattered bones in one of his legs. All four of Grandad Poole’s sons (my dad amongst them) fought in the Second World War. One of my uncles, Francis Kevin Poole, went down with all but 5 of the crew, when HMS Asphodel (K 56), the Corvette on which he served as a Signalman, was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-Boat (U-575), while

escorting a convoy in the Bay of Biscay.

That was on March 10, 1944, when Uncle Frank was just 20 years old. I was 7 months old when he perished. I was living with my seven older brothers and sisters in our evacuation home in the village of Haunton, Staffordshire, England.

That’s us at right, with chubby little me carefully held in place in my mother’s arms at the end of the line. What a crew!



The story goes—and it’s my mom who told me the story herself—she had a terrible time giving birth to my immediate older brother, Michael (July 14, 1942). She had a prolapse of her womb. After the doc fixed

her up, he said to my dad: “I will not be responsible if your wife gets pregnant again.” To which I couldn’t help quipping to mom: “I would hope not!”

But anyway, mom and dad were dyed-in-the-wool Catholic and wouldn't dream of using birth control. The story goes (again it's my mom who told me this) that they tried birth control, specifically the Rhythm Method, but, in my mom's immortal words: "We couldn't make it work!"

Like clockwork, mom got pregnant again barely four months later. Till now, she'd given birth to all seven of the children at home, with the doctor and a midwife on hand, which was very customary in those days. But the doc told her that when the time came for her to give birth to me, she'd have to go to the hospital in Tamworth, less than 10 miles away, so she could be confined on the Maternity Ward in case of any problems that may arise. It was war time, so not surprisingly my mom was the only expectant mother on the ward when I was due. I like to say that I was born in solitary confinement.

Out I came just 13 months after Michael, on August 17, 1943.

Mom and dad took one look at me and said to one another: "What a beautiful baby! We gotta have more of these." OK, OK, I made that up, but more they indeed had, four more in fact, rounding out the family at a posse of a dozen kids. The last four babies were all born at home, just like the first seven. I was the only one born in a hospital.



Mom and dad's 12 kids between them had 36 kids. The 36 grandkids have to-date had 104 kids or grandkids of their own. The numbers are staggering. My mom and dad have a total of 152 direct offspring—at least! Those are just the ones we know about. Including forebears and in-laws, I have 340 people in the genealogy chart I maintain at ancestry.com.

Now that's a family!

I'm not in the least bit proud of the numbers, by the way. I used to be and, as we Pooles are won't to do, I'd even brag about it. But not anymore, not when I see how devastating human impact has been, and continues to be, on this beautiful planet of ours. This so-called *Anthropocene*, the still-debated geologic epoch in which we find ourselves, is thought by some to have been triggered by the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century. Others propose that

human activities started to have a significant global impact on earth's geology and ecosystems as far back as tens of thousands of years ago, after *homo sapiens* migrated out of Africa and relatively quickly colonized the world.

Whatever the case, the more *homo sapiens* on the planet, the tougher it is for all other life—flora and fauna in particular—to survive. World population has more than tripled in my lifetime (2.2 billion in 1943 when I was born; 7.3 billion today—2016). They say it'll level off at around 9-12 billion before the end of this 21st century. The only people in my family who'll be around at the end of the 21st century will be a bunch of my mom and dad's great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren. Which begs the question: What kind of world are we leaving behind as our legacy to them?

Only time will tell...

Friday, November 17, 2006

Getting a Visa to Enter India

Acquiring a visa to enter another country is stressful no matter where you plan on travelling. India is no exception.

I'd been told that I shouldn't apply too soon, since the time span of your visa starts from the day you receive it, not from the day you arrive in the country for which the visa has been granted. Moreover, I had been warned that it can be difficult to get an extension to your visa once you're in country.

I had options. I could mail in my visa application, along with my passport; or I could take it to the appropriate Indian Consulate--which in my case, coming from Pennsylvania, had to be the Indian consulate in New York City (NYC).

I decided the risk was too great to send off my application by mail, especially since my departure time was imminent. Moreover, on the NYC Indian Consulate website there was an ominous note indicating that, because of a significant increase in demand for passports and visas, it could take two weeks to process a visa by mail, not including the time it would take to mail it back and forth.

So I downloaded the visa application form from the website and carefully filled it out. I included supporting documentation about the Fulbright award, along with the Government of India clearance which had been acquired for me by the Fulbright representatives in New Delhi. I'd already renewed my passport. It was good till 2016.

I had all my ducks in line; I was ready to go to the consulate.



Consulate General of India, Upper East Side, NYC

NYC is six hours' drive from my home town of Ligonier, in SW Pennsylvania. The Indian Consulate office, at the Central Park end of Lexington Street in New York City, opens at 9:00 am. I wanted to get the visa taken care of the same day, so I figured I needed to be the first in line.

On the advice of my wife, Marilyn, I planned to drive into Newark International Airport, park the car there, and then take trains and subways to Lexington Street in Manhattan. A Fulbrighter friend, Denise Burnette, who teaches at Columbia University and whom I'd met in June at a Fulbright to India orientation in Washington, DC, had given me precise directions on which trains and subways to take to get to where I needed to go.

I rarely go anywhere without a book to read, just in case I have time on my hands. I hit the road shortly after midnight, Friday morning, November 17. Traffic on the interstates is light in the middle of the night. As a result, I got to Newark International Airport, 16 miles from downtown Manhattan, by about 5:00 am!

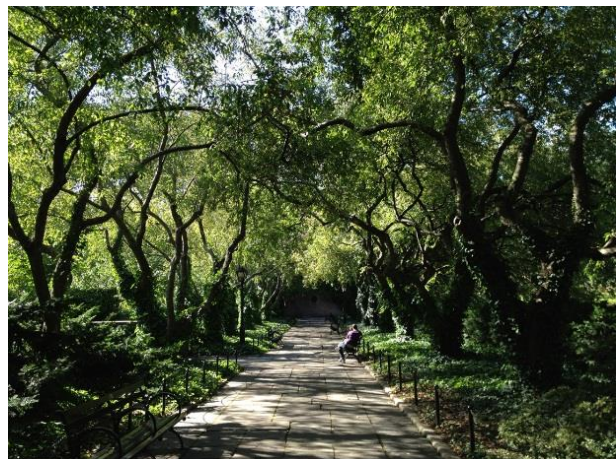
No problem, I thought to myself. I preferred to be early rather than snarled up in some nightmarish New York congestion. So I parked the car in the airport parking lot and headed for downtown Manhattan.

Surprise, surprise! At 5:00 in the morning, even in NYC, you're one of few travellers on the train or subway system, and those who are sharing the ride with you are essentially, like yourself, semi-comatose. More to the point, though, there were all these uniformed train and subway employees already standing around, hands behind their backs, waiting for the upcoming surge of rush hour traffic. It was as though they were all there just to help me find my way around.

It was wonderful! I love New York!

So... the upshot was that I was standing outside the Indian Consulate by 6:00 am, three hours before the Visa office opened! Yes, I was the first in line, but I had oodles of time on my hands, so what to do?

I figured I had maybe an hour and a half before anyone else was likely to join the line. The rumbles in my stomach told me I needed at least a cup of coffee. On the walk from the subway station to the consulate I'd passed several restaurants, so I moseyed on back to one of them, ordered a coffee to go, used the bathroom, and strolled on back down past the consulate into Central Park. There I found a bench and sort of made myself



comfortable, gathered my wits, and sipped a very welcome first hot coffee of the day.

But I didn't dally long in Central Park. I'd come a long way to be first in line and I didn't want to lose my spot outside the Consulate. As luck would have it, just 5 minutes after I parked myself next to the gate that led down to the basement of the consulate where passports and visas



were processed, I was joined by the second in line, a young Sikh from the Punjab in India. It was about 7:00 am. Within half an hour there were maybe 30 people in the line, and by the time they opened the gate at about 8:40 am there must have been 100. And they kept coming throughout the morning. I estimate there must have been well over 400 by midday.

The gate was unlocked at 9:00 am sharp and I led the procession down the stone steps into the basement, where an Indian attendant was

waiting. The process was simple enough. You got a numbered ticket, like at the supermarket deli, and you waited till your number was called, at which point you went up to the counter to submit your visa application and passport. You were then given a numbered receipt. I was Number 1, so the lady told me to come back at midday to collect my visa.

Whoohoo!

It seemed an interminable wait, though. I was dog tired after my long, late night/early morning drive. I did my best to revive my flagging spirits by going back to the restaurant where I'd bought the coffee. I treated myself to a healthy Eggs Benedict breakfast. I lingered in the warm, comfortably heady atmosphere of the restaurant, reading my book while nursing cup after cup of coffee. I left a generous tip on the table clearly visible for the waitress to see so she wouldn't try to hustle me out of there.

It worked; she hustled others, but she didn't hustle me.

Around 11:30 am, I dawdled back to the consulate on what turned out to be a bright, sunny, November day. There, outside, I stopped and chatted with several others who were waiting with me. One was the Sikh lad whom I'd already met in the line. He was a graphic designer for a newspaper publisher. He'd lost his passport when, trusting the mail, he'd sent it off to the New Zealand Embassy to get a tourist visa stamped into it. His tale of woe made my day; I no longer

felt like I'd wasted my time and money slogging it into NYC.

Shortly after midday, we were told to form a line to collect our visas and, lo and behold, I picked mine up without a hitch after waiting maybe half an hour. I retraced my steps to Newark International Airport, picked up my car, and drove on back to Ligonier.

I got home around 8:00 pm, having stopped along the way to grab a MacDonald's large fries and a mess of McNuggets. By 9:00 pm I was in bed.

I slept for 14 hours...

Wednesday, November 22, 2006

Well bless my soul!



Year round we live in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Ligonier is a sleepy little town, whence my wife and I commute to the colleges where we teach. But Marilyn retired in 2003, and for that reason I planned to fly to India, not from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but from Fort Myers, Florida, because Marilyn's mother, Anne, lived at the time in Cape Coral, Florida,

and Fort Myers is the nearest international airport. The idea was for Marilyn to stay in Florida with her mom while I was away in India. At 92 years of age and bravely recovering over the previous few years from not one, but two, broken legs, we figured Anne would definitely appreciate having a daughter around to help her out and keep her company from day to day.

We decided to use both our cars for the trip to Florida because of the huge amount of stuff we'd be carrying. I had a couple of hundred pounds of baggage that was ear-marked for India; Marilyn packed whatever she needed for six months in Florida. And then there were the dogs... So we travelled in convoy. I led the way in the Subaru Outback, on top of which I loaded a car-top carrier so as to free up the interior for the dogs—our dogs always travel in style. Marilyn followed in the Subaru Impreza with the balance of the baggage.

On the way to Florida, there were some tense, even scary, moments, especially for Marilyn, when we hit heavy traffic on the beltway, a major multi-lane highway around Washington, DC. As luck would have it, we also ran into the occasional heavy downpour. But otherwise the trip was routine, if tough going for Marilyn, who was more accustomed to being chauffeured on long trips.

You'd be amazed what one has to consider when doing something like this. For example, I now know all there is to know about airline baggage allowances. I discovered, for example, that the cheapest way to reliably and swiftly ship, say, 150 pounds of "stuff" overseas is to take it along as excess baggage. UPS, DHL, FedEx would charge around \$800 or more. As airline excess

baggage I was able to get away with paying around \$400. My Fulbright scholarship grant covered me for up to \$500 of excess baggage.

No brainer.

At the airport in Fort Myers, I planned to check all my baggage through to New Delhi—other than my carry on laptop computer case, which, aside from the laptop, included sundry items such as meds, etc. that I didn't want to lose sight of. I decided I'd pay whatever excess baggage fees over \$500 that I'd have to, and then claim reimbursement from the Fulbright folks at some later date.

Why did I have so much baggage, you may ask? What happened to "traveling light?" Well, I persuaded a couple of educational software developers to donate about 1,100 CD-ROMs for me to take and distribute in India. Then I had my university produce 250 CD-ROMs of my own professional and teaching materials—again for distribution to students and faculty in India. Finally, I asked the print shop at my university to produce 6 hard copies of each of two of my books--so I could donate them to libraries here and there in India.

The CDs and books alone weighed in at over 150 pounds. So there you have it: there was no way I was going to avoid excess baggage on this trip! Getting it all together while teaching a full schedule of classes was exhausting, more so than I anticipated. In fact, I started to very much look forward to leaving for India so that I could finally slow down!

I had a couple of send offs from my colleagues and students. My colleagues took me out to



dinner and one of them thoughtfully gave me a large supply of Pepto-Bismol and Immodium-ID. That was the best send-off gift of all because I twice had to deal with "Delhi Belly."

Then, a few evenings later, I had a surprise send-off while I was at school. I was busy in the computer lab with a few students who were finishing up their

work for the semester when I heard this commotion in the hallway outside. I walked 30 or so of my students to wish me bon voyage!! What a beautiful surprise! They came bearing gifts—cookies and farewell cards and such—and something wrapped up in silver foil. Well, I kind of guessed what it was because of its shape. When I tore open the wrapping paper, the contents turned out to be a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey!! Now there's a first.

I never before had students give me any kind of alcohol. But I think it's a tradition I'd like to encourage them to continue.

Monday, December 4, 2006

The journey begins

I flew out of Southwest Florida International Airport, located a few miles south and east of Fort Myers, on the Gulf Coast of Florida. The plan was to fly to Frankfurt, Germany, and there catch a connecting flight to New Delhi, India, where I would arrive in the early hours of the morning of the next day. I was to be met at the airport by a driver for the Fulbright organization in India and taken to the hotel where I was scheduled to stay for two nights, before flying on down to Tirupati in South India. The distance from Fort Myers, USA to Tirupati, India? Close to 10,000 miles (16,000 km).

It was hard to say goodbye to Marilyn. This would be the longest period of time we'd have spent apart since we got married 26 years ago and I didn't want to let her go. Marilyn had to stay back behind the security barrier as I was processed through. After I'd cleared security and turned back to wave goodbye for the last time, I got teary-eyed. We just stood there looking back at each other, neither of us wanting to turn away. But I'd come too far to not do this, so with a last waved kiss and a hand-on-heart gesture to tell her that I loved her, which she quickly reciprocated, I turned around and disappeared into the mazy time-warp of international travel, with its added layer of security and concern following 9-11.

But I didn't mind the added security one bit; I even smiled to myself when it was announced over the intercom that the security level had been notched up. This sense of well-being was reinforced a couple of days later when, in Hyderabad, India, where my plane landed to off-load passengers and to take on others en route to Tirupati, a couple of military guys walked through the plane checking that any baggage left on board belonged to someone actually sitting in the plane.

"Hey, you can check my bags any time you want, bud," I thought to myself, "as long as you get me to Tirupati in one piece."

Of the various airports in which I spent some time, the least well-designed and least well-organized was, surprisingly, the one in Frankfurt, Germany. Indeed, I'd have to conclude that that proverbial Prussian persnickety attention to detail must be in decline. The lines were unnecessarily long, people were allowed to push in ahead of you, and the bathrooms were not easy to find and minuscule when you did find one. At the check-in desk, one fatuous official created a scene which had us all—mostly Indian, by the way, since we were waiting for a flight to New Delhi—rolling our eyes, as if to say: "What kind of a country is this!?" Once on the Lufthansa plane, however, the quality of service was outstanding.

The taxi from the airport to my hotel in New Delhi took me through downtown districts where I got to see my first slice of Indian city life. At 2:00 in the morning it was very quiet. Being December it was also cool. In the taxi's headlights I could see the shuttered fronts of hole-in-the-wall shops that lined the streets. In the shadows cast by the taxi's headlights, clutches of men, women and children lay curled up asleep in the open air on concrete steps or on charpoys—a light bedstead used everywhere in India, consisting of a simple wooden frame with legs and a web of rope or tape netting. Dogs were everywhere, though it was not until I reached Tirupati, a couple of days later, that I routinely saw goats, cows and bullocks in the streets.

The driver told me he would be back in the morning at 11:00 am to take me to Fulbright House, on Hailey Street in New Delhi, where I was to do a “meet and greet” with various personnel at the offices of the United States-India Educational Foundation (US-IEF). It wasn't an orientation, since weeks before I had attended a weeklong orientation in Washington, D.C. attended by about a hundred other Fulbrighters. The meet and greet was accompanied by polite conversation and sundry cups of tea, Indian-style, small cups, the tea thick and creamy and sweet. Delicious!



The hotel where I stayed was called the Hotel Grand Sartag. The gentleman in the splendid outfit was the doorman. My room was comfortable and clean, with an



ensuite. The night I arrived, after a long, refreshing shower, I climbed into bed and slept like a log. When I woke the next morning, though, I discovered that the back of the hotel was not quite as posh as the front!

Two days later, on the morning when I was to fly to Tirupati, jet lag got me up earlier than necessary and, as luck would have it, I arranged to be taken to the airport with lots of time to spare. If I hadn't, I would most definitely have missed my plane because the taxi driver took me to the wrong airport! I had no idea where he was going and I stupidly assumed he'd been told where to take me. He'd presumably assumed by my foreign appearance that I wanted the international airport, so that's where he took me.

Ironically, I'd been chatting with him while he navigated the absolutely chaotic Delhi traffic. You know me, I like to be friendly an' all. I asked him to teach me some Hindi words, and one of them was "Acha" or "Achowa" (my spelling—that's how it sounded when he said it). It means "Well done!" or "That's fine." Or even just: "OK." Or words to that effect.

Well, guess what my last word to him was after I paid him his fare, along with a handsome tip? You guessed it: "Acha! Well done, mate. I really appreciate it." That was before he drove off and before I realized that he'd dropped me off at the wrong airport!

Acha? Not!

An airport official guided me and my luggage-laden cart to the entrance to the terminal, where a security guy in military uniform checked my ticket. Imagine my dismay when he told me I was at the wrong airport; that the correct airport (the domestic airport) was 10 kilometers (6 ¼ miles) away. So there I was, essentially stranded with close to 200 lbs of baggage loaded on a cart, wondering what the heck I was going to do next.

I met many angels during my time in India and this was when the first of them appeared at my shoulder. I should define what I mean by angels. Angels are people who appear out of the blue and help you get to where you need to go, do what you need to do, often without any expectation of reward.

This young lad was just standing there, hanging around outside the entrance to the international terminal. He must have been waiting for me to show up, or so it seemed. Who knows? Maybe a putz in my particular predicament shows up all the time. Fact is, I was so taken aback to see him beckoning me to follow him that I was immediately skeptical. Wouldn't you be? This had scam written all over it. I was convinced I was about to be the victim of a rip off. Maybe I was about to be led down a dark alley and bopped over the head with a blunt instrument.

I looked back at the guy with a look on my face that said: "Are you kidding me? You think I'm an idiot? C'mon, this is obviously a scam. Whaddya take me for?"

I gathered from his gestures and general waving of arms that he wanted me to go with him into an elevator, which further heightened my suspicions. When he realized I didn't trust him any further than I could see him, he walked across to a balcony, waved me over, then pointed down to where there was a bustling taxi rank below.

Well bless my soul. He didn't speak a word of English, but it immediately dawned on me that he knew exactly the predicament I was in. We got on the elevator and he whisked me down to the lower level, directed me to a pre-pay taxi kiosk, waited while I got my ticket, escorted me to the

designated taxi where the taxi owner, who *did* speak English and no doubt was my angel's employer, loaded my luggage on board and told the driver to take me to the domestic airport.

Before we took off, I gave my angel friend what he considered a really nice tip (R50; that's 50 rupees, not much more than a dollar at the then rate of exchange). But I'm telling you, I was ready to empty my wallet into his pocket. Phew! Tirupathi here we come.